

# IULIA GRAD

## ON THE STRATEGIC DIMENSION OF THE BOHMIAN DIALOGUE

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**Abstract:** The paper focuses on the concept of dialogue from the perspective of David Bohm's thought, with the aim to underline its relevance for the practice of dialogue. The paper proposes a reading of the bohmian dialogue in the light of the discussions around the strategic dialogue, defined as a tool effective in overcoming difficult situations, in different contexts. The analysis tries to outline a picture of the relation between the bohmian dialogue and the strategic dialogue emphasizing that there are three main aspects of the bohmian dialogue that are relevant in this respect, namely its epistemological dimension, the creative one and the ethical innervation of dialogue.

**Key words:** dialogue, David Bohm, Martin Buber, dialogic principle, strategic dialogue.

## DESPRE DIMENSIUNEA STRATEGICĂ A DIALOGULUI LUI BOHM

**Rezumat:** Lucrarea are în centru conceptual de dialog din perspectiva concepției lui David Bohm, cu scopul de a sublinia relevanța acesteia pentru practica dialogului. Textul propune o analiză a dialogului lui Bohm în lumina discuțiilor despre dialogul strategic, definit ca un instrument eficient de depășire a situațiilor dificile, în context diferite. Analiza încearcă să evidențieze o imagine a relației dintre dialogul lui Bohm și dialogul strategic, subliniind trei aspect relevante ale celui din urmă: dimensiunea epistemologică, dimensiunea creativă și substanța etică a dialogului.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** dialog, David Bohm, Martin Buber, principiul dialogic, dialogul strategic

## 1. Introduction

In a philosophical reading key, the dialogue is a complex concept and it had attained a sort of a holy status,<sup>1</sup> as the solution for the communication problems and the ideal that should guide us in our relation with the others. The dictionary definition of dialogue, understood as a discussion among several persons with the purpose of attaining an agreement and the classification among the different types of dialogue that derives from this definition, give only a hint on the complexity of the debate that revolves around the concept.

The philosophical approach of dialogue comprehends it as a special kind of interaction, which implies a particular attitude towards the other. The most significant name that can be brought up here is Martin Buber. For Buber, the philosopher of dialogue *par excellence*, the dialogue is essentially different from a simple type of discussion. He gives up entirely the linguistic connotations of the term, and constructs a concept of dialogue understood as a mode of existence. In Buber's works, the *dialogue* becomes the *between* and receives an ontological dimension. Thus, the dialogue designates the entering into a genuine relationship that marks the creation of a world, a world of the between, which does not pertain to any of the partners, but includes them. The authenticity of the dialogue lies in the creation and the maintaining of a live relationship that allows the partners to share a common space. For Buber, the genuine dialogue has an ontological character, since the partners enter a world designated by Buber with the phrase "the sphere of the between".

Martin Buber's view fundamentally marks the philosophical addresses of dialogue in general. Within the multitude of topics addressed by Martin Buber, which varied from religion, to politics, from esthetics to ethics and education, his major preoccupation and effort aim to formulate an ontology of the between and a philosophical anthropology. Buber's philosophical labor is marked by the publishing in 1923 of the volume *I and Thou*, the work that established Martin Buber as the main philosopher of dialogue and that influenced all the

major philosophical, but not only philosophical, approaches of dialogue.

## **2. The bohmian dialogue**

An interesting view on dialogue is proposed by the physicist and philosopher David Bohm. It is not difficult to detect the buberian influence in Bohm's concept of dialogue. For Bohm, like for Buber, the dialogue is an essentially creative process. Nevertheless, there is an important nuance here, because for Buber the ontological dimension of the dialogical creation process is fundamental, while for Bohm the creative dimension manifests in the epistemological area.

David Bohm understands the dialogue as "a free flow of meaning among all the participants."<sup>2</sup> The image used by Bohm to illustrate his view on dialogue is that of "a stream of meaning flowing among and through us and between us. This will make possible a flow of meaning in the whole group, out of which may emerge some new understanding. It's something new, which may not have been in the starting point at all. It's something creative. And this shared meaning is the "glue" or "cement" that holds people and societies together."<sup>3</sup>

One of David Bohm's major contributions to the field of dialogue studies consists in the description of the impact of dialogue on the thought process. As considered by Bohm, the dialogue is an event that acts on the process of thinking. Bohm analyzes the problems of communication as resulting from the way our thinking functions, which is characterized firstly by fragmentation, namely the breaking of things into bits, and ignoring their interconnections. Bohm emphasizes that the manner in which men think the totality is essential for the global order of human mind itself. <sup>4</sup> To put it in Bohm's words, "the thought produces results, but thought says it didn't do it. And that is a problem."<sup>5</sup>

The bohmian concept of dialogue is shaped in relation to these difficulties, given the fact that the dialogue can respond to the difficulties in thought which are, in fact, at the source of the majority of

the so-called problems of communication. Thus, the nature of the bohmian dialogue is linked to the unfolding of the process of thought and to the readiness to open up to the other. Bohm introduces two practices that are inherent to dialogue and that aim right at the core mechanisms of thinking. One is the suspension of assumptions, that is to say to acknowledge what is in the other's mind, without jumping to conclusions or judging. The other one is the *proprioception* of thought, a concept essential to the possibility of a genuine dialogue. Bohm borrows the term from neuropsychology, where it designates the body's perception of its own movement, and applies it to the process of thinking. Accordingly, the proprioception of thought means that the thought should be in a way conscious of its own movement. So, the suspension of assumptions makes the proprioception of thought possible.<sup>6</sup> Bohm affirms that the proprioception allows us to understand that many of the problems that we seek to resolve are in fact paradoxes that have to be acknowledged. The dialogue presumes the cognizance of the process of thought itself, as a precondition for the opening towards the other.

Bohm introduces a concept that is essential for dialogue, namely the tacit knowledge, as "a coherent movement of thought, a coherent movement of communication"<sup>7</sup> that transcends the verbal expression. Just like described by Bohm, as a knowledge "at the level for which we have only a vague feeling", the concept seems very buberian. For Buber, the I - Thou relation does not generate an objective knowledge of Thou; rather it gives a certitude that cannot be characterized by any of the properties of a rational knowledge. "-What, then, do we experience of Thou? - Just nothing. For we do not experience it. - What then do we know of Thou? - Just everything. For we know nothing isolated about it any more."<sup>8</sup> Thus, what is obtained in a genuine relation is not the knowledge of the other, but the certainty of the other's presence. Even if detached from the privileged space of the genuine relation between an I and a Thou, the tacit knowledge, as described by Bohm, is an essential mark of the dialogue.

The above mentioned features are embodied in the model of dialogue proposed by David Bohm, known as the bohmian dialogue.

The bohmian dialogue is characterized firstly by its openness. The participants, whose number can vary from twenty to forty, sit in a circle, there is no leader, no plan, no agenda, and nothing should be decided about any issue. "We must have an empty space where we are not obliged to do anything, nor to come to any conclusions, nor to say anything or not say anything. It's open and free. It's an empty space. The word "leisure" has that meaning of a kind of empty space."<sup>9</sup> But, even if there is no plan and no decision that are made in the dialogue group, there is "a change" that occurs, and that is the aim of the dialogue. In this respect, Bohm mentions a North American tribe that had the habit of meeting periodically in conditions similar to those of the bohmian model of dialogue, and even if there were no discussion about particular problems that had to be resolved after the meeting, the participants "seemed to know what to do, because they understood each other so well."<sup>10</sup>

The limits of the bohmian dialogue derive from its key trait, namely the fact that it focuses mainly on the process of thinking. Thus, the bohmian dialogue assures the space for the deconstruction and the dismantle of the assumptions that interfere with and compromise the dialogue, but it doesn't go further and it does not explain the creative way of knowing and learning, which is actually the main stake of the dialogue. Olen Gunnlaugson considers that Bohm remains at the abstract level of analysis of dialogue and that is translated in the participants being tangled in a meta-analysis that interfere with the addressing of the concrete aspects of dialogue. Moreover, by stressing the importance of the suspension and of the dismantling of the assumptions of the participants, the bohmian dialogue diminishes and marginalizes the importance of the personal dimension within the dialogue.<sup>11</sup>

Nevertheless, despite the validity of the arguments invoked by Gunnlaugson, the bohmian dialogue has a special relevance for the practice of dialogue, and particularly for the understanding of the principle of the practice of dialogue used in very specific contexts. Thus, beside the fact that Bohm himself describes his view of dialogue in an practical manner, – even if the dialogue is sometimes idealized

and spiritualized – by presenting the rules and the conditions of the group of dialogue, the bohmian dialogue has a strong ethical core that is particularly relevant here. This ethical core is revealed in the open attitude towards the other, which is constitutive for the dialog practice. An example that could be mentioned in this respect, and that will be addressed in the following part of the paper, is the technique of strategic dialogue.

### **3. The limited dialogue**

There are various attempts to translate the abstract philosophical views of the theoreticians of the dialogue in practice, in order to explore their practical opportunities. Martin Buber is the most important name in this respect, if we take into account his impact on psychiatry or education. In education, for example, John Scudder proposes the Buber Model, which cannot respond to the challenge raised by the resistance to rigid schemas that characterizes the buberian thought.<sup>12</sup>

The strategic dialogue in the area of psychotherapy represents an interesting example, as well. Giorgio Nardone and Paulo Salvini describe the technique of the strategic dialogue as the instrument that marks the border between a deterministic scheme, which views the patient as a product of factors such as his genes, family, personality, etc, to a pragmatic scheme, that views the subject as the constructor of his own reality. Due to its focus on “getting to know a problem through its solution”, the strategic dialogue is presented by Nardone as an “epistemological evolution”,<sup>13</sup> that materializes in the joint effort of the therapist and the patient towards the “co-construction of reality.”<sup>14</sup>

The concept of dialogue proposed by Bohm is appealing especially for the corporate environment, in the utilization of the strategic dialogue technique. Bohm describes the applying of the dialogue principle to corporate problems as a dialogue that is limited by specific pre-established purposes. But, despite this limitation, the dialogic principle works, since it allows the knowledge of the

assumptions.<sup>15</sup> The strategic dialogue offers to companies a specialized technique that allows responding to trends and major changes in the area of interest of the organization or of the society at large. According to Yankelovich and Rosell, the strategic dialogue fills a gap that is generated by the fact that the company goes outside its comfort zone due to “a crisis of confidence or mistrust, or a threatening shift in the economy or technology”.<sup>16</sup> In the context of these changes, Yankelovich and Rosell identify several challenges that the company confronts, challenges brought about by the novelty of the context, such as the need to identify the main certainties and uncertainties, the need to properly understand the changes and their implications, the availability to question the familiar and comfortable perspectives and solutions, the need to expand the area of options, the need to evaluate the emotional response of those involved in the process of decision, the need to take into account a large diversity of opinions and points of view, and the need for responsibility for the decisions.<sup>17</sup> While the structure of the strategic dialogue is different from the group of dialogue described by Bohm, since it is more rigorously structured and it is based on micro-scenarios for action, there is a striking similarity between their outcomes. In the case of the strategic dialogue, the main objective focuses mostly on the enlargement of the possible options at the disposal of the company, through the “uncovering of the archeology of assumptions”, understood just as Bohm’s proprioception of thought, as the process of “bringing the layers of hidden assumptions into the open and critically examining them.”<sup>18</sup>

Therefore, going beyond its rigor, the strategic dialogue shares with the bohmian dialogue the same ethical core constituted by the openness towards the other, the willingness to expose the own vulnerabilities in order to share and to create something new. The dialogue, whether conceived as a special relationship described in terms of an ontology of the interval, of the between, as an unique event that occurs between an I and an Thou, or as a technique used for the purpose of finding a solution to a difficult situation, carries an

ethical innervation that derives from the special attitude towards the other.

An interesting account of the moral core of dialogue is proposed by Ronald C. Arnett's analysis of the dialogic ethics. Arnett's perspective is situated in the large framework of a minimal postmodern ethics, characterized by its "disdain for authority in all its many guises".<sup>19</sup> From the very beginning, Arnett declares the dialogic ethics "a pragmatic necessity" in a world essentially marked by difference. "Living with the routine of change and difference, we must remember that we are not the first people or historical era to live within the ongoing presence of difference, but we may be the first to live in an era whose public discourse and scholarship are defined by the acknowledgment of difference."<sup>20</sup> Thus, Arnett's description of postmodern ethics has at its center the value of dialogue, understood essentially as the willingness to learn from the other. "Learning is the anchor in an era that rebels against universalistic foundations"<sup>21</sup> and the dialogue is its main instrument. For Arnett, the main coordinates of dialogue regard the learning process inherent in proper listening, the refraining from imposing the control, even if it would impose that the dialogue takes place, and the acknowledgment of bias.<sup>22</sup> By way of describing the dialogic ethics in terms of encounter and of learning, Arnett gives a reading key of dialogue that enrolls in the pragmatic registry outlined above, as the instrument that "listens to what is before one, attends to the historical moment, and seeks to negotiate new possibilities."<sup>23</sup>

#### **4. Conclusion**

While the strategic dialogue is, as we have seen, an actual technique that is used in order to obtain solutions for very concrete problems, its essence must be understood within the framework of the philosophical discourse on dialogue, as a relation characterized by the genuine openness to the other. Despite the ambiguous and almost spiritual manner in which David Bohm describes the term dialogue,

we consider that his view embodies a pragmatic dimension of dialogue that derives from its ethical core and its creative nature. Thus, we consider that the bohmian dialogue offers the conceptual tools that are necessary, on the one hand, for understanding the essence of the technique of dialogue applied in specific contexts and, on the other hand, for understanding its mechanisms and the opportunities it offers.

The dialogue principle, even when it is applied in environments that seem to slacken its depth and existential significance, such as the organizational milieu, is built around an ethical core that is captured by the response that comes from the dialogic ethics: "If we want to change the situation, we must first meet this radical form of otherness of which we may not approve and that we may not want".<sup>24</sup>

## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> John Durham Peters, *Speaking into the air: a history of the idea of communication*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 33.

<sup>2</sup> David Bohm, *On Dialogue*, (New York: Routledge, 2003), ix.

<sup>3</sup> David Bohm, *On Dialogue*, 6.

<sup>4</sup> David Bohm, *On Dialogue*, 49; see also David Bohm, *Plenitudinea lumii și ordinea ei*, (București: Humanitas, 1995), 30.

<sup>5</sup> David Bohm, *On Dialogue*, 10.

<sup>6</sup> David Bohm, *On Dialogue*, 25.

<sup>7</sup> David Bohm, *On Dialogue*, 14.

<sup>8</sup> Martin Buber, *Eu și Tu*, (București : Humanitas, 1992), 37.

<sup>9</sup> David Bohm, *On Dialogue*, 17.

<sup>10</sup> David Bohm, *On Dialogue*, p. 17.

<sup>11</sup> Olen Gunnlaugson, "Bohmian Dialogue: a Critical Retrospective of Bohm's Approach to Dialogue as a Practice of Collective Communication", *Journal of Dialogue Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1, (2014), 32.

<sup>12</sup> Haim Gordon, "Would Martin Buber Endorse the Buber Model?", *Educational Theory*, 23:3, (1973).

<sup>13</sup> Giorgio Nardone, Alessandro Salvini, *The Strategic Dialogue, Rendering the Diagnostic Interview a Real Therapeutic Intervention*, (London: Karnac Books, 2007), 104.

<sup>14</sup> Giorgio Nardone, Alessandro Salvini, *The Strategic Dialogue, Rendering the Diagnostic Interview a Real Therapeutic Intervention*, 105.

<sup>15</sup> David Bohm, *On Dialogue*, 42.

<sup>16</sup> Dan Yankelovich, Steven Rosell, "Creating Strategic Dialogue", in Stuart Crainer, (ed.), *The Financial Times Handbook of Management*, (London: Prentice Hall, 2004), 852.

<sup>17</sup> Dan Yankelovich, Steven Rosell, "Creating Strategic Dialogue", 853.

<sup>18</sup> Dan Yankelovich, Steven Rosell, "Creating Strategic Dialogue", 854.

<sup>19</sup> Stuart Sim (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*, (London, Routledge, 2001), 3.

<sup>20</sup> Ronald C. Arnett, "Dialogic Ethics: Meeting Differing Grounds of the "Good", in Ronald C. Arnett, Janie M. Harden Fritz & LeeAnne M. Bell (eds.), *Communication Ethics Literacy: Dialogue and Difference*, (SAGE Publications, 2012), 79.

<sup>21</sup> Ronald C. Arnett, "Dialogic Ethics: Meeting Differing Grounds of the "Good", 81.

<sup>22</sup> Ronald C. Arnett, "Dialogic Ethics: Meeting Differing Grounds of the "Good", 80.

<sup>23</sup> Ronald C. Arnett, "Dialogic Ethics: Meeting Differing Grounds of the "Good", 95.

<sup>24</sup> Ronald C. Arnett, "Dialogic Ethics: Meeting Differing Grounds of the "Good", 93.

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