

Kaiciid lecture: Dialogue and Praxis
By Scherto Gill
Guerrand-Hermès Foundation for Peace

Introduction

Many of my friends and colleagues are part of the interreligious dialogue movement and a few of them have been doing this for over 30 years. In private conversations, I often hear them admit to each other, rather painfully, that *interreligious dialogue just doesn't work*.

Some say that it is *repetitive* because people tend to pronounce the same noble sentiments, for example, the commitment to mutual respect as all humans are created in the image of God; the promotion of tolerance, understanding, love and compassion as they are shared by all religions;

Some complain that it is *tedious* because there is a tendency to cover the same grounds, seek consensus and avoid tension or conflict;

Others suggest that it is *superficial* as few would venture beneath the surface of rhetoric and explore substance of religions; and equally, it is *frustrating* as most of the time, they leave the dialogue event without getting to know the person behind those noble statements.

However, when I ask, if it doesn't work, why have they been doing this for all these years? This is the moment when I notice a spark in their eyes, and a discreet curve of excitement at the corner of their mouths, they would lean closer and lower their voice and speak with a mysterious examined tone:

Because, very rarely, something absolutely extraordinary or even magical happens in dialogue –

“It is one of those conversations that would change me forever not because I share the same views with the other person, but because we see things so differently”, says one;

“It is one of those moments when I am so inspired by someone else's religious passion that it adds depth to my own faith”, claims another;

“It is one of those occasions when I feel deeply moved and uplifted by an amazing closeness to someone who was a total stranger before the conversation”, adds a third...

In this module, we will explore what makes those 'rare' moments tick, dialogue transformative and the interreligious dialogue movement a true pathway to peace in the world.

We will do this in the following four steps:

First, we revisit some of the key concepts and theories of dialogue. We are concerned with dialogue in general, including interreligious dialogue and other dialogue events. Here we highlight dialogue as human's way of being-in-the-word (Heidegger, 1962) and for communities to come together (Gadamer, 1970)

Secondly, we take a closer look at the ethics of dialogue, which refers to core practical ethos underpinning dialogue encounter. This prepares us to engage in dialogue as practical philosophy.

Thirdly, we examine dialogue as praxis, i.e. how we relate to things in the world and ground our relationships in dialogue as 'a thoughtful act' (Dallmayr, 2009). In doing so, we consider practical points of what it entails to live a life in dialogue, as in *vita activa* (Arendt, 1958). We explore in practice how communities can be dialogically cultivated globally.

A. Dialogue – Concepts and theories

It is necessary to return to the concept of dialogue and general dialogue theories in order to re-orient ourselves within the conceptual landscape of dialogue.

Here, we will focus on four major approaches to understanding dialogue:

- I. Dialogue as thinking together (David Bohm)**
- II. Dialogue as emancipation (Paulo Freire)**
- III. Dialogue as encounter (Martin Buber)**
- IV. Dialogue as human's being-in-the-world (Hans Georg Gadamer)**

Key Reading:

[Burbules, N. \(2000\). 'The Limits of Dialogue as a Critical Pedagogy', in P. Trifonas \(ed.\) *Revolutionary Pedagogy*, New York: Routledge](#)

I. Dialogue as thinking together (David Bohm)

"... it is proposed that a form of free dialogue may well be one of the most effective ways of investigating the crisis which faces society, and indeed the whole of human nature and consciousness today."

Background

David Bohm (1917-1992) was an American physicist-philosopher, one of the 20th century's most important thinkers. His main concern has been with understanding the nature of reality in general and of consciousness in particular as a coherent whole. From late 1980s to early 1990s, Bohm held weekend seminars to explore the process of thought and the nature of consciousness. This experience had led to his developing a unique theory of dialogue and his much read book 'On Dialogue'.

Bohm's Theory of Dialogue

Bohm argues that we live in a world which is the product of human thought, such as the language we speak, our system of economic values, national boundaries, beliefs, etc. Equally, human thought includes our feelings, emotions, desires and motivations. Thus our acts are constrained by our assumptions and feelings and by the psychological and sociological pressures behind them. So it is important that humans explore our thought process through dialogue as dialogue helps us slow down the process of thought so that we can observe it while it is actually happening.

For Bohm, dialogue is practical as it takes the form of a group of people coming together to explore the individual and collective presuppositions, ideas, beliefs, and feelings. Dialogue is thus 'thinking together', it is a way of observing, collectively, how hidden values and intentions can frame our behaviour and action; it is also a way of witnessing how unnoticed cultural differences can clash without our realizing what is occurring. As such, dialogue is part of an unfolding process of creative participation in shared thinking and learning. Dialogue as thinking together is truly powerful in helping engender a sense of increased harmony, fellowship and creativity amongst people.

Principles of Bohm's Approach to Dialogue

There are broadly four key principles underlying Bohm's approach to Dialogue. These, however, are not practical guidelines. Instead they articulate the values that people must hold and live in order to engage in this process of thinking together.

1) Agenda-free

Dialogue must be agenda-free. That is to say that no dialogue should aim at achieving anything 'useful' because 'as soon as we try to accomplish a useful purpose or goal, we will have an assumption behind it as to what is useful, and that assumption is going to limit us.' says Bohm.

2) A circle of people in a sequence of sessions

Bohm argues that Dialogue works best with between 20-40 people seated facing one another in a single circle. Circle allows each person to speak to another directly. A group of this size allows for the emergence and observation of different subcultures that can help reveal ways that thought operates collectively. Such a group reflects a microcosm of the whole society.

A Dialogue takes time to begin, flow or move towards any great depth. Therefore it is necessary to meet regularly in a sequence of sessions. Bohm says that the point is not to establish a fixed dialogue group forever, but rather set up one that lasts long enough to make a change in the individuals who participated in the Dialogue. To continue, perseverance is always desirable.

3) Suspension and listening

Dialogue requires suspension of thoughts, impulses, judgments, etc. Suspension offers participants a direct experience of the nature of thought, the limits of rationality, and the creative possibilities of a consciousness-informed inquiry. Suspension involves attention, listening and looking and is essential to exploration. It is a shift from 1st person engagement to 3rd person witnessing as suspension helps expose one's own reactions, impulses, feelings and opinions in such a way that they can be seen and felt within our own psyche and also be reflected back by others in the group. Suspension slows the dialogue down, and invites people to pay attention to the process of thought and deeper and subtler meanings underlying our thought.

So the actual process of exploration takes place during listening -- not only listening to others but also to oneself. During suspension, we listen more and attend more. Thus we give sustained attention to the movement of our intellectual, emotional and kinaesthetic processes as these unfold in real-time.

4) Facilitation

Dialogue works best where there are facilitators to 'lead from behind'. Bohm sees that Dialogue is essentially a conversation between equal participants. That is to say that there should be imposed hierarchy such as a leader for dialogue. However, two experienced facilitators can provide assistance to the collective thinking process, but these interventions should never be manipulative or obtrusive.

Summary

Bohm's theorisation offers a possibility to transform human consciousness in and through dialogue, both individually and collectively. Dialogue leads to shared meaning, which according to Bohm, is what truly holds a society together.

However, Bohm's approach to dialogue has its limitations. For instance, it ignores the impact of power dynamics on the dialogic process, and shows little sensitivity to the socially constructed power-relations such as in gender, class, ethnicity, and their effect on the individual's engagement in dialogue.

Furthermore, it downplays the need to identify with individual thought and emotions. This leaves no opportunities for individuals to work with their assumptions and feelings as an authentic expression of their lives in the world. Thus in practice, Bohm's approach to dialogue falls short of empowering the participants for self-improvement.

This is an aspect that Freire's theory of dialogue as emancipation intends to address, which we will turn to next.

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II. Dialogue as emancipation (Paulo Freire)

‘Dialogue is the encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world. ... Dialogue cannot exist, however, in the absence of a profound love for the world and for people. The naming the world, which is an act of creation and re-creation, is not possible if it is not infused with love. Love is at the same time the foundation of dialogue and dialogue itself (1970, p. 70).

Background

Paulo Freire (1921 – 1997) was a Brazilian educationalist and one of the most significant educational thinkers in the 20th Century. Freire initiated a national literacy programme for peasants and slum dwellers in the 1950s and 60s. Through this work in the field, he discovered that poor and working class Brazilians believed it was impossible to change their individual circumstances and were resigned to their situation in society. Freire realised that this acceptance is due to their education which tends to perpetuate an oppressive structure as too often, education is like ‘banking’ where the educator makes ‘deposits’, i.e. information, knowledge, status quo, in the educated. Therefore, Freire’s goals were to develop an efficient pedagogy for adults, and to raise the social consciousness of the Brazilian working class. In this process, he advanced an approach to dialogue that is emancipatory, at the heart of which is the recognition of the need for the ‘oppressed’ to move from an object position in society (being acted upon) to a subject position where one can act proactively to transform one’s life and the society one lives in. This theory is summarised in his seminal book entitled ‘The Pedagogy of the Oppressed’.

Freire’s theory of dialogue

Freire maintains that humans are limited by social, economic, political and other conditions. The purpose of education is to enable people to become ‘conscious of such conditioning’ in order to ‘go beyond it’. Thus pedagogy must focus on helping individuals develop critical capacities and critical attitude through dialogue. By cultivating these capacities, dialogue enables people to reflect on their experience in the world with a view to transform it.

Freire’s Approach to Critical Dialogue

Freirean dialogue is described as critical pedagogy which has been integrated in adult education in Brazil and across the world. Such education is not based on pre-prescribed curriculum, instead, it is structured to be dialogical. There are four core aspects to the Freirean dialogue:

1) Problematising

According to Freire, a critical approach starts with problematising in order to develop an awareness of the reality in concrete situations as well as an understanding of one’s place in the world. The participants learn to pose questions such as ‘who is making this statement?’, ‘for whom is he/she making it?’, ‘why is this statement being made here, now?’ and ‘who benefits from such statement and who is left out?’. Thus problematising honours and respects the agency of each participant and supports the development of their critical consciousness.

2) Critical reflection

In dialogue, it is crucial that none of the existing dominant views are imposed or conveyed without them being probed and questioned. The purpose of critical reflection is to question the nature of the individual’s historical and social situation, so that together the group will be able to ‘name the world’. Naming the world give voices to the oppressed and allow them to identify the unjust condition of their existence and locate the root causes of these situations and problems. Naming the world is emancipatory.

3) Praxis

The central concept in Freire's epistemology is praxis, which he refers to as conscious action. In this way, the act of knowing includes a dialectical movement from thinking to action; action to new ideas and to a new action because both thinking and action are simultaneously constituted in the praxis. Dialogue is aimed at action which characterises the *raison d'être* of critical dialogue — collective actions for a societal future.

4) Solidarity

Critical reflection and actions engender solidarity amongst dialogue partners, in Freire's case, the teachers and the students. Dialogue demands respect for each other and it itself affirms each person's humanity. Freire sees that the end of dialogue and of education is mutual humanisation which in turn entails solidarity.

Summary

Freire's conception of critical dialogue as pedagogy is emancipatory because through 'naming the world', dialogue gives voice to those who are usually silenced in the society. Here dialogue is not only a thought process, but is in part liberation – dialogue partners liberating each other and making a difference for each other in the world. Therefore, emancipatory dialogue has been regarded as an important social process for enhancing community, building solidarity and leading us to act in ways that make for justice and human flourishing.

One major limitation of the dialogue pedagogy is that it is insufficiently sensitive to the diversity within the group. Indeed there is rich diversity in every group, including, not at least, for instance, the multiple forms of cultural communication, the different aims and values held by members of the groups, the myriad serious conflicts and histories of oppression, and the manifold structural violence that have excluded the marginalised groups from mainstream discourse in the past. Instead, there is a tendency to over simplify the world into the oppressed and the oppressor division.

Furthermore, there is much confrontation in the approach to critically analyse the limit conditions, which could potentially marginalise the feminist approach marked by receptivity, care, listening, intuition and non-confrontation.

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III. Dialogue as Encounter (Martin Buber)

The primary word I-Thou can be spoken only with the whole being. Concentration and fusion into the whole being can never take place through my agency, nor can it ever take place without me. I become through my relation to the Thou; as I become I, I say Thou.

All real living is meeting

Background

Martin Buber (1878–1965) was an Austrian author, scholar, literary translator and political activist. His contribution to dialogue is summarised in a number of his books, the most significant of which is the one entitled *I and Thou* published in 1923. In *I and Thou*, Buber argues that the fundamental form of human existence is 'man with man, a dialogue which takes place in the so-called 'sphere of between', in the encounter, through relationships. Buber's theory of dialogue deals with the most profound issues of human relations, human relations with reality, and human relations with God. It sits comfortably between theology and philosophical anthropology.

Buber's Theory of Dialogue

According to Buber human beings possess a two-fold attitude towards the world - the 'I-Thou' and the 'I-It'. The 'I-Thou' relation stresses the mutual and holistic existence of two entities. It is an encounter of equals, who recognise each other as such. It is a dialogue. The 'I-It' relations emphasises the other being as an object to be used or experienced as a means to an end, failing to recognise the other as an equal. Therefore, the 'I-It' relations contain no dialogue.

Although human existence is consisted in an oscillation between 'I-Thou' and 'I-It' relations, Buber argues that humans' being is predominantly characterised by a dialogic relation with others, not only with human other but with other animate beings, such as trees, animals, as well as with the Divine Other. Buber maintains that all experience is relational, and that no isolated 'I' exists apart from relationship to an other. Equally, in every 'I-Thou' dialogue, the 'I' is affirmed. Thus he concludes: '*All real living is meeting*'.

The meeting isn't just between two people or between a person and the world. Buber believed that 'every particular Thou is a glimpse through to the eternal Thou' (99). In other words, each and every 'I-Thou' relationship opens up a window to the ultimate Thou. Thus God is not an entity to be merely 'believed in', instead, God is the Divine Other that human beings 'live with' and with whom true dialogue and encounter is necessary.

The 'I-It' relationship, however, involves distancing where differences are accentuated, the uniqueness of 'I' stressed. As a result, the 'I' is separated from the self it encounters. The latter is a reflection of the crisis of being in a modern society and therefore Buber sees that in such societies, it is becoming more and more difficult for humans to encounter God.

Buber's approach to dialogue

Buber establishes that dialogue is located in the 'in-between' space of the 'I' and an other. This 'in-between' space is defined as 'reciprocal relationship' which is transformative. Indeed, through every 'I-Thou' encounter, the 'I' is transformed and this affects the 'I's further engagement in the 'I-It' relation and with the future 'I-Thou' encounters.

There are four key features in the Buber's approach to dialogue encounter.

1) Intersubjectivity

As already pointed out, for Buber, the 'I' does not exist ontologically prior to relation, that is, there cannot be 'I' without it being related to a 'Thou' or to an 'It'. Intersubjectivity arises only when there is a relation in place. Intersubjectivity calls for a we-relationship, which is tied to the lived presence of oneself with the other, and the content of this experience in relation to the being of the other.

2) The meeting of souls

According to Buber, genuine dialogue is the meeting of souls because the 'I-Thou' encounter can only take place between whole beings, including our spiritual or higher self. The life of dialogue involves 'the turning towards the other', not by seeking but by grace as if we are called to dialogue.

3) Silence and Stillness

For Buber 'attentive silence' is the basis of dialogue (Avnon 1998: 42-3). Silence is active, and is regarded a welcoming acceptance of the other; and any words born out of silence are received in silence. In silence arises the stillness, which is located in an in-between space, a generative space, a kind of knowing which bears a different quality from the fruit of meditation.

4) Community

According to Buber, dialogic life is a form of political life through the actions of dialogue community. Buber implies that for a dialogue community to thrive, it requires leaders to commit themselves to dialogic life and to exemplify what it means to be in reciprocal relationship with others. With dialogue communities, institutions become associations through the fellowship of men.

Summary

In Buber's conception, being, encounter, dialogue and community are interconnected and they sit in the meeting place of the 'We'. This is true encounter. Buber rejects 'I-Thou' and 'I-It' relation as dualism, instead he sees an inter-play between 'I-Thou' and 'I-It' relations, which carries the transformative potential for human beings. Buber's theory can offer much insight into the ways to transform myriad conflicts in the contemporary society – between men, men and nature, and above all, men and God.

However, there is a key limitation: Buber underestimates the pivotal part that the otherness in the other plays in the dialogue encounter and how it might contribute to our self-understanding in dialogue. The attention to the other and otherness is at the core of philosophical hermeneutics pioneered by Gadamer and others. This is what we will outline in the next section.

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IV. Dialogue as Being-in-the-world (Hans Georg Gadamer)

Philosophical hermeneutic 'understands itself not as an absolute position but as a way of experience. It insists that there is no higher principle than holding oneself open in a conversation'.

Background

Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) was a German philosopher of the continental tradition, best known for his magnum opus *Truth and Method* published in 1960. Gadamer developed a distinctive and thoroughly dialogical approach, grounded in Platonic-Aristotelian as well as Heideggerian thinking, that rejects subjectivism and relativism, renouncing any simple notion of interpretive method, and locates dialogic understanding in the linguistically mediated human relationships. Following Heidegger, Gadamer argues that dialogue is fundamental to human's being-in-the-world.

Gadamer's Theory of Dialogue

Gadamer asserts that humans are finite beings as our knowledge of the world and of ourselves and our language are always framed within our personal and social history, cultural and political context, religious practices and so forth. To grow, it requires human effort to overcome such finitude through interpretation and understanding. For Gadamer, to understand is also to interpret a web of meanings and contexts within which such understanding takes place. Understanding is necessarily dialogic.

Dialogue takes place whilst individuals seek to understand within the interplay of perspectives present in the encounter. These perspectives are constituted in what Gadamer calls 'horizon' which include afore mentioned history and tradition. Dialogue thus evokes openness to others' horizons and commitment to engage with otherness. In this way, dialogue is a process that draws the individual away from oneself in order to return to the self anew. That is to say that the person emerges from genuine dialogue transformed. Dialogue also helps modify the individual's action in the world. Since our embeddedness and finitude demand self-cultivation and self-transformation, the challenge of dialogue is not only universal but also existential.

Gadamer's Approach to Dialogue

Although Gadamer's thinking is predominantly philosophical, it has much practical relevance to dialogue at both micro and macro levels. In fact, the following five ethical principles are applicable in the encounter between individuals as well as the encounter of communities, nations and states.

1) Opening oneself to the Other

The first condition of dialogue is an encounter with otherness. An encounter brings our attention to something 'alien', or otherness, which in turn, makes us become acutely aware of the situatedness of our understanding and knowing. An openness to otherness calls for one's capacity to listen to what addresses us in a conversation. Whilst it is necessary that we remain open to the meaning of the other, this openness 'always includes our situating the other meaning in relation to the whole of our own meanings or ourselves in relation to it' (TM, 247). In this sense, the Other is a Thou.

2) Engaging 'prejudice'

Our tradition and history form the basis of our 'prejudice' which doesn't have negative connotation attached to the word now, i.e. being unjustified, erroneous and distorting the truth. Prejudice simply means 'a judgement that is rendered before all the elements that determine a situation have been examined' (TM. 273). Prejudices do not readily limit one's freedom, and to understand does not necessitate that one becomes prejudice-free. Prejudice connects the familiar world we inhabit and the unfamiliar meanings to be incorporated into our own. This is where we engage with otherness.

3) Fusion of Horizons

Our prejudices are constituted in our horizon which is referred as a range of vision that 'includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point' (TM, 301). Horizons do not imprison us as they can shift and expand. Dialogue helps broadening our perspectives through the fusion of horizons. Fusion of horizons means that we are open for the other to genuinely challenge our own perspectives so that we are able to recognise the particularities of our own horizon and that of the other in relation to the greater universality. Historical movement of human life suggests that there is never a horizon that is closed, and instead, it is 'something into which we move and that moves with us' (TM, 303). Thus understanding through fusion of horizons is continuous and necessarily incomplete and dialogue allows an infinite possibility for human's growth.

4) Questioning

In order to attend to the meanings implicit in the otherness and achieve understanding (rather than misunderstanding), the criterion of questioning is imperative in Gadamerian dialogue. Thus, our task during dialogue 'becomes of itself a questioning of things and is always in part so defined' (TM, 271). In fact, the real power of dialogue is our ability to see what is questionable. Dialogue involves not only an act of questioning but also the experience of being questioned or for our perspectives to be 'called into question', possibly in unsettling ways. After all, it is in the challenging tension between at-homeness and not-at-homeness, self-possession and what places our horizon in question, lies the true transformative potential of dialogue.

5) Mutual engagement

Dialogue requires mutual engagement and reciprocal learning. As dialogue is always dialogue about something, so understanding is coming to an understanding with someone 'with respect to something'. Accordingly, dialogue requires equally committed partners to engage in a mutualising act of interpretation. Gadamer clarifies that it is not a matter of looking **at** the other person, but looking **with** the other, at the thing we dialogue about. Therefore, dialogue partners are bound in the event of dialogue as if players are mutually engaged in a game and are equally carried away by the 'rule of the game' - the shared concern for the topic of dialogue.

Summary

Gadamerian dialogue is radically non-instrumental. Its emphasis on the boundedness of our horizons demands openness to ongoing revision of our own prejudice, instilling the necessity to engage in continued self-cultivation. Dialogue as being-in-the-world suggests that we do not enter into dialogue, instead, we find ourselves already in dialogue – but only IF we are listening intensely to the other. Dialogue embodies solidarity amongst people. Solidarity rejects the commonalities or shared interests which would render it superficial. Instead, being historically and culturally situated, people bond with one another as the other. Thus Gadamerian dialogue is an unfolding mutual inquiry and dialogue partners as co-investigators. In such an inquiry, there lies the imperative to disclose the roots of modern social malaises, such as violent conflicts, exploitation of the planet earth, inequality and so on. This includes critical self-awareness of possible hindrances within one's own tradition and culture that might impede on a social movement towards a peaceful and flourishing world.

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B. Dialogue Ethics

So far, we have revisited four key dialogue theories in the 20th century and their relevant foundational concepts. These clearly articulate how some thinkers conceive as dialogue and understanding. Together they establish human's ways of being in the world as fundamentally relational – not only in the way we are in relation to other human beings, the Divine, but also in our relation to the world itself, such as other animated beings and nature. These prepare the fertile ground for discussing the practice of dialogue ethics.

In a global era where a plurality of otherness is a common factor in all encounters, an analysis of the ethical resources and a reconstruction of ethical orientations are pressingly necessary in order to provide guidelines for dialogue partners to put ethics into practice.

I have identified four broad ethical considerations embedded in the dialogue theories outlined in this module: **(1) alterity; (2) self-cultivation; (3) mutuality; (4) solidarity**. Let's exam them.

(1) The place of otherness in dialogue – the ethics of alterity

Dialogue insists on an ethics of alterity and responsibility.

In the work of Buber, Gadamer, and to a certain extent, the work Freire, the place of the other and otherness has been regarded as central to genuine dialogic encounter. The other and their otherness are constituted in the moral worthiness of the person which is an end in oneself. Therefore the other can command our own moral attitudes of respect, responsiveness and relationship.

To ignore the other and otherness in dialogue is to underplay the tension between divergent presumptions, beliefs, cultural contexts and historical traditions that shape our perspectives. In fact, as we have seen, residing in such tension are the conditions for dialogue. It is precisely by engaging with these differences, our own horizon becomes expandable.

Thus dialogue demands the conversation partners, first and foremost, to prioritise an openness and attentiveness to the other and otherness. This means care – care for the other and care for what the other has to say, instead of inattention to, or disinterest in the other. It is such care that enables us to listen to, respond to and thereby bond with the other.

The primacy of the other in dialogic encounter is equally proposed in the philosophical ideas of Emmanuel Levinas insofar as there is a similar insistence on the subject's irreducible engagement with otherness. In this way, some suggests that 'the other appears as a partner, a mutual co-self, an other who is both different and close enough to be understood, to be taken seriously, to be taken into account' (Kogler 2014).

(2) Overcoming human finitude – the ethics of self-cultivation and self-transcendence

Dialogue entails the ethics of self-cultivation and self-transcendence which include the cultivation of virtues.

All dialogue theories recognise that human thought and understanding are situated and constrained in some ways by our histories, traditions and cultural practices. To overcome such finite determinacy humans must engage in dialogue. Growth through dialogue is to embrace otherness so that it becomes our own, not by destroying it critically or reproducing it uncritically, but by explicating it within one's own horizons and thus giving it new validity.

Dialogue creates unity in which difference is appreciated not rejected. Self-transcendence (without necessary the religious connotation) leads to reconstruction of how traditions on each side are understood and historical meaning comprehended. The ethos here is that both dialogue partners are open to the other's truth-claim and are willing to confront it and to be confronted by it.

Accordingly, dialogue will contest those forces and influences embedded in our prejudices and cultural biases. This process is never static nor uncritical but rather productive and transformational. In this way, this ethos not only gives rise to individual growth, but also enables cultures to progress and evolve.

(3) Equality and active reciprocity in dialogue – the ethics of mutuality

Dialogue requires the ethics of mutuality.

In dialogue both conversation partners must be concerned, in the similar way, with what motivates the conversation, its meaning and the questions it intends to address. At the same time, they must both be provoked by it to 'question further' in the direction the dialogue indicates. This equality and active reciprocity is referred to as the ethics of mutuality.

The ethics of mutuality can be problematic especially when the relationship between the dialogue partners is inherently asymmetrical because it is often not in the power of the individuals to establish equality; rather it is in the historical and institutional realities that the power imbalance prevails.

However, the ethos of mutuality can help bring more engagement in dialogue as it does not undermine critical self-examination. Mutuality is neither an act of blind empathy, nor an act of assimilation, nor an act of domination. Mutuality rests on a conception of the good which can give rise to ethical questions about the power dynamics.

The ethos of mutuality reminds us that the openness to the other and otherness is by no means 'reducing the other to the categories of the self'. It prompts us to face the danger of domination, control or assimilation, especially after the West's active othering indigenous and minority cultures for its own benefit. Equally, it instigates an awareness of the risk of essentialising cultures' otherness.

(4) Language and understanding – the ethics of solidarity

Dialogue evokes an ethics of solidarity.

Understanding is language-bound and language is 'the real mark of our finitude', and we are always already biased in our thinking and knowing by our linguistic interpretation of the world. Dialogue acknowledges that language and understanding are not two processes but one and the same. This is because language frames our horizons; so language and understanding are inseparable structural aspects of human's being-in-the-world. In this way, language is by no means simply an instrument or a tool. Rather, we are always already encompassed by our language. Language binds one human being with another.

So it is in language and dialogue that solidarity occurs. It is an expression of human bonds developed through a reciprocal engagement with one another in dialogue. These bonds emerge when we are able to perceive the 'I' and the 'other' as the 'we', despite our differences. Thus the community of life is lived through solidarity (solidarities) and through people acting in solidarity.

Summary

In a highly politicalised world where there are competing ideologies, values and embedded power imbalances, as well as the pluralistic identities, all decisions are made within finite and limited knowledge constrained by cultural contexts, historical references and individual and institutional narratives. Dialogue can help us recognise differences, negotiate meanings and seek understanding so that humans can reach out to one another for the betterment of the world and our lives within it.

Dialogue ethics enables us to develop a sense of we-ness and of solidarity with others in the world. This is really the basis for communities to come together. Solidarity calls for actions to address power imbalance, oppression and exploitation, and hence, dialogic life inhabited in the solidarity involves our participation in 'a community of doing' in the words of Merleau-Ponty (1973). We participate in each other's 'doing', including rituals, memories, narratives, past pains, present concerns, future inspiration and hopes, a participation 'proceeding in the direction of ethical well-being and a shared concern with the good life' (Dallmayr, 2009, 37). Such community must be dialogically cultivated globally.

References

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Review of Section A & B

At the end of the first and second section of this module, let's briefly review what we have outlined:

1) Defining dialogue

Following different thinkers, we can define dialogue from a number of convergent perspectives:

Dialogue is a focused and intentional conversation, a space of civility and equality in which those who hold different perspectives may come together in a collaborative inquiry. They would listen and converse so that shared meaning would unfold.

Dialogue is a way of learning and self-cultivation through relationships that are reciprocal, caring, and empowering.

Dialogue is human's way of being-in-the-world, an existential pursuit that underlies our personal and communal life. In this case, we are constantly in dialogue – dialogue with oneself (including with one's higher self and Divine Other), with others, with texts, literature, arts and with Nature.

2) Dialogue is not...

In this process, it is also become clear that dialogue is not

- Dialogue is not two egos meeting separately;
- Dialogue is not debate, discussion, persuasion, domination, bargaining, negotiation;
- Dialogue is not the triumph of one opinion over another; nor the correction of other people's mistake or misunderstanding;
- Dialogue is not making statement, seeking agreement or consensus;
- Dialogue is not conversion or proselytising even though we may consider our religion or our faith a gift for the other.

3) What happens during dialogue

Although we are yet to explore the practice of dialogue, the dialogue theories and dialogue ethics offer some insight in terms of what happens during dialogue:

- In dialogue, we seek to observe our fears and other emotions and engage with preconceptions and presuppositions including those of our own and of others;
- In dialogue, we attend intensely to other's voices and perspectives through that of our own;
- In dialogue, we see the other not as a threat but a cause for celebration;
- In dialogue, we raise questions and develop sensitivities to what is questionable;
- Dialogue starts with an encounter; dialogue is an encounter.
- Dialogue includes silence and stillness – a powerful way of attending, communicating and receiving;
- Dialogue encompasses tensions and paradoxes, and in so doing, new understanding, shared meaning, may arise.
- Dialogue represents a way of engaging and appreciating differences for better understanding through collaborative inquiry;
- Dialogue serves as a public forum for exploring the structural roots of our social malaises
- In dialogue, we question social policies and institutional values;
- In dialogue, we imagine pillars for peace and pathways for a more just and humane world;

- In dialogue, we evoke joined social actions and collaborative civic engagement.

4) **Virtues necessary for dialogue**

In order to pursue a dialogic life, some key virtues are important to cultivate in all of us.

Openness. Our openness to the other and otherness is a basis for mutual appreciation.

Care. Our care for each other enables us to form strong social bond that entails shared commitment to the greater good.

Respect. Respect for the other person and their perspectives is acceptance and appreciation of the unique qualities that each person brings to dialogue regardless their backgrounds.

Affection. Our affection, i.e. feeling with, and for, our dialogue partners arises from our respect.

Solidarity. In engaging in mutual act of dialogue and understanding, this virtue inspires us to identify joint projects and common actions. Dallmayr insists that reciprocity is not enough, we must go an extra mile – beyond reciprocity, such as offering unconditional forgiveness, doing more than what is expected, doing what is good. Real solidarity between people is akin to the relationship between a mother and a child; and between friends, for instance. It implies the ethics of giving. In other words, in dialogue we offer ourselves to each other as a gift – the gift of our whole being.

Hope. Hope is central to dialogue as optimism holds possibility for learning and transformation for oneself and for the world at large.

C. Dialogue and Praxis

Having revisited key concepts in dialogue within its general contour, and having considered the ethical dimensions of dialogue, we can now examine some of the practical implications of dialogue. This is what I call **praxis**, i.e. how we relate theories and concepts to things in the world and ground our relationships in more thoughtful ways, in our spiritual practice, social life, and in our political institutions and our economic values. In dialogue, we become part of the cosmos.

Dialogue, be it dialogue with a text, with a human partner, with one's higher self, or with members of another community, is a challenging process fraught with many pitfalls and possible derailments.

Let's first examine the prerequisites/conditions and hindrances to dialogue.

a) Prerequisites and conditions of dialogue

- **Critical self-awareness** – one recognises one's situatedness and finitude;
- **Good will to dialogue** – an ethical commitment to dialogue, ethical precondition;
- **The presence of otherness** – dialogue mustn't be limited to two like-minded people who have already reached common concern. Pluralism and diversity must be insisted, or 'The dignity of difference', in the words of Chief Rabbi Jonathon Sacks. That means that all dialogue events must intentionally invite and engage people from diverse backgrounds;
- **Recognition, appreciation and respect for the other** – tolerance is not enough. Our attitude towards the other must come from respect and acceptance which is fundamental for establishing a sense of equality in dialogue so that neither party feels inferior, or dominant; However, respect and appreciation is not to identify the lowest common denominator amongst the dialogue partners. Instead, it is seeing the other as irreducible to oneself - unique, meaningful, morally worthy in their own right.
- **Openness to the other** – including sensitivity to otherness;
- **Responsibility towards the other** – This is a precondition of dialogue as without our duty of care for the other, and our commitment to suspend our judgement and to hold their otherness, there can be no genuine dialogue;
- **Responsibility towards the world** – we live a dialogic life so that we can transform our life and the world around us. Our responsibility towards to the world lies in our commitment to transforming the world from within ourselves through dialogue.

b) Hindrances to dialogue

- ❖ **The need for conversion** – it is not against the teaching of spreading the good news. Dallmayr says that if all religious practitioners are good human beings, they can truly spread the good news. So it is not by converting others, but by practising one's religion, pursuing a religious life. So the need for conversion can only serve as a hindrance to dialogue;
- ❖ **Talking past and across each other** – this is the biggest hindrance of dialogue that makes it impossible to have true encounter;
- ❖ **Consensus seeking** – often resulting in facile consensualism, making conversation superficial;
- ❖ **Duality of 'seeming' and 'being'** – According to Buber, seeming is the essential cowardice of man, the lying that frequently occurs in self-presentation when one seeks to communicate an image and make a certain impression.
- ❖ **Existential mistrust** – meeting the other with suspicion. Rather than genuine encounter, dialogue becomes a game of unmasking and uncovering unconscious motives.

c) Praxis

Let's move on to discuss more practical topics in relation to how we might go about dialogue. Although by highlighting these practical concerns, it is easily giving the impression that dialogue must be organised as an event for a group of people, I haste to add that this is not the case. From the theories and ethics examined so far, we have concluded that dialogue is not merely an event rather it is the way we are – our being itself is dialogic. That means that when we read, when we meditate, listen to music, look at arts, walk in the nature, talk to people, we are constant in dialogue.

In addition to these day-to-day dialogic situations, if we would like to organise a dialogue event, or when we find ourselves in a dialogue situation, here are some points to consider:

1. Theme(s) for dialogue

It is important to choose the themes for dialogue to represent the interests of all those involved. Themes are not supposed to invoke real difficulties for the participants; nor prompt defence, or result in alienation. Themes that make visible the complexity behind positions and issues rather than invite polarisation are preferred. Themes that are connected to real-world struggles are equally meaningful as topics that encourage retrospection.

Examples

Last year, the GHFP has sponsored the Forgiveness Project's ten dialogue events over ten months. The theme of each dialogue was intentionally provocative. For instance, the last dialogue was framed with this question: *Is it possible to forgive the unforgiveable?* The one I chaired has this line as the topic: *What happens when unresolved trauma is allowed to fester between generations?* These thought-provoking questions themselves invite dialogue about such challenging themes. They also opened up the opportunity for personal narratives. As we will discuss later, personal narratives and stories can be significant substances for dialogue.

(www.theforgivenessproject.org)

For the GHFP's peace seminar series, we deliberately chose the themes for the dialogue with a sense of openness, such as Forgiveness, Healing and Post-Conflict Reconciliation. As ours are research seminars, such topics help give rise to different theoretical positions, unfold contextual complexities and explore divergent approaches in the field. Themes like this welcome openness and engagement, and encourage diverse otherness as the opportunity for learning.

(www.ghfp.org)

2. Space(s) for dialogue

Opportunities to construct purpose-built meeting spaces are limited. However, creating shared spaces for cultivating relationships is central to dialogue. This means not only attending to the physical characteristics of the space used for dialogue event, but also creating a psychological space that is welcoming, respectful and participative. These spaces should be viewed as mutual rather than neutral.

Example

The Tent at St Ethelburga's in London is a special meeting place for people of all faiths as equals. It is a dignified atmospheric space, based on principles of sacred geometry, made of goats' hair in a traditional Bedouin style. It has a middle-eastern feel, like a nomadic place of hospitality, but avoids the use of religious symbols. The windows bear the word for peace in seven major languages in the world, manifesting the intention within the space. The tent seats twenty-eight people in a circle. This space is indeed mutual where people of religious faiths, or non-religious affiliation can experience the notion of the sacred in this space. Prayers, words of good wishes, mediation, guided visualisation and chanting have all been part of the dialogue events that have taken place in the Tent. Participants often reflect on the transformative energy in the tent, and its pivotal part in their dialogue experiences.

(www.stethelburgas.org)

3. The art of listening

Practising the art of listening is one of the most important aspects of dialogue. To cultivate such art so that it becomes an indispensable quality in us is equally a part of our participating in dialogue. Listening can be perfected in dialogue itself provided there is willingness to do so.

- ✚ Deep listening – this is when we listen with full awareness of the limitedness of one’s own horizon. When we listen with openness, receptivity and compassion, our listening becomes deep;
- ✚ Listening to suspend one’s own judgement – this is not to entirely clear up our prior assumptions, which is impossible; but to listen as if we are witnessing our own processes and those of others;
- ✚ Listening as a way of encountering and engaging with the other – we are aware that there can never be value-neutral listening. It is like reading – we do not read about it, we read from it. Similarly, we do not listen from outside of the other, nor outside of ourselves, but listen from ourselves and from the other. In such listening, we encounter the other, and in turn, ourselves.
- ✚ Listening with questions – once we find ourselves ‘listening’, i.e. truly listening with the qualities we previously mentioned, we can begin to listen more proactively and in such listening, we are able to seek questions and also answers.

Example

Peter Senge, the author of *The Fifth Discipline*, organises an annual dialogue event. What marks his dialogue unique is that it is entirely silent. 20 Participants from around the world are invited to spend three days together in silence. We dialogue for three days in silence. I took part in last year’s silent dialogue and it was no doubt the most profound experience of dialogue I have ever had. It gave me a chance to truly listen.

However, listening didn’t come so readily nor so easily.

When we first started, I was tormented by the urge to communicate with someone. As it is a silent dialogue, I sought to connect with people through eyes, or body language. Then I resolved to keeping myself to myself. This didn’t work either as I was bombarded by my own thoughts and ideas so much so I had to write them down as they were so loud in my head. This went on for a whole day.

In the evening, we had our one-hour sitting together in silence in a circle. For the first time, I felt settled in the stillness of the silence. In the stillness, I heard other people’s listening – I could feel that I was attended to, in silence, and their care and attention helped me realign myself. From that moment, I could listen and attend to the otherness present in the circle. I listened to my body, my mind, my higher self, and my whole being and from this listening, I listened to those in the other.

That listening was so deep that I was able to develop an immense closeness with the others at the dialogue without the need of exchanging words or narrative. The listening offered me an experience of their otherness, and I was with them, each single one of them. I listened to nature and became one with it; I also rediscovered myself in such listening.

www.solonline.org

4. Dialogue facilitation and facilitator

Most dialogue meetings or events require some organisation and facilitation. The presence of the facilitator can increase the safety within the space, and help build trust. Ground rules and boundaries help engender a sense of safety within a group. Above all, safety comes from respect, care and relationship. All these require the skilled facilitation and the commitment of the facilitator. Where possible, especially in a larger group, co-facilitation is preferred.

Here I highlight some of the relevant topics.

a. Ground rules

Depending on the group and the nature of the conversation, some groups tend to spend five or ten minutes on ground rules for dialogue, such as: confidentiality, not interrupting, respect, sharing the airtime, starting and finishing on time, making 'I' statements rather than generalisations, latecomers and so on. Ground rules make for safe conversation and generative dialogue. (GHFP seminar)

b. Boundaries

Creating and maintaining appropriate boundaries is an important aspect of safe space. Apart from setting ground rules, starting and finishing on time, being clear about any financial input required, deciding how to respond to disrespectful or inappropriate remarks and comments, and having an agreement about the way to open or close the meeting, etc. these minute details are often extremely important as they help hold the space together. (LNS open Forum)

c. Space to connect

Dialogue is relational and therefore creating an environment/space where participants have as much opportunity as possible to connect with each other can be key to the experience of the dialogue. This might involve space for discussions in small groups/pairs, informal social time at the beginning or during the event, by offering food and refreshments, or a self-intro. (Focus group)

d. Framing the dialogue

Introducing the meeting effectively can help set the scene for the dialogue. As well as welcoming people and describing the purpose, theme(s) and format of the meeting, the facilitator can use the opening talk to help create safe space and to invite a deeper level of participation. This can be done in a number of ways, for example, by pointing out some of the diversity in the space that might not be immediately visible, by naming the 'hot spots' or sensitive issues (and thus demonstrating it is safe to talk about them), by being transparent about different topics or by specifically inviting contributions from everyone. (SoH dialogue)

e. Sensitivity to etiquette

An understanding of the customs of different cultures, faiths and religions is always helpful. This could include an awareness of prayer times and festival dates, dietary needs, gender issues, body language, and customs such as removing shoes (or not). However, an attitude of openness and respect, and a willingness to refrain from taking offence when unexpected differences emerge, is more important than to know the details of every custom and preference. (GHFP seminar)

f. Awareness of power dynamics

People who are in power are not always aware of such power – in race, gender, language ability, education, age, physical ability, social standing, economic status, religious authority – all can affect the power dynamics in dialogue, and have impact on individuals sense of empowerment. Awareness is the first step in creating a more equitable environment that encourages listening, appreciating differences and otherness and engagement.

g. Modelling a desired presence

Facilitation is truly leading from behind, and therefore the leading must be subtle and gentle. For instance, a good facilitator can simply be a non-anxious presence, modelling that we are comfortable with all the diverse perspectives shared without the need for steering the conversation in any particular direction, and that we are willing to hold the tensions and differences as they arise.

h. Embodying virtues

For dialogue, we have discussed four fundamental ethical dimensions. In addition to those, it is important to consider other values to be embodied, such as: (a) an emphasis on hospitality; (b) maximising the interactive and participatory quality; (c) being open, experimental and willing to take risks; (d) adding creativity and texture to dialogue, eg. silence, scripture reading, prayer, music, storytelling, arts installation, silent walks, and so on.

D. Conclusion