

The Metaphysics of Collaboration: Identity, Unity and Difference in Cross-sector Partnerships for Sustainable Development

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In this article, we critically discuss the ideal of alignment, unity and harmony in cross-sector partnerships (CSP) for wicked problems like sustainable development. We explore four characteristics of the concepts of identity, unity and difference which are presupposed in the partnership and collaboration literature, and point at their metaphysical origin. Based on our analysis of these four characteristics, we show the limitations of the metaphysical concepts of identity and difference in the case of CSPs for wicked problems like sustainable development.

Introduction

NOWADAYS, 93 PER CENT OF CEOs see sustainable development as an important feature of their company's future success.² Initially, corporate social responsibility (CSR) with regard to sustainable development was motivated by public responses to irresponsible business activities and pressures from NGOs³, and consisted mainly of

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2 Accenture, *A New Era of Sustainability: UN Global Compact-Accenture CEO Study 2010*

3 M. Porter, 'Strategy and Society. The Link between Competitive Advantage and Corporate Social Responsibility', *Harvard Business Review* 84, No. 12, 2006, pp.78-92

cosmetic improvements of the corporate image of the company in order to safeguard their market position. Today, it is increasingly seen as a source of competitive advantage.⁴ Over the last few years, we have seen a tremendous increase in sustainably produced goods and services, balancing economic, socio-cultural and environmental aspects.

Because the primary responsibility for economic, socio-cultural and environmental aspects is allocated to different players in society – the profit sector on the one hand and governmental organisations, NGOs and civil society on the other – it is argued that the balancing of *people*, *planet* and *profit* in sustainable business development presupposes the active involvement of and partnership with society.⁵ The growing number of cross-sector partnerships (CSPs) or multi-stakeholder alliances (MSAs) in recent years shows that the private sector is actually partnering with stakeholders in order to solve sustainable challenges.⁶ Through these CSPs, firms seek to balance economic (profit), social-cultural (people) and environmental (planet) interests.

In a recent review of partnerships for sustainable development, CSPs are defined as “collaborative arrangements in which actors from two or more spheres of society (state, market and civil society) are involved in a non-hierarchical process, and through which these actors strive for a sustainability goal”.⁷ Profit- and non-profit organisations start cross-sector collaborations when they experience being unable to solve these problems on their own and are not willing to merge their activities into a new organisation in order to solve these problems.⁸

Although these collaborations among profit- and non-profit organisations appear under a variety of names – public-private partnerships, global action networks, cross-sector partnerships to address social issues and so on – and can be categorised in various typologies, the problems addressed by these partnerships are comparable⁹: complex public problems like climate change, desertification and the loss of biodiversity which cannot be solved by the public or private sector alone. Although empirical evidence for the impact of CSPs on sustainable development is still lacking, it is widely assumed that the establishment of CSPs is a desirable or even necessary strategy to address complex problems like sustainable development. By “linking and sharing of information, resources, activities, and capabilities”, it is

4 G. Málovics, N.N. Csigéné and S. Kraus, ‘The role of corporate social responsibility in strong sustainability’, *The Journal of Socio-Economics* 37, 2006, pp.907–18

5 L. Hens and B. Nath, ‘The Johannesburg Conference’, *Environment, Development and Sustainability* 5, 2003, pp.7–39

6 G. Eweje, ‘Strategic partnerships between MNEs and civil society: the post-WSSD perspectives’, *Sustainable Development* 15, No. 1, 2007, pp.15–27

7 M.M. van Huijstee, M. Francken and P. Leroy, ‘Partnerships for sustainable development: a review of current literature’, *Environmental Sciences* 4, No. 2, 2007, p.75

8 J.M. Bryson, B.C. Crosby and M. Middleton Stone, ‘The Design and Implementation of Cross-Sector Collaborations: Propositions from the literature’, *Public Management Review*, 2006, pp.44–55; J.W. Selsky and B. Parker, ‘Cross-Sector Partnerships to Address Social Issues: Challenges to Theory and Practice’, *Journal of Management* 31, No. 6, 2005, pp.849–73

9 Van Huijstee et al., op. cit.

expected that CSPs “achieve jointly an outcome that could not be achieved by organisations in one sector alone”.¹⁰

At the same time, it is acknowledged that CSPs cannot solve all public problems. This is due to the complexity of public problems like sustainable development¹¹, which are also called ‘wicked problems’. According to Rittel and Webber, who described the concept of wicked problems as opposed to tamed problems for the first time in 1973, wicked problems are difficult to pin down, highly complex and do not have definitive solutions. They concern complex systems in which cause-and-effect relations are uncertain or unknown. Rittel and Webber specified ten characteristics of wicked problems. Examples include: that there is no definitive formulation of a wicked problem; that solutions to wicked problems are not true or false but better or worse; and that wicked problems have no stopping rule (i.e. the problem solver does not know when an acceptable solution of the problem is found).¹²

It is not difficult to recognise that sustainable development is a wicked problem in this sense. On the one hand, the famous definition of sustainable development from the Brundlandt report – *Our Common Future*¹³ – seems to be quite simple, stating that the use of resources today should not constrain the use of (non-renewable) resources in the future. If, however, we take the biophysical finiteness of the earth into account and, with this, the fact that every resource will eventually be exhausted, it becomes clear that the problem is difficult to pin down and highly complex; as is its solution.¹⁴

The complexity of wicked problems like sustainable development is partly related to the multiple stakeholders involved in solving them. It is assumed that many stakeholders have differing ideas about what the ‘real’ problem is¹⁵ and that the solution to the problem is based on ‘judgments’ of multiple stakeholders, which can differ widely and are not (always) based on shared values.¹⁶ These differences are due to differences with regard to the *content* of the wicked problem, but also due to different agendas and divergent motives of profit and non-profit organisations.¹⁷ While non-profit organisations are mainly motivated by altruistic motives, for instance¹⁸, profit organisations are mainly self-interested.¹⁹ Furthermore,

10 Bryson et al., op. cit., p.44

11 Ibid.

12 H.W.J. Rittel and M.M. Webber, ‘Dilemmas in a general theory of planning’, *Policy Sciences* 4, 1973, pp.155–69

13 World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future*, Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987

14 C. Peterson, ‘Transformational supply chains and the “wicked problem” of sustainability: Aligning knowledge, innovation, entrepreneurship, and leadership’, *Journal of Chain and Network Science* 9(2), 2009, pp.71–82

15 M.W. Kreuter, C. de Rosa, E.H. Howze and G.T. Baldwin, ‘Understanding wicked problems: A key to advancing environmental health promotion’, *Health, Education and Behavior* 31, 2004, pp.441–54

16 S.S. Batie, ‘Wicked problems and applied economics’, *American Journal of Agricultural Economics* 5, 2008, pp.1,176–91; cf. Rittel and Webber, op. cit.

17 M. Yaziji and J. Doh, *NGOs and Corporations: Conflict and Collaboration*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009

18 G.R. Milne, E.S. Iyer and S. Gooding-Williams, ‘Environmental organization alliance relationships within and across non-profit, business, and government sectors’, *Journal of Public Policy and Marketing* 15, No. 2, 1996, pp.203–15

19 E. Iyer, ‘Theory of alliances: Partnership and partner characteristics’, *Journal of Non-profit and Public Sector Marketing* 11, No. 1, 2003, pp.41–57

profit and non-profit organisations have divergent approaches to value creation; companies will naturally focus on economic value creation by producing and selling products and services, while NGOs, for instance, will focus on social value creation by advocating social norms and values.²⁰ Finally, profit and non-profit organisations have different identities.²¹ Because of these sector-specific differences – besides the complexity of problems like sustainable development in themselves – actual partnerships to solve wicked problems are vulnerable to failure. Therefore, the literature focuses on the initial conditions affecting CSP formation and the ways CSPs try to understand and overcome their differences and align partners in order to enhance successful collaboration. Recent research is focusing for instance on models of business involvement in general²² and value frame fusion in particular.²³ With this, it seems that the literature on CSPs shows a tendency towards convergence, consonance, complementarity or at least compromise between partners²⁴, i.e. an implicit ideal of alignment, unity and harmony.

This ideal of unity and harmony seems to be paradoxical. On the one hand, this unity or harmony is conceived as a necessary condition for effective CSP collaboration (cf. §1). On the other hand, this ideal seems to be out of reach in the case of wicked problems like sustainable development, in which multiple stakeholders with *different* judgments and *different* values are involved. The question is therefore: how to reach unity within CSPs and respect the fundamental differences between multiple stakeholders at the same time?

Although the literature on partnership and collaboration acknowledges the importance of “complementary differences”²⁵ and “tensions, fluidity and paradox” between partners²⁶, it is unclear how exactly the concepts of identity and difference are understood in the CSP literature. The intuition we want to explore in this article is that a *metaphysical* concept of identity, unity and difference is the origin of concepts like partnership and collaboration which are used in the CSP literature. In the history of Western philosophy, the identity of an entity is understood as a general characteristic – *animal rationale*, for instance – that various entities – such as human beings – have in common. This generality is found in a unifying principle (*idea, eidos*) in the light of which different entities synthesise to

20 Yaziji and Doh, op. cit., pp.76–9

21 S.L. Brickson, ‘Organizational Identity Orientation: The Genesis of the Role of the Firm and Distinct Forms of Social Value’, *Academy of Management Review* 32, 2007, pp.864–88

22 A.M. Reed and D. Reed ‘Partnership for Development: Four Models of Business Involvement’, *Journal of Business Ethics* 90, 2009, pp.3–37

23 M.J. le Ber and O. Branzei, ‘Value Frame Fusion in Cross Sector Interactions’, *Journal of Business Ethics* 94, 2010, pp.163–95

24 cf. D. Croteau and L. Hicks, ‘Coalition Framing and the Challenge of a Consonant Frame Pyramid: The Case of a Collaborative Response to Homelessness’, *Social Problems* 50, 2003, pp.251–72; cf. B. Nowell, ‘Out of sync and unaware? Exploring the effects of problem frame alignment and discordance in community collaboratives’, *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 20, No. 1, 2010, pp.91–116

25 Le Ber and Branzei, op. cit.

26 C. Hardy, T.B. Lawrence and D. Grant, ‘Discourse and Collaboration: The Role of Conversations and Collective Identity’, *Academy of Management Review* 30, No. 1, 2005, pp.58–77

and appear *as* the same (identity). It is, however, questionable whether these metaphysical concepts of identity and difference are applicable in the case of CSPs for wicked problems like sustainable development. According to the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, the metaphysical concept of identity is the result of a reduction of difference to identity, in which the fundamental differences between actors is neglected and even violated (cf. §1). In this article, the question of how to reach unity within CSPs and respect fundamental differences between multiple stakeholders at the same time leads to a philosophical reflection on the nature of unity, identity and difference in CSPs for wicked problems like sustainable development.

In section one, we first set the stage by articulating three specific questions with regard to unity, identity and difference in CSPs, based on an analysis of the Selsky and Parker, Seitanidi and Crane framework of partnership implementation, and by articulating four characteristics of the metaphysical concepts of identity, unity and difference, based on the work of Aristotle, Levinas and others. In section two, we focus on the question how differences between partners are exactly bridged and what the role of identity and difference is in the process of partnership implementation. In section three, we answer the research question, what is the nature of the concepts of unity, identity and difference that are presupposed in the partnership and collaboration literature. Moreover, we show the limitations of these concepts in the case of wicked problems like sustainable development. Finally, we draw some conclusions with an eye to future research.

§1 Setting the Stage

a) The Process of Partnership Implementation: Three Questions with Regard to Unity, Identity and Difference in the Process of CSP Formation and Implementation.

In an influential review article on the design and implementation of cross-sector collaborations, John Bryson and colleagues provide an overview of the initial conditions affecting collaboration formation and the process of collaboration. Here, the experience of sector failure to solve social problems like sustainable development is seen as a driver for CSP formation: “Public policy makers are most likely to try cross-sector collaboration when they believe the separate efforts of different sectors to address a public problem have failed or are likely to fail, and the actual or potential failures cannot be fixed by the sectors acting alone”.²⁷ Besides the experience of the dependency on other sectors, initial agreements among partners on the problem definition are also seen as an initial condition of CSP forma-

27 Bryson et al., op. cit., p.46; cf. Van Huijstee et al., op. cit.

tion²⁸. One of the reasons for this is that agreements on the problem definition can help to clarify the interest partners have in solving the problem. In the literature therefore, both the acknowledgement of the *interdependency* of cross-sector partners and the recognition of the *self-interest* of each partner in solving the problem are seen as necessary conditions for CSP formation.²⁹ Based on the ground-breaking work of Selsky and Parker³⁰, Seitanidi and Crane revealed the critical micro-processes within partnership formation in a case study on the implementation of CSPs.³¹ We follow their work for a moment to throw light on three questions with regard to identity, unity and difference in the process of CSP formation and implementation.

According to Seitanidi and Crane, the first stage of partner selection consists of the following steps: the strategic decision of a company for 'partnership' as the preferred associational form to work on sustainable development; the exploration of possible partners; and the selection of a partner organisation based on selection criteria. They describe an additional step in the event of reputational risk, the situation in which potential partners would undermine the reputation, integrity, brand or, in short, the identity of the company. If, for instance, Shell and Greenpeace decide to start a partnership, it is at least conceivable that this partnership would raise questions about the integrity of and motives of both partners. An informal risk assessment is an additional step, consisting of internal and external debates within the company or NGO and with the potential partners and stakeholders about the concerns the CSP raises and its consequences for their own reputation. In this way, the informal risk assessment considers which potential partners are compatible with the identity of the company or NGO.³²

The various steps in the selection phase show clearly that Seitanidi and Crane acknowledge the fundamental differences or even conflicts between partners. On the one hand, these differences can lead to the construction of partnerships that jointly work on innovative solutions to the wicked problem of sustainable development. On the other hand, these differences between partners can also undermine the identity of the partnering organisations. Otherwise, it wouldn't make sense to perform an informal risk assessment.

Although an informal risk assessment can help to assess which partners are compatible or not, Seitanidi and Crane do not make clear how we can distinguish between differences between partners which undermine the identity of one of the partnering organisations, and differences which are constructive and lead to innovative solutions. Is it possible to make

28 B. Gray, 'Cross-Sectoral Partners: Collaborative Alliances among Business, Government, and Communities' in C. Huxham (ed.), *Creating Collaborative Advantage*, pp.57-79, Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1989; F. Westley and H. Vredenburg, 'Interorganizational collaboration and the preservation of global biodiversity', *Organization Science* 8, No. 4, 1997, pp.381-403; Selsky and Parker, op. cit.

29 J.M. Logsdon, 'Interests and Interdependence in the Formation of Social Problem-Solving Collaborations', *Journal of Applied Behavioural Science* 27, No. 1, 1991, pp.23-37; cf. Bryson et al., op. cit.

30 Selsky and Parker, op. cit.

31 M.M. Seitanidi and A. Crane, 'Implementing CSR through Partnerships: Understanding the Selection, Design and Institutionalisation of Nonprofit-Business Partnerships', *Journal of Business Ethics* 85, 2009, pp.413-29

32 Cf. Van Huijstee et al., op. cit.

such a strict distinction between constructive and destructive partnerships, or does every construction presupposes a certain amount of destruction and vice versa? Is, for instance, the construction of the roundtable on sustainable palm oil by WWF, Unilever and others a real solution to social problems, if it didn't destroy Unilever's business as usual in a certain way? The first question we face with regard to the implementation of CSPs is, therefore, how to distinguish between differences between partners which are destructive for the identity of the partnering organisations, and differences which are constructive for the unity of the partnership and lead to innovative solutions.

According to Seitanidi and Crane, the second stage of partnership implementation concerns the design of the partnership itself and consists of the following steps: partnership experimentation and adaptation, which involves agreements on partnership objectives and a Memorandum of Understanding. These agreements should be operationalised within the partnership, which involves agreements on the content and processes of the partnership. If for instance the meat industry and an NGO for animal protection co-create a market for animal-friendly meat products, they have to agree on the specific characteristics of the product, taking both aspects of economics and animal welfare into account.³³

We already saw that initial agreements on the problem definition are an initial condition of partnership formation and lead to higher degrees of alignment on common goals³⁴; without shared objectives, agreements on the operationalisation of the partnership – the commitment of resources, designation of formal leadership, the decision-making structure and so forth – will not succeed and the partnership in general will not get off the ground.³⁵

Although it is clear that partners have to agree on the problem definition and the shared objectives of the partnership and have to adapt to each other in the design phase, Seitanidi and Crane do not make clear, however, how exactly the differences or even conflicts between multiple stakeholders are bridged in order to reach such a common ground. The second question we face with regard to the implementation of CSPs concerns, therefore, how exactly partners bridge their differences within the process of partnership implementation.

The final stage of implementation concerns the institutionalisation of the partnership. According to Seitanidi and Crane, partnership programs and processes should be embedded in the partnering organisations. The institutionalisation is measured by the extent to which partners are able to overcome crises within the partnership, "a) by accepting the other organisation's strengths and also weaknesses as a reality of an integrative relationship and b) by not avoiding conflict but rather accept disagreements as functional which permits retaining the organisation's identity intact".³⁶ If, for instance, the meat industry

33 J. Bos, V. Blok and R. van Tulder, 'From confrontation to partnership: The role of a Dutch Non-Governmental Organisation in co-creating a market to address the issue of animal welfare', *International Food and Agribusiness Management Review* 16, No. A, 2013, pp.69–75; cf. Van Huijstee et al., op. cit.

34 Cf. Nowell, op. cit.

35 Cf. Bryson et al., op. cit.; cf. C. Huxham and S. Vangen, *Managing to Collaborate: The Theory and Practice of Collaborative Advantage*, New York: Routledge, 2005

36 Seitanidi and Crane, op. cit., p.422

and the NGO for animal protection, based on their conflicting value systems, disagree with regard to specific animal welfare characteristics of a new animal-friendly product brand, they have to *agree to disagree*.³⁷ Here, we see again that Seitanidi and Crane acknowledge the fundamental differences between partners (encountered during the first phase of partnership implementation), which have to be bridged in order to achieve shared objectives (second phase of partnership implementation). On the one hand, the extent to which CSPs are able to solve such crises – i.e. differences and conflicts within the partnership – is an indication of the unity of the partnership. On the other hand, the acceptance of differences between partners helps to retain the partnering organisations' own identity. For Seitanidi and Crane, therefore, constructive partnerships with shared objectives allow for differences or conflicts within the partnership, because they can strengthen the identity of the actors involved.

However, if differences between actors can be seen as destructive for the identity of the partnering organisations – as Seitanidi and Crane revealed with regard to the first phase of partnership implementation – and at the same time as constructive for the identity of the partnering organisations – as they suggest with regard to the third phase of partnership implementation – the question is again: how can we distinguish between differences which are destructive for the identity of the partnering organisations, and differences which are constructive for their identity? The third question we face with regard to the implementation of CSPs thus concerns how to distinguish between differences between partners which are constructive and destructive for the identity of the actors involved. While the first question concentrates on differences which are destructive for the identity of the partnering organisations and differences which are constructive for the *unity of the partnership*, the third question focusses on the differences between partners which are constructive for the *identity of the partnering organisations*.

Our short consultation of the partnership literature makes two things clear. On the one hand, the philosophical question about unity, identity and difference is at the heart of the phenomenon of CSPs. On the other hand, this question is not taken into account in current research on the way CSPs overcome their divergences and align their efforts to solve wicked problems like sustainable development. In the next subsection, we will reflect on the concepts of identity, unity and difference in the metaphysical tradition.

b) Identity, Unity and Difference in the Philosophical Tradition

In the history of Western philosophy, identity is understood as *sameness*; each thing is the same with itself and two things are the same if they share certain qualities. In the case of two things sharing the same quality – man and woman share the quality human being for instance – we talk about *qualitative* identity. Two things can be more or less qualitatively identical, dependent on the specificity of the qualities they share. In this respect, two men

37 Cf. Global Environmental Management Initiative (GEMI) and Environmental Defense Fund, *Guide to Successful Corporate-NGO Partnerships*, 2008

can be seen as 'more' identical than man and woman for instance. In the case of *total* qualitative identity, we talk about *numerical* identity. Numerical identity only holds for the sameness of a thing with itself, because a thing is only *total* qualitative identical with itself.³⁸

Qualitative identity is traditionally understood in terms of a *genus proximum et differentiam specificam*. Each thing can be defined in terms of a genus under which it falls – animal, for instance – and a species which differentiates this type of animal – *animal rationale*, for instance – from other types of animals. All entities who share the same quality – *animal rationale*, for instance – are qualitative the same in contrast with other entities who do not share these specific qualities (plants, for instance). The identity of an entity therefore contains one or more unifying qualities (animal or plant, for instance) and one or more differentiating qualities (*rationale*, for instance). These qualities are understood as universal terms and form a hierarchy of universals (*animal*) which are applicable on lower levels of universality (*rationale*) and so on, down to the lowest level of universals (*Dutch philosopher*, for instance) and in the end, to individual entities (Vincent Blok as a Dutch philosopher). According to the Aristotelian tradition, these individual entities are the 'primary substances' of which universal terms (genus, species etc.) are predicated, "while it is not itself predicated of something else"³⁹; rationality may be a quality of Vincent Blok but Vincent Blok itself cannot be seen as a quality of another primary substance.

Aristotle distinguishes between *essential* qualities of primary substances – i.e. qualities which are predicated to the primary substance *per se* (*Kath'auto*) like the rationality of human being – and *accidental* qualities like the tallness or red-nosedness of a human being. Essential qualities of primary substances (*eidos*) are not restricted to genera or species. According to Aristotle, *eidos* primarily means the form or gestalt of an entity as it appears in contrast to its materiality.⁴⁰ The *eidos* has to be understood therefore as a unifying principle in the light of which *different* things appear *as* the same (identity). The first characteristic of identity and difference in the metaphysical tradition is that identity is understood as an essential quality (genus, *idea*, *eidos*) which is a unifying principle in the light of which *different* entities appear *as* the same. The difference between entities who share the same qualitative identity (Socrates and Callias as human beings, for instance) is explained by their accidental qualities (tallness, rednosedness etc.) or by their materiality (see also Leibnitz's concept of the *identity of indiscernibles*). While the qualitative identity of Socrates and Callias is due to the essential quality they share (human being), the difference between them is due to differentiating accidental qualities (Socrates has a red nose and Callias is tall, for instance) and their particular materiality.

According to Emmanuel Levinas, these metaphysical concepts of identity and difference are the result of a *reduction* of the other to the same, difference to identity. Because the work of Levinas is notoriously difficult, we restrict ourselves to a schematic presentation of his critique of the metaphysical concepts of identity and difference in this section, and

38 H. Noonan, 'Identity' in E.N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2011

39 Aristotle, *Metaphysics* (trans H. Tredennick), Cambridge/London: Harvard UP, 1933–1989, 1028b35

40 S.M. Cohen, 'Aristotle's Metaphysics' in E.N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2012

explore the applicability of his critique in the context of cross-sector partnerships in the next section.

In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas argues that “Western philosophy has most often been an ontology: a reduction of the other to the same by interposition of a middle and neutral term that ensures the comprehension of being”.⁴¹ This middle term – *rationale*, for instance – is the unifying principle in the light of which different things synthesise and appear as the same. To what extent do we have to conceive such an interposition of a unifying principle as a *reduction* of the other to the same according to Levinas? “The relation with Being that is enacted as ontology consists in neutralising the existent in order to comprehend or grasp it. It is hence not a relation with the other as such but the reduction of the other to the same”.⁴² Because of the primacy of the knowledge of the Being of beings in the metaphysical tradition – *rationale* as differentiating quality of human beings, for instance – priority is given to the essential qualities, while the accidental qualities of Socrates and Callias are renounced, just as their particular materiality, i.e. their singularity. The second characteristic of identity and difference in the metaphysical tradition is that identity is the product of a reduction of the other to the same, difference to identity.

This reduction doesn’t mean that differences between primary substances are simply rejected in the metaphysical tradition. In light of the unifying principle (essential quality), the remaining differences are understood as accidental or *secondary* qualities; they are appreciated only in light of the essential or primary qualities. In this respect, the difference *as* difference is reduced to a difference *within* the same; or in philosophical language, the difference is *interiorised*.⁴³ The same holds for the singularity of primary substances, which is neutralised and anonymised by the reduction of the other to the same according to Levinas.⁴⁴ In order to understand a primary substance like another human being, we traditionally refrain from his singularity and conceive him in general terms – the other in his animality, in his rationality and so on. Because this singularity of the singular person is understood in general terms, it is precisely this otherness or singularity which is violated. The third characteristic of identity and difference in the metaphysical tradition is that differences are interiorised and only appreciated in light of a unifying principle (identity).

According to Levinas, the point of departure of this reduction is found in myself. “The relation with the other is here accomplished only through a third term which I find in myself. The ideal of Socratic truth thus rests on the essential self-sufficiency of the same, its identification in ipseity, its egoism”.⁴⁵ The unifying principle, in the light of which the other appears as the same, is found in myself. In this way, the other (difference) is suppressed, exploited and dominated by the self (identity). The fourth characteristic of identity and

41 E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1969, p.43

42 Levinas, op. cit., pp.45–6

43 Cf. J. Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982

44 Levinas, op. cit., p.45

45 Ibid., p.44

difference in the metaphysical tradition is that the power performed by the self guarantees sameness over otherness, identity over difference.

Contrary to the metaphysical tradition, the point of departure of Levinas' philosophy is precisely found in the encounter with the singularity of another person. The confrontation with another person is completely different from an encounter with any other object, organism or event in the world. I not only see that another person looks like me, acts like me and appears to have consciousness like me. For Levinas, the main difference is that I, in my face-to-face encounter with another person, a) experience a fundamental difference between myself and the other person which cannot be bridged – i.e. the radical exteriority of the other – and b) experience myself as the one who is called upon to respond to this other.⁴⁶ Contrary to the metaphysical tradition, Levinas develops a way of thinking that is characterised by a desire for the other without reducing him, i.e. “the personal Other, the you”.⁴⁷ Because the further elaboration of Levinas' concept of the other as Other is beyond the scope of this article, we restrict ourselves to this schematic presentation of Levinas' critique of the metaphysical concepts of identity and difference. In the next section, we trace the four characteristics of the metaphysical concepts of identity and difference in the context of CSP development and implementation.

§2 Analysis: Identity, Unity and Difference in the Process of Partner Selection

The process of partner selection, as we have seen, starts with forging initial agreements on the problem definition and the shared objectives. These agreements are important in partnership implementation but difficult to accomplish in the case of wicked problems (cf. §1a). According to a famous article by Hardy and colleagues, who analysed the role of discourse and conversation in effective collaboration, agreements on the problem definition and the shared objectives are the result of constructing a collective identity, i.e. a unifying principle which is meaningful to and shared by the actors involved and is able to engage them to solve social problems: “the discursive construction of a collective identity enables participants to construct themselves, the problem and the solution as part of a collaborative framework in which the potential for joint action is both significant and beneficial”.⁴⁸ The construction of a collective identity has two advantages according to their research. On the one hand, it forges agreements on the problem definition and the shared objectives of the partnership. On the other hand, the potential benefits of the partnership for the partnering organisations (i.e. the interest partners have in solving the problem) become clear.

According to Hardy and colleagues, collective identities are constructed in two specific

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid., p.24

48 Hardy et al., op. cit., pp.62–3

types of conversation among partners. First of all, conversations that connect partners to a *common issue* – such as AIDS, sustainable development or poverty alleviation – produce generalised membership ties. These conversations involve the diagnosis of a shared issue or problem and the prognosis of a possible solution of the problem, i.e. a common goal or shared objective. In our example of the partnership between the meat industry and the NGO for animal protection, this shared objective can be found in a new market for animal-friendly meat products, for instance. Secondly, the construction of collective identities involves conversations that connect partners in a direct way to each other, for instance because of a common history of collaboration or position in the network, or because of the status or authority of a specific partner. These conversations produce particularised membership ties. Both types of conversation are important in the construction of a collective identity.⁴⁹

The concept of a collective identity which is produced by generalised and particularised membership ties shows that the identity of the partnership is understood as the unity of two distinct actors which can be seen as the ‘primary substances’ of the partnership, and are connected or *tied* together in a unity. Although these actors are seen as members of the partnership who share a *common* or *collective* identity, the unity of the partnership cannot be understood as a physical unity like a merger; CSPs concern collaborations between actors without merging their activities into a new organisation (cf. Introduction). The unity of the partnership concerns a *unifying principle* – stop the violation of animals in the meat industry, for instance – in the light of which different actors show themselves *as* the same, *as* unity. The collective identity of the partnership is understood here in line with the metaphysical tradition: as a unifying principle in the light of which primary substances – the actors involved in the partnership – appear *as* the same.

There are two specific ways in which different actors show themselves *as* the same. 1) The generalised membership ties produce a *commonality* among different actors, a *shared* problem definition and/or *shared* objectives, for instance. 2) The particularised membership ties produce a *community* among different actors, a spatial or temporal proximity like the *same* home base or the *same* field of action (animal production and animal welfare, for instance). Mediated by these two types of identity – commonality and community – different actors become intertwined and form a synthesis.⁵⁰ The identity of the partnership is understood here as the unity that different actors have in *common* in light of a unifying principle; the commonality of shared objectives and/or the community of spatial-temporal proximate actors. It is this concept of the unity of the partnership as the synthesis of different partners in the light of a unifying principle (commonality/community) which is

49 Cf. Hardy, op. cit. – Although the case study of Seitanidi and Crane does not speak in terms of a collective identity, their partnership selection criteria correspond in general with the generalised partnership ties – a mutual interest like sustainable development, for instance – and the particularised membership ties; previous experience in working with CSPs, covering similar geographical areas etc.

50 This double origin of the identity of the partnership corresponds with the double – onto-theo-logical – origin of the philosophical question of being (cf. M. Heidegger, ‘Der Satz der Identität’, *Identität und Differenz*, Gesamtausgabe Band 11 Frankfurt a.M., Vittorio Klostermann, 2006, pp.37–8). The further elaboration of this connection is beyond the scope of this article.

presupposed in all efforts of CSPs to overcome their differences and converge or align their efforts.

If we realise, however, that CSPs deal with wicked problems which are characterised by *different* judgments and *different* values of multiple stakeholders, it is questionable whether this unity of different partners can ever be expected in the case of wicked problems like sustainable development. In this respect, various researchers on CSPs conclude that conflicts are “pervasive and likely unavoidable in cross-sector partnerships”.⁵¹ In a recent case study on value frame fusion in CSPs by Le Ber and Branzei, the point of departure is exactly the fact that differences among multiple stakeholders are unavoidable and, therefore, that the ideal of a unifying synthesis of different partners is out of reach.⁵² Because the importance of agreements on shared problem definitions and shared objectives is acknowledged by Le Ber and Branzei, too, the question of their work is how CSPs can find a common ground (identity) and respect the differences between partners at the same time. We follow the framework of Le Ber and Branzei for a moment to see how identity and difference are conceived in their work.

According to Le Ber and Branzei, CSP formation starts with the way social problems and their solutions are understood by the individual partnering organisations. Because it is difficult to find a ‘common ground’ among these different actors, partnership formation is seen as an iterative process of revising and adjusting the individual and fundamentally *different* conceptions of the problem and its solution in relation to the other individual actors involved. In our example of an animal-friendly product brand, for instance, the NGO originally saw the meat industry as ‘part of the problem’, but acknowledged later on that a new market for animal-friendly meat products could be seen as ‘part of the solution’ of the problem. To this end, both the NGO and the industry had to adjust their conception of the problem and its solution in relation to the other. The new product brand of animal-friendly meat had to meet both the objectives of the industry (focus on animal-welfare attributes which can be communicated to consumers, a maximum of 20 per cent above the mainstream product price etc.) and the NGO (significant increase of welfare in the meat supply chain).⁵³ In such an iterative process, different partners can find ‘common ground’, i.e. areas where the problem definition and the objectives of the *different* actors *overwrite* or *overlap* each other, without the necessity to embrace the judgments or values of the other actors completely.⁵⁴

How are the concepts of identity and difference understood in the framework of Le Ber and Branzei? For Le Ber and Branzei, partners do not construct a collective identity

51 Le Ber and Branzei, *op. cit.*, p.169

52 In their article, Le Ber and Branzei speak in terms of frames. Frames are ways in which specific phenomena – problems, ideas, issues etc. – are understood and ‘framed’ by various individuals and/or organisations. With regard to the question of this article, we will avoid the terms ‘frame’ and ‘framing’ and refer to the way problems and objectives are understood by various partners.

53 Cf. Bos et al., *op. cit.*

54 Cf. Le Ber and Branzei, *op. cit.*

but rather look for overlap between their individual identities. The point of departure is therefore found in myself as a primary substance who is interested in collaborating with other actors. In the iterative process of value frame fusion, my essential qualities are the starting point of the process of value frame fusion and these essential qualities are analysed, compared and reconciled in relation to the essential qualities of other actors. In this process, it becomes clear that some essential qualities overlap with those of others, while others do not. These overlaps between the *different* identities of partners are in fact *shared* essential qualities. With this, it becomes clear that the unity of the partnership is also here understood as a synthesis – or better, as a ‘symbiosis’ – of different actors in the light of a unifying principle, i.e. the essential qualities that different actors have in common (common ground). Because the identities of the different actors do not have to overwrite or overlap each other completely, the unity of the partnership captures the commonality between the identities of the partners involved – their shared essential qualities – while allowing for their differences, i.e. essential qualities of the individual partners which do not overlap with each other. We can conclude, on the one hand, that the metaphysical concept of the unity of the partnerships we discussed before is also presupposed in the iterative process of finding common ground in the framework of Le Ber and Branzei. On the other hand, although partners try to overcome their differences and converge or align their efforts in order to find a common ground of shared essential qualities, their (remaining) differences are at the same time respected in this framework.

More important than the advantages of Le Ber’s framework is, however, that we receive an indication of how this unity of different partners is achieved in CSPs. Le Ber and Branzei distinguish four phases in this iterative process of finding common ground. Firstly, the *different* interpretations of the social problem and its solution are acknowledged and *negotiated* by the partners. Secondly, actors experiment with the *elasticity* of their own problem definition and objective in order to assess whether it may include the problem definition or the goals of other actors involved. This elasticity presupposes the willingness of the different actors to challenge their own understanding of the problem and its solution, and to embrace their partner’s conception of the problem: “The willingness and ability to see each other’s point of view builds forward momentum simply by creating a sense of connection”.⁵⁵ The ability to embrace the other’s understanding of the problem definition and its solution is called frame plasticity, i.e. the ability to give up aspects of your own understanding of the problem definition and to embrace aspects of the other’s conception of the problem, without identifying yourself completely with the other. In the fourth phase of this iterative process of finding common ground, the remaining differences between partners are understood and appreciated as *complementary* differences, i.e. as differences which can contribute to solving the social problem by generating synergetic or complementary effects. “Frame fusion partners reach common ground by coming to appreciate their (complementary) differences rather than espousing and/or enacting a similar frame”.⁵⁶

55 Ibid., p.182

56 Ibid., p.177

The process of frame fusion can be depicted in the following way:

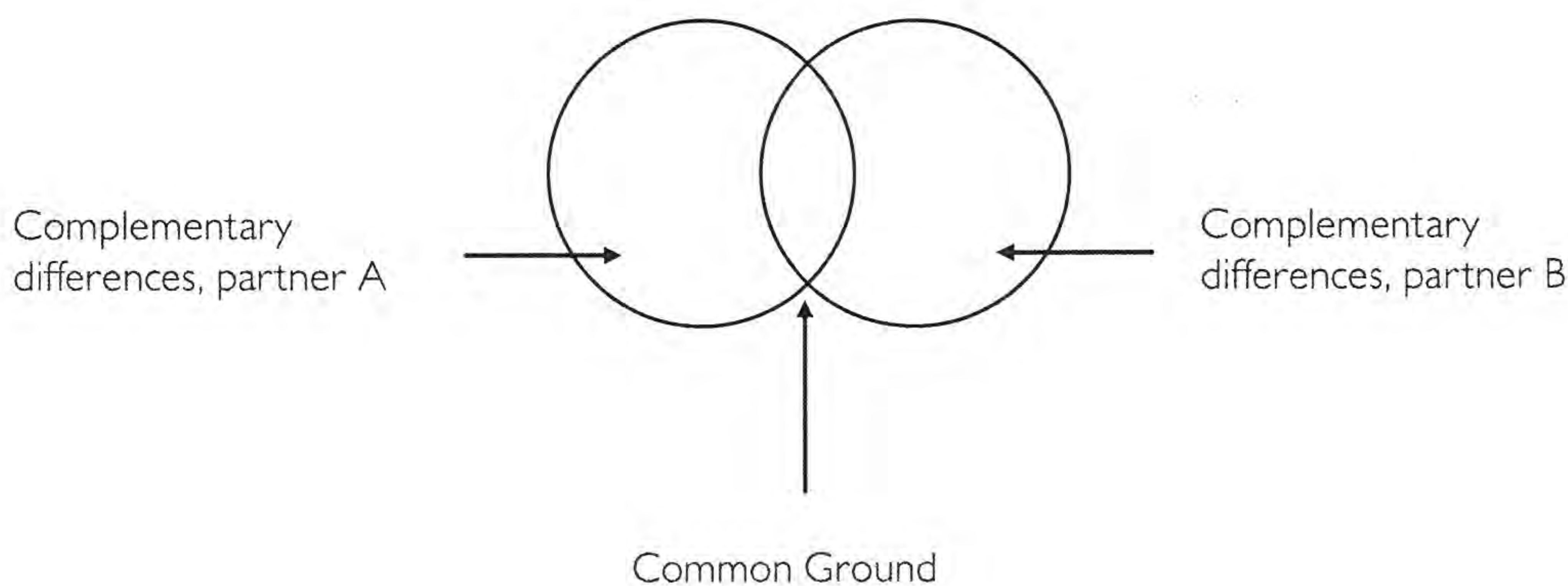


Figure 1: Process of Frame Fusion in CSPs

The iterative process of finding common ground shows that the actors have to give up parts of their *own* essential qualities and that they have to embrace parts of the *other's* essential qualities in the process of negotiation, elasticity, plasticity and fusion. This means that the common ground is not a neutral overlap between the identities of different actors, but is the product of a reduction of the otherness of the individual partners – their different essential qualities – to the same. In this iterative process of value frame fusion, the essential qualities which are shared by the individual partners increases while the remaining differences between them are acknowledged as *complementary* differences.

We can conclude that differences are reduced to the same in the process of value frame fusion. In this respect, we encounter the second characteristic of the metaphysical concept of identity and difference – identity is the product of the reduction of the other to the same, difference to identity – in the partnership literature, i.e. the ideal of unity and harmony. At the same time, we may conclude that Levinas' critique of the metaphysical tradition isn't applicable to the process of value frame fusion, because the remaining differences between actors are acknowledged as complementary differences. Contrary to Levinas, we may even claim that precisely these complementary differences contribute to solving social problems by generating synergetic or complementary effects.

And yet, this reduction of difference to identity is not harmless. This becomes clear if we realise that the differences between the essential qualities of multiple stakeholders are seen here as *complementary* differences. It is senseless to speak about *complementary* differences without any reference to a common ground (identity), and therefore primacy is given to the essential qualities multiple actors have in common. Only in the light of this common ground, differences between essential qualities of partners are appreciated as *complementary* in achieving this common goal of the partnership. These differences may be seen as

essential qualities of the individual partners, but are reduced to accidental qualities of the partnership.⁵⁷ Here we encounter the third characteristic of the metaphysical concept of identity and difference in the partnership literature: the differences between partners are only appreciated *in the light of* a common ground (identity), which means that these differences are essentially reduced to the same in order to be able to comprehend and grasp the other's viewpoint and to appreciate his or her viewpoint as complementary difference.

What is more, the reduction of difference to identity in the CSP formation is led by the individual actors involved. This becomes clear if we realise that CSP formation is characterised by power imbalances. While Le Ber and Branzei presuppose that partners are voluntarily involved in finding common ground without any 'push or pull' of one of the partners⁵⁸, Hardy and colleagues show the violent character of this reduction. In their analysis, Hardy and colleagues point at political processes involved in defining the problem and the objective of the partnership. Political processes are important, because the specific formulation of the problem definition already determines what potential solutions are involved and who are legitimate partners in realising these solutions. If we conceive the problem of sustainable development, for instance, in such a way that it affords a systems change, a wholly different solution is at stake than if it is defined at a product level and only involves the substitution of unsustainable resources. This example shows that partners have an interest in the specific way the problem is defined, because it has consequences for the shared objective of the partnership and, with this, for the investments of resources to solve the problem.

For Hardy and colleagues, it is clear that some partners are more powerful than others in defining the problem and the shared objectives of the partnership, i.e. that partnership formation is not a voluntary process without any push and pull. It is conceivable that power imbalances are especially at stake in the case of wicked problems, exactly because of the different problem definitions and different values of partners. These power imbalances can be seen as a prime source of conflicts between partners⁵⁹ but also as their solution. When partners have difficulty in finding a common ground with regard to the problem definition and/or its solution, power imbalances and negotiation processes between partners will lead to the prevalence of the problem definition of the powerful partner over that of the weaker partner. In the light of this negotiated problem definition, the differences between the partners can be respected and accepted as an 'agreement to not agree' or as *complementary* differences.⁶⁰ The point of departure is therefore not only found in my identity (essential quality) as an individual actor (primary substance) which is voluntarily aligned

57 There is also a more subtle form of reduction at stake in the process of value frame fusion. The ability to see the other's point of view and to embrace the other's viewpoint presupposes already that I abandon the fundamental – unbridgeable – differences between myself and the other in order to be able to grasp and comprehend him or her.

58 Le Ber and Branzei, *op. cit.*

59 Cf. Bryson et al., *op. cit.*

60 A negative consequence of such a situation can be found in the legitimacy loss of the weaker partner or the blurring of responsibility within the CSP (cf. Van Huijstee et al., *op. cit.*).

with the identity of other actors in the process of value frame fusion, but this alignment is the product of efforts of individual partners to dominate the process of finding a common ground of shared essential qualities.

If conflicts and fundamental differences are persistent during the first two phases of CSP implementation⁶¹, power imbalances will lead to the exclusion of 'extreme' or 'radical' perspectives by the powerful partner⁶². In this respect, we can understand why radical stakeholders like Greenpeace or People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) are excluded by MNEs like Unilever, Nestlé and Shell: fundamental differences between actors are excluded and only complementary differences are taken into account in CSP formation. The reduction of the other to the same in CSP formation is therefore not – or at least, not only – characterised by the willingness of both partners to challenge their own identity and embrace the other's perspective on the problem and its solution, as Le Ber and Branzei suggest, but by the (political) will of the partners to master and control the other in CSP formation. Only by the inclusion of complementary differences and the exclusion of radical differences is the unity and harmony of CSPs guaranteed. With this, we encounter the fourth characteristic of the metaphysical concept of identity and difference in the partnership literature: that the point of departure of value frame fusion is found in essential qualities of myself as primary substance and that the power performed by myself guarantees sameness over otherness, difference over identity. In both 'voluntary' and 'forced' partnerships, common ground is found by using the reductive powers of the actors involved. Through these reductive powers, actors give up the fundamental difference between themselves and the other partners in order to achieve unity (partner inclusion) or they maintain their identity in confrontation with the other to achieve unity (partner exclusion). Only by this inclusion and exclusion of partners can the unity of the partnership be guaranteed.

With the analysis of the process of CSP development and implementation, we encountered the four characteristics of the metaphysical concept of identity and difference in the partnership literature: 1) The unity of partnerships is understood as the synthesis of different actors in the light of a unifying principle, which is found in an essential quality they share (commonality, community, common ground etc.). 2) This unity and harmony of the partnership is the product of the reduction of the otherness of the individual partners to the same, difference to identity. 3) This reduction doesn't mean that all differences between partners are excluded. The differences between individual partners are appreciated in the light of a common ground, which means that the difference *as* difference is essentially interiorised and reduced to the same. 4) The unity of the partnership is guaranteed by the power of the individual actors involved in partnership formation, i.e. by the inclusion of complementary and the exclusion of fundamental differences. If actors are able to find such a common ground, the differences between their judgments and values are interiorised as *complementary* differences. If actors are not able to find such a common ground and

61 Cf. Bryson et al., op. cit.

62 Hardy et al., op. cit.; B. Gray and T.M. Hay, 'Political limits to interorganisational consensus and change', *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* 22, 1986, pp.95–112

conflicts remain, fundamental different actors are excluded from the partnership by the more powerful actors involved.

Accordingly, we can conclude that a very specific concept of identity, unity and difference is presupposed in the CSP literature, and that the tendency towards unity and harmony in the CSP literature is rooted in the metaphysical tradition. In the last and concluding section, we return to the three questions we raised in section one.

§3 *Conclusions and Discussion*

In §1a, we developed three questions with regard to identity, unity and difference in the process of CSP formation. Based on our analysis of the partnership literature in section two, we identified four characteristics of the concepts of identity and difference which are presupposed in the CSP literature. With this, we are first of all able to answer the three questions developed in section one.

The first question we raised was about the differences between partners and the unity of the partnership: how are we to distinguish between differences between partners which are destructive for the identity of the partnering organisations and differences which are constructive for the unity of the partnership and lead to innovative solutions? The unity of the partnership is the product of the reduction of the other to the same, difference to identity, as we have seen. There are two ways in which this unity is constituted. The reduction can result in a common ground, in which the differences between the partners are interiorised as complementary differences. These complementary differences between partners are conceived as drivers for innovative solutions within the partnership. If actors are, however, unable to find common ground and conflicts remain, the differences between actors undermine the unity of the partnership. In that case, the unity of the partnership is guaranteed by the exclusion of 'radical' different partners; only complementary differences between partners are seen as constructive for the unity of the partnership and therefore, as drivers for finding innovative solutions within the partnership.

The second question asked how exactly partners bridge their differences within the process of partnership implementation. As we have seen in section two, the unity of the partnership is constituted and guaranteed by the reductive power of the actors involved. Differences between partners are bridged by the reduction of the other to the same, difference to identity. This identity is found in a unifying principle (commonality, community, common ground), in the light of which the differences between partners are interiorised. The kind of differences between actors that are bridged or exorcised in order to find common ground within the partnership is in the end determined by the power of the actors involved in partnership formation.

The third question was about differences between partners and the identity of the partnering organisations: how to distinguish between differences between partners which are constructive and destructive for the identity of the partnering organisations. It is important to realise that, in a way, all partnerships are destructive for the identity of the partnering

organisations. The concepts of frame elasticity and frame plasticity (cf. §2) already show that actors should be able to give up aspects of their own identity and embrace aspects of the other actors without identifying themselves completely with the other. This destruction of their own identity, however, is not problematic if a common ground is found. In the light of this common ground, the differences between partners can be seen as complementary differences which lead to innovative solutions to social problems. These differences are not destructive for the identity of the partnering organisations but retain an organisation's identity intact. If the problem definitions and core values of other actors threaten to undermine the organisation's identity, they will use their power to assimilate or exclude these actors from the partnership in order to find common ground. Power imbalances and negotiation processes between partners will lead to the prevalence of the problem definition and values of the powerful partner over those of the weaker partner. This power to assimilate or exclude potential partners can be seen as destructive for the identity of the (weaker) actors involved.

The critical question we have to ask, however, is whether these metaphysical concepts of identity, unity and difference are suitable in the case of wicked problems like sustainable development. If multiple stakeholders are involved with different or even conflicting judgments and values, it is questionable whether the ideal of the unity of the partnership – a common ground of shared problem definitions, common goals or a collective identity – can ever be reached within the partnership.⁶³ Again, if multiple stakeholders are involved in the solution of wicked problems, it is questionable whether the reduction of these *differences* to identity – common ground – and to *complementary* differences is possible without the destruction of the identity of the partners involved. Finally, if such stakeholders are involved, it is questionable whether it is desirable to deal with complementary differences within the partnership only and to exclude extreme or radical perspectives on the problem and its solution.

In the case of wicked problems like sustainable development, we are in need of (disruptive) innovative solutions. Innovation seems to flourish in an environment of open innovation, in which the interaction with *other* or *different* stakeholders is seen as a resource

63 Although Bryson and colleagues acknowledge the risk of conflict within the partnership due to differing aims and expectations, differing strategies and different attempts to control the collaboration, they see no principal obstacle to developing a common problem definition and shared objectives. Because conflict is common in partnerships, they argue for the use of “resources and tactics to equalize power and manage conflicts effectively” (Bryson et al., op. cit., p.48). We do not argue against the possibility of managing conflicts but question whether this ideal of the unity of the partnership can ever be guaranteed by power equalisation and conflict management in the case of wicked problems like sustainable development. Le Ber and Branzei seem to ignore this risk of conflict within partnerships completely. The frame elasticity presupposes the willingness of the partners to challenge their own conception of the problem and its solution, and to embrace their partners' understanding of the problem “without push and pull” (Le Ber and Branzei, op. cit.). We do not argue against the possibility of embracing the other in CSPs, but raise the question of whether the different (conflicting) judgments and values of multiple stakeholders could also *prevent* such openness towards other partners.

of competitive advantage⁶⁴; only the *diversity* of problem definitions and values leads to creative and innovative solutions. It is questionable whether it is sufficient to deal with 'complementary' differences only in order to find innovative solutions to wicked problems like sustainable development, or that 'radically' different stakeholder should be involved as well.

Do we have to conclude then that CSPs are impossible or insufficient in the case of wicked problems like sustainable development, because these kinds of partnerships all show a tendency towards convergence and harmony and cannot take the wickedness of the problem and the fundamental differences between stakeholders into account?

Hardy and colleagues do not embrace this conclusion. They acknowledge "people's preference for coherence" and a "tendency towards convergence", but believe that "a number of factors can mitigate this tendency towards convergence".⁶⁵ They argue for the production of "private constructions", i.e. the construction of the actors' own identity (problem definitions, interest and core values). According to their argument, effective collaboration between partners is facilitated by a tension between the tendencies towards convergence (commonality, community, collective identity of essential qualities) and towards divergence (private constructions of a private identity of essential qualities of the actors involved).

The question is, however, how the tendency towards convergence is related to the tendency towards divergence. Hardy and colleagues seem to make a strict distinction between the collective identity of the partnership (shared essential qualities of the partnership) and the private identity of the partners (private essential qualities of the individual partners) which are not shared. There are two problems with this position. If the mission of an NGO is to stop the pollution of the environment in Asia, for instance, we may expect this mission to be part not only of the private construction of the NGO, but of the shared objectives of the CSP too. In other words, it is for this NGO insufficient when this essential quality is only a private construction and it should be part of the collective identity as well; otherwise, it wouldn't make sense for the NGO to join the CSP.⁶⁶ The first problem is therefore that a strict distinction between the essential qualities which constitute the collective identity of the partnership and the essential qualities which constitute the private identity of the partnering organisations cannot be made in the case of wicked problems like sustainable development. At the same time, it is precisely this essential quality of the NGO which may be in conflict with the problem definition and values of the other partners involved in the partnership. From the perspective of the partnership, these conflicting essential qualities have to be seen then as part of the private construction of the NGO. Indeed, the success

64 H.W. Chesbrough, *Open innovation : the new imperative for creating and profiting from technology*, Harvard: Harvard Business School Press, 2003; for an example of competitive advantage based on interorganisational collaborations between *for-profit* companies, see: E.F.M. Wubben, N.A. Runge and V. Blok, 'From Waste to Profit: an interorganisational perspective on drivers for biomass valorization', *Journal on Chain and Network Science* 12, No. 3, 2012, pp.261–72

65 Hardy et al., op. cit., p.68

66 It's for this reason that 'mutual interests' is an important criterion for partner selection (cf. Seitanidi and Crane, op. cit., p.418).

of CSPs is guaranteed by a shared problem definition and shared objectives, as we have seen (cf. §1a), which means that conflicting essential qualities have to be excluded from the partnership. But this exclusion of conflicting essential qualities from the partnership and their inclusion in the private identity of the actors involved means that this private identity actually turns out to be an accidental quality and is limited to complementary differences between partners. Why? On the one hand, if these qualities were really essential for the NGO, they should have been part of the collective identity of the partnership in which they are involved. On the other hand, if these essential qualities really concern fundamental differences between (potential) partners – think, for example, of Greenpeace and Shell or PETA and the meat industry – these private identities are unacceptable for the other actors involved. The second problem is therefore that even if we accept the need to acknowledge the private identity (difference) of partners, only *complementary* or *in-essential* differences between partners will be acceptable for the powerful actors involved. In this respect, it is not only likely that the “people’s preference for convergence” and “tendency towards convergence” are rooted in the metaphysical tradition (§2), but also that the “ongoing circulation and interplay of common and private constructions”, which mitigates the tendency towards convergence according to Hardy and colleagues, are preceded by the inclusion of complementary different partners and the exclusion of radical different partners.

Although Hardy and colleagues give valuable suggestions on how to mitigate the tendency towards convergence – including raising mutual awareness of the different conceptions of the problem definition and the objectives of the partnering organisations, and having a steady flow of new partners over time⁶⁷ – our question about whether the metaphysical concepts of identity and difference are suitable in the case of wicked problems like sustainable development in general, and the question about how to maintain one’s own identity (difference) and share objectives with other partners at the same time (identity), remain unanswered.

It is unnecessary, however, to conclude that CSPs are impossible or insufficient in the case of wicked problems like sustainable development, because of their tendency towards convergence and harmony. As soon as we have realised that the meaning of concepts like partnership and collaboration is essentially determined by the metaphysical tradition, we can question whether the metaphysical concepts of identity and difference are appropriate in the case of CSPs for wicked problems like sustainable development.⁶⁸ Philosophers like Levinas can inspire us to question the metaphysical concepts of identity and difference. He not only pointed at the metaphysical origin of these concepts, but his attempt was also to ‘destruct’ the metaphysical meaning of these concepts and to develop a non-metaphysical concept of identity and difference. For him, the relationship with the other is characterised

67 Hardy et al., op. cit.

68 According to Günter Figal, the function of a hermeneutic-phenomenological destruction of metaphysical concepts is exactly that it enables us to question the applicability of metaphysical concepts in new contexts (G. Figal, ‘Hermeneutics as Phenomenology’, *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 40, No. 3, 2009, pp.255–62).

by a fundamental difference which cannot be bridged. Although the Other is irreducible, this doesn't mean that I do not have a relation with him.⁶⁹ In my face-to-face encounter with the Other, I experience myself as the one who is called upon to respond to the Other. The irreducible Other calls for our response in a non-reductive way, i.e. calls for our embracing of the Other while leaving him intact at the same time; this is called *participation*.⁷⁰

One of the main questions for future research is whether Levinas can provide us with a non-metaphysical concept of partnership in which the fundamental and even conflicting differences between partners are embraced⁷¹ and the search for innovative solutions to wicked problems like sustainable development is encouraged.*

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69 Cf. M. Lim, 'The ethics of alterity and the teaching of otherness', *Business Ethics: A European Review* 16, No. 3, 2007, pp.251–63

70 Levinas, op. cit.

71 For a philosophical reflection on such a non-metaphysical concept of partnership with the other, see V. Blok, 'Communication or Confrontation: Heidegger and philosophical Method' (*Empedocles* 1, 2009, pp.43–57) and – in the context of business and economics – V. Blok, 'The Power of Speech Acts: Reflections on a Performative Concept of Ethical Oaths in Economics and Business' (*Review of Social Economy* 71, No. 2, 2013, pp.187–208).

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