

## THE ESSENTIAL MEANING OF DIALOGUE Philosophical Aspects of a Recent Theme

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### **The Philosophy of Dialogue**

A programmatic philosophical reflection of dialogic thinking in the 20th century has been developing in a line, tying on, quite remarkably, to the greatest landmark crises in the history of Western society. The very origin and continued development of the European philosophy of dialogue represents a sensitive and radical intellectual reaction to the two most tragic events in the 20th century: the crisis of spiritual values brought about by the First World War and the profound shock caused to democracy by the rule of the totalitarian dictatorships.

In Western thought, the dialogic philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig, Ferdinand Ebner and Martin Buber, having originated in the early 1920s, constitutes the first systematic awakening of an awareness of the irreducible dimension of „You“ in the ontology of human relations. The tragic process of objectifying of „the other one“, his degradation into the cannon-fodder of great power interests has its spiritual roots in a seemingly unchangeable - for centuries ingrained - theoretical reduction of his being to its non-relational parameters (thinking of man only in the third or first person: He, She - or I, and the other one as my „other self“). The lack of relational receptivity, and the spiritual dominance of European Selfhood arranging the world have eventually caused the profound crisis of European humanity: it was precisely the „solipsism“ of philosophical thought (its neglect of the relational dimension) that has proved itself to be the weakest spot of the modern concept of humanity, manifesting itself in its deficiency at a time when „I“ becomes capable of bestially turning against its own „You“. The philosophers of dialogue, shocked by the experience of the catastrophic war, demonstrate, out of the depth of their spiritual conviction, that the main condition of humanity is my relationship to „You“; because I is not a centre of the universe but a gift from my Creator to You.

The microcosm of personal relations and the macrocosm of social entities are the levels that comprehensively affect one another. If a personal relation to God and to one's neighbour - which is the foundation of Judaeo-Christian spirituality - vanishes from the soul of the modern European, then his whole design of the world will be marked with this deficiency and his entire praxis shall have corresponding consequences. This reflection by the first generation of the philosophers of dialogue was radically deepened after the second recent catastrophe in European history - after Auschwitz and the Gulag. After the collapse of Nazi totalitarianism Emmanuel Lévinas began systematically

elaborating an ethical dimension of I and You, shifting the focal point of this relationship still further towards „the Other one“ and reflecting personal responsibility as the deepest substratum of social justice. He analyzes the genesis and function of totalitarianism as such and radicalizes the awareness of the „otherness“ of redeeming transcendence against immanent, horizontal Being. Up till now his philosophy has been the last and strongest word coming from this line of philosophy.

The crisis, which is a challenge to dialogic thought at present, is no longer describable in terms of apparent liquidation of other human beings but in terms of a simple passive collapse of human relations. This collapse is sometimes diagnosed as a negative accompanying phenomenon of post-modern radical plurality.

### Post-modern Plurality and Dialogue

The post-modern era is a period of civilizational and cultural recapitulation. Its synchronic pluralism is a projection of the diachronic pluralism of traditions which are being revived in the post-modern era and which meet one another. The resultant plurality of convictions, values and norms that find themselves in the most different interrelationships (from convergence to conflict) is a stimulus and subject of various modes of communication.<sup>1</sup> In a situation where their common context is reduced to an utterly abstract principle of unbridled plurality, born out of the levelling-off of all temporal-spatial factors, the very possibility of communication cancels itself out not only between different traditions but often within the framework of one and the same tradition, since the modes of its interpretation, not guided by any de-levelling criterion of correctness, are not instrumental in the development of that tradition but in its collapse. Thus, the criterion of correctness of any statement or act becomes this statement or act itself. In this way, this principle of unconditional individuation is turning into a mechanism of endless gradual decomposition because anything, once arisen, does not lend itself to be subjected to the necessity of being bound to anything outside itself; at the same time to seek a criterion of correctness in oneself means a new explosion of plurality of possible self-interpretations which, once again, are not guided by anything external of themselves and so on and so forth.

This process has its fatal consequences in dehumanizing everyday relations, invariably turning its edge, with cruel clockwork tenacity, against that one who is not (in an ever narrowed-down sense) „our own“ but who is „the other one“. A counterpoise of this process may probably only be a movement proceeding from the potentialities of dialogue. Dialogue can link up precisely to the fact that it finds its contextual prerequisite in the very principle of plurality.

<sup>1</sup> See J. Poláková, *Searching for the Divine in Contemporary Philosophy: Tensions between the Immanent and the Transcendent* (Lewiston - Queenston - Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1999).

Dialogue springs from the same trans-immanent nothingness into which the post-modern infinite differentiation collapses. Although not coming with ready criteria, it restores the possibility of communication, thus transforming the levelling-off disintegration into new creation. Emerging out of the latent nothingness „before Creation“, it carries its telos out of it: to put everything into the relations mediated precisely through this purifying and substantiating nothingness in which - particularly at the time of crises or catastrophes – we finally come to inquire why we really are, what we were born for. Such a contingent plurality of human singularities, which is capable of autonomously reflecting in its members the nothingness of one's own isolated being, is also capable of turning towards mutual, non-contingent relatedness. Through nothingness, which underlies our being, we drop out of ourselves into relationship with the Other one. Becoming capable of togetherness.

That part of our post-modern humanity which is capable of being dialogically transformed can be a new starting point of a constructive movement.

### The Extra-ordinariness of Dialogue

Dialogue is left as the only chance for communication in situations where the possibility of understanding another person utterly fails: where it is impossible to place that person in the same order in which I am myself placed, or at least to find some constructive connections between him and „my“ order. Furthermore, only when this possibility is out of the question, there comes a chance for a „pure“ dialogue in the true sense of the word, or - to be exact - a dialogue reveals its most profound potentialities. It is apparent that, in this most intrinsic sense, dialogue is communication which breaks through the boundaries of mere comprehension: „dia-logue“ is a penetration through (my or our) order of thinking,<sup>2</sup> penetration beyond that order, towards the living reality of the Other one.

In this way, the transcending nature of dialogue eliminates the idolatry of any construed meaning and makes it possible to accept meaning which, on the contrary, constitutes and transforms us. Its source is the Infinite of which I catch a glimpse through the slits in my order, through nothingness and absurdity.

In a „space“ of transcendence thus opened, an unconditional openness is possible, not as a senseless disintegration but as an act of acceptance of the Other one - into Meaning which touches both of us. This character of dialogue spells out the simple fact that the core of dialogue takes place outside the sphere which is humanly disposable. Interaction which wants to preserve the character of dialogue should not take anything for granted.

### Dialogue and Discourse

<sup>2</sup> R. Panikkar, *Myth, Faith and Hermeneutics* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 9,243.

The development of post-modern society has been aiming at an ever greater distancing from all the ideal models of the communication community through which modern rationality has been enclosing itself ever more into the ghetto of its deontological fictions. Inside, it is hopelessly burning out while life continues. It seems on many occasions that it is going down towards its bottom; but it is at the bottom of life that one finds not ideas, rules, exchange of arguments but integral human communication into which Transcendence may enter.

The vertical openness of dialogue relativizes the horizontal criteria of a discursive consensus. A discursive effort to attain relationless formal universality which, through its emptiness, eventually allows for any formally endowed acts of arbitrariness, is surpassed by dialogue and subordinated to the relational search for contentual universality whose infinite fullness is granted according to the so called principle of grace: at its own discretion, independently of human ambitions. Seen from this viewpoint, dialogue is a way of opening and subordinating an anthropological action perspective to the theological one.<sup>3</sup>

Unlike artificial human universalities, the genuine universality of this perspective brings an intrinsic confirmation of each uniqueness: it is universality that creates not generalities but relations.<sup>4</sup> Not representing any abstract pattern, it is a point of encountering virtually all singularities. Dialogue is an entrance to this relation which is opened without any restrictions, and hence always the same in an infinite plurality of unique dialogical encounters. The integrating effect of the dialogue principle on all the spheres of human experiencing and thinking is conditioned by this transcendent nature of it. In it, the horizontal movement „towards“ is always synthesized with the vertical movement „through“ and „above“. In dialogue, each particularity is thus rendered transparent and is elevated into universal relational context.

Dialogue liberates and transforms, being liberation and transformation itself. In it, there is an outgoing interaction underway between all the dimensions of the human, an interaction which does not cancel differences and which respects mystery, and this is what creates productive unity. It can be observed that dialogue is, to a greater or smaller extent, a hidden driving force of all the modes of human communication as long as their goal is to overcome the mortifying self-sufficiency in this or that sphere of human life. Only certain pseudo-communicative structures of self-absolutized human power whose feedback is just an impetus for a more perfect act of subjugation are thoroughly closed to transcendence.

<sup>3</sup> See for example K. Vrána, *Personalismo dialogico* (Roma: Pontif. Univ. Lateranensis, 1984 – in Italian), pp. 34–41.

<sup>4</sup> See the classical formulations of this universality: F. Rosenzweig, *Der Stern der Erlösung* (Frankfurt a. M. 1921 - in German); E. Lévinas, *Totalité et Infini* (Den Haag: M. Nijhof, 1961 – in French).

Dialogue, transcendence and creative humanity belong to one another. They express three different aspects - communicative, theological and anthropological - of a productive relational mutuality between the relative and the absolute: through dialogue each human singularity takes a share in the universal fullness of being; through dialogue it bypasses, opens up and surpasses each case of the totalitarianism of systems and each act of terror committed in enclosed worlds. But by overstepping the horizontal order, it does not find itself in a horizontal chaos but rather in a vertical order of love. The theological dimension of dialogue is a source of strength not only to attain freedom but also responsibility.

As a result, dialogue is a mode of emancipation of the human which does not turn against impersonal necessities and pressures with the same impersonality of the discursive and manipulatory approach (which eventually succumbs to and reproduces what it originally wanted to oppose) but, by itself, it shapes and embodies an alternative which is untouchable and unconquerable by any tendency to impersonalization, since this alternative has its starting point and is anchored radically outside that area.

### Dialogic Truthfulness

By not reducing the truth to a consensual formulation, dialogue opens up each consensus to that which transcends it - to what there is. In this way, it also goes beyond the horizon of post-modern relativism. By insisting on the unimageability of truth, it stimulates the truthfulness of human attempts at its imaging, thus becoming permanent spiritual being on the journey, a never-ending shared pilgrimage after the gradual fulfilment of the relation to all.<sup>5</sup> Standing in humility before the mystery of being, any system of ideas and any world of experiences ceases to be a prison for man and becomes an instrument, an open opportunity.

The liberating importance of aiming towards the truth is based on dialogical respect for what I do not understand, and yet for what I do not want to lose relation to. Therefore, dialogical knowing has the nature of a patient loving adventure in which I voluntarily give up my self-assurance and courageously subordinate myself to the unknown. Dialogical relation to it has neither a speculative nor observatory nature. It is an intrinsically engaged total conversation, a transcending flare-up, purified identification with what I yearn to know.

<sup>5</sup> J. Poláková, *The Possibilities of Transcendence* (Lewiston – Queenston – Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1995), pp. 31–51.

### Language from the Viewpoint of Dialogue

The communicability of the truth known through dialogue, just as the very linguistic mediation of dialogue, makes it imperative to assume an unreduced attitude to language itself.

In dialogue, language as a system of signs is just an aid of relation, which permeates language, appropriating it and creatively working with it. Despite modern linguistic reduction, he who speaks and that which is spoken of do exist outside language.<sup>6</sup> The possibility of linguistic creativity is conditioned precisely by this fact. In case the world is identified with „the world of language“, there is nothing to conduct genuine dialogue about and nobody to conduct it with.

In dialogue, language is adjusted to relatedness, and not the other way round. Language receives its life from dialogue; without contact with what there is, it dies. Even my speaking Self becomes real or unreal depending on the extent of reality which I allow to enter into my words. If I am more my own self in dialogue, this is because in it I intrinsically stand up for that which there is - and then also my language meets its intrinsic destination. If I transcend it with a genuine contact with reality, it, too, will transcend myself with a genuine contact with whom I want to speak; the transcendent character of dialogue is transferred onto everything that may serve it.

The freer we are from language, the freer our language is itself: the system of signs can function only in relation (to an indisposable reality), in the opposite case it does not „mean“ anything - it ceases to be itself.

### Non-verbal Aspects of Dialogue

In the end, the predominance of relation over language means that a dialogic relation may cover more than could be communicated by language.

### Dialogue and Ethics

The principle of dialogue can be perceived as an initial principle of ethics. It establishes moral endeavour in an unconditional respect for non-I - in love. It systematically concretizes its imperative as respect for otherness, as a relational decentring of I, as a shifting of the centre of gravity into You, independently of whether it will ever be reciprocated or not. Dialogic ethics is not exhaustible by rules; it goes beyond them. Its practice does not deal only with what is still morally permissible and what no longer is - it does not move at the lower threshold of the norm and does not bargain over the possibilities of its violation. Dialogic ethics can rather be called an attitude which looks out in the opposite direction: how to do for You more than is obligatory.

<sup>6</sup> J. Poláková, *Myšlenkové tvoření (Creation in Ideas, Praha: Filosofía, 1993 – in Czech).*

### Dialogic Fullness of Humanity

It can be proved that sociological, epistemological, linguistic and any other forms of unrelatedness are an impoverishment of humanity - basically deprived of altruistic dynamism and its transcendent motivation. In egoisms, the forms of human existence and mutual contact are, however comprehensive they may be, analogous to subhuman (animal, vegetative-mechanical) forms of existence and contact. In this context, the growth of dialogic potential within individual, group and social life looks like a mode of redemption: dialogue replaces solipsist idolatry with a relation to reality; it transforms destructive, entropic plurality into productive, creative one; the enclosed space of human immanence is opened to that which transcends it.

The dialogic fullness of humanity thus attained has an almost infinite amount of mutually inspiring and potentiating dimensions. At the level of philosophical abstraction the following aspects emerge:

- a) intrapersonal: Dialogue confirms personal humanity in its integral quality. Unlike all the other modes of communication, it confirms not only its „horizontal“ (immanent) dimension but also its „vertical“ (transcendent) dimension.
- b) interpersonal: Dialogue allows for the constitution of a fruitful, internally differentiated „we“: acceptance of the otherness of the other one eliminates both a rift and unity at the cost of reduction.
- c) anthropological-theological: Dialogue is established as a synthesis of relations of the type „communio“ and the type „religio“. The rendering transparent of human relations for a relation with God brings them an infinite enrichment, infinite permanence and a basic support vis-à-vis all the factors of life operating against relatedness.
- d) humanistic-realistic: Dialogue balances the interrelation between the personal and the impersonal in human life without the personal being reduced and the impersonal neglected. The independence of dialogic humanity, based in an asymmetry of relation between transcendence and immanence, allows for the same creative asymmetry in the human relation with subhuman realities.
- e) intercultural: Dialogue renders any cultural plurality productive: it maintains positive relations even beyond the bounds of mutual understanding, and out of variety it makes it possible to derive mutual enrichment.
- f) intracultural: Dialogue is an embodiment of the full synthesis of European spirituality. The idea of dialogue was born out of the need of this century, brought about by crises, to overcome the dichotomy of the personally relational and the impersonally substantial model of Western thought in favour of the regulative position of universally humanizing relatedness.

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