

Review Essay

On Dialogue

David Bohm

edited by Lee Nichol. London & New York: Routledge, 1996.

Dialogue: An Exploration of Human Thoughts

David Bohm's *On Dialogue* argues that more than a mechanistic process facilitated by transportation, financial, and digital communication technologies, human encounter is the result of a "dialogical world view."¹ This dialogue presupposes a shared meaning wherein participants are invited to interpret and understand each other in order to reach mutual understanding.

As a theoretical physicist at Birkbeck College, University of London, Bohm wrote about the problems of physics such as the meaning of the universe, causality and chance, order and creativity. In *On Dialogue*, he turns his attention to the concerns of the humanities; undertaking philosophical exercises in this field. Similar to hermeneutic philosophers such as Hans Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur, Bohm

¹ David Bohm, *On Dialogue*, ed. Lee Nichol (London & New York: Routledge, 1996), vii.

looks at dialogue as an exploration of human understanding about oneself and others.

In the Foreword, Lee Nichol writes that “dialogue is a multi-faceted process . . . which explores an unusually wide range of human experience: our closely-held values; the nature and intensity of emotions; the patterns of our thought processes; the function of memory; the import of inherited cultural myths; and the manner in which our neurophysiology structures moment-to-moment experience.”² In all these processes, dialogue itself becomes a means through which we suspend our thoughts so that human encounters can be developed. Dialogue then is a creative process wherein we understand how we think, especially how collective thinking can be formed, and explores how thought is collectively generated and sustained.

Calling into Question Deeply Held Assumptions

Bohm realizes that dialogue is a tool often utilized for solving practical problems. However, its success depends on how it calls into question deeply held assumptions about culture, meaning, and identity.

As a theoretical physicist, Bohm understands that everyone holds basic assumptions about the meaning of life, politics, religion, and personal interests that are difficult to abandon. These basic assumptions may put us at odds with each other. For example, Einstein and Bohr’s theories stand on opposite

² Bohm, *On Dialogue*, vii.

ends simply because they each have their own scientific premises. Einstein is absolutely convinced that one will eventually arrive at a theory in which the objects are connected by laws, while Bohr believes that reality is uncertain, which can be seen in his quantum theory where objects are connected by probabilities.³ In the field of psychology, it would be difficult for B.F. Skinner and Carl Rogers to sit at one table and have a good time. While Skinner contends that all human activity is determined by its surroundings, Rogers criticizes this behavioristic metaphysical directive because of his position on how human freedom is the basis of human action and development. These examples illustrate that most scientists are not ready to abandon their scientific assumptions;⁴ and when their assumptions are challenged, they will defend them.

The same difficulties can be seen in everyday life. All of us have assumptions that anchor or motivate our decisions and actions. The relationship between these assumptions and everyday concrete actions underlie politics, religion, and even science. Take for instance the issues of discrimination and environmental concerns. Underneath these issues and the resulting actions is the idea that society consists of classes and the false sense of entitlement of its members to exploit nature. Scientists who work for companies that

³ Bohm, *On Dialogue*, 37–38.

⁴ Eugene Swaim, “B.F. Skinner and Carl R. Rogers on Behavior and Education,” *Oregon ASCD Curriculum Bulletin* 28, no. 324 (August 1974).

heavily contribute to pollution may have specific self-interests in proving that pollution is not dangerous. There are others whose interests are better served in proving that pollution is dangerous and perhaps somewhere there is an unbiased scientist who tries to judge both sides.⁵ These assumptions function like computer programs installed in human minds that incapacitate them from thinking and acting differently as a result of new or even the best intentions. As Bohm writes, these “assumptions affect the way we see things, the way *we* experience them, and, consequently, the things that we want to do.”⁶

Among all these difficulties, Bohm believes that dialogue is a necessity, in a sense that “it cannot be turned aside.”⁷ The real power of dialogue lies in how it weighs all assumptions and opinions without deciding. Bohm writes:

The object of a dialogue is not to analyze things, or to win an argument, or to exchange opinions. Rather, it is to suspend your opinions and to look at the opinions, to listen to everybody’s opinion, and to suspend them, and to see what all that means. If we can see what all of our opinions mean, then we are sharing a common content even if we do not agree entirely.⁸

⁵ Bohm, *On Dialogue*, 13.

⁶ Bohm, 69.

⁷ Bohm, 22.

⁸ Bohm, 26.

Dialogue is implicit in the processes of thinking. We cannot simply state and concretize it in words. However, based on Bohm's observations of scientific meetings, people pay more attention to the contents of a meeting as they are presented on printed reports. This has resulted in meetings that are increasingly more productive. This observation points to a crucial element involved in dialogue: "the awakening of the process of dialogue itself as a free flow of meaning among all participants."⁹

In such a process, a new kind of collective mind begins to emerge. The development of common meanings transforms the process of dialogue. The scientists' focus on meeting reports or facts was also an act of suspending their assumptions. This resulted in a more productive and perhaps collaborative meeting of minds and not just by individuals. By suspending one's assumptions, dialogue "helps participants cultivate a firsthand experience of the nature of thought, the limits of rationality, and the creative possibilities of a consciousness-informed process of inquiry."¹⁰

Bohm owes much to Michael Polanyi in his explanation of the tacit process of dialogue based on personal knowledge. Like Polanyi, Bohm sees this process as the basis for dialogue that leads to the "proprioception" of thought. He writes: "*the*

⁹ Bohm, *On Dialogue*, x.

¹⁰ Olen Gunnlaugson, "Bohmian Dialogue: A Critical Retrospective of Bohm's Approach to Dialogue as a Practice of Collective Communication," *Journal of Dialogue Studies* 2, no. 1 (2014): 26.

point of suspension is to help make proprioception possible."¹¹ Bohm borrows the term proprioception from neurophysiology to convey the significance of giving sustained attention to our intellectual, emotional, and kinesthetic processes. As Gunnlaugson remarks:

Proprioception allows the physiological correlates of our thoughts to enter more clearly into felt awareness in the moment, in turn helping us understand more fully what is taking place by orienting differently by experiencing this deeper connect with the underlying ground wholeness, which day to day reality is embedded in.¹²

By proprioception, participants within dialogue groups learn how to break out of the solipsistic representational world of images, meaning, and thought. Under the influence of Krishnamurti who identified the proprioceptive awareness where "the cup has to be empty to hold something" or contain something, Bohm identifies dialogue groups as empty spaces where anything may come in.¹³ This way, the tacit aspect is common in dialogue, it is shared.

As empty cups or spaces that can be filled, dialogue has the power to build shared meanings among those involved and can change society. Bohm contends that a dialogue among twenty to forty people is powerful because this group

¹¹ Bohm, *On Dialogue*, 25.

¹² Gunnlaugson, "Bohmian Dialogue," 27.

¹³ Bohm, *On Dialogue*, 17.

serves as a microcosm for society as a whole. A group of this size can create micro-cultural circles consisting of different subcultures, thereby becoming the microcosm of a whole culture. Thus, insofar as the question of culture as collectively shared meanings begins to emerge, the power of the group increases much faster depending on the number of people in the group. For example, Bohm explains that the power of the dialogue group is the same as a laser that can produce an intense and coherent beam¹⁴ which differs from ordinarily incoherent thoughts. For Bohm, only coherent thinking has great power. Sharing meaning, even though it is tacit in nature, is the ultimate basis of living together in society. Therefore in Bohm's perspective, dialogue is a necessity because collective life is only meaningful for human life if there is shared meaning.

Bohm concludes that the process of suspending assumptions through dialogue makes it possible for shared meanings to naturally emerge, become connected, and created¹⁵ We are in the same boat in which we see our assumptions and the varied criticisms of these assumptions. Without our effort to change anybody's opinion and coming to any conclusions and judgments, dialogue influences us, affects our feelings and suspends our own assumptions. The suspension of our assumptions is not just a logical process as argued by Karl Popper in his thinking about

¹⁴ Bohm, *On Dialogue*, 14.

¹⁵ Bohm, 20.

falsification.¹⁶ Dialogue is a social psychological process that allows us to create shared meanings resulting in friendship, mutual respect, and positive human encounters.¹⁷ The suspension of assumptions is a critical process for us to encounter other people through dialogue.

Back to Substantive Communication

Bohm's concept of dialogue as a creative process of shared meaning in human encounters has an important implication for our concept of communication. Bohm realizes that communication is a *modus precendendi* for the formation of society. Communication technology greatly contributes to the creation of a network of communication in our lives. But behind the success of building these networks, communication is breaking down everywhere today on an unparalleled scale. "People living in different nations, with different economic and political systems, are hardly able to talk to each other without fighting."¹⁸ Our lives are marked by the blocks that we build, which are influenced by economic and political systems that affect our assumptions. In this context, we communicate and connect to each other but only for economic and political purposes.

Eric Voegelin identifies this type of communication as pragmatic communication. This kind of communication

¹⁶ Karl Popper, *Objective Knowledge: An Evolutionary Approach* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 13.

¹⁷ *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (London: Routledge, 2002).

¹⁸ Bohm, *On Dialogue*, 1.

fails to create shared meanings because it “has the purpose of inducing in the human target a state of mind that will result in the behavior in conformity with the communicator’s intention.”¹⁹ Propaganda, advertising, and psychological management create and even magnify the conditions for this type of communication. The purpose of communication in this context is to shape and direct human behavior according to the expectations and needs of economic and political systems.

The impact of pragmatic communication in society does not stop there. Voegelin exposes that pragmatic communication tends to be toxicant and damaging to human interaction. The phenomenon of toxicant communication can be seen in various media, such as films, radio, TV, and the internet. They provide information that are not necessarily true nor essential. Voegelin writes that modern man is living in conditions replete with the anxieties of life, boredom, and hopelessness. To escape these states of the soul, humans develop *divertissements* — diversions that are intended to overcome emptiness through activities like watching movies and television, listening to the radio, and searching the internet. In a pragmatic way of thinking, this kind of information has its goal: to drown the anxieties of an empty life.²⁰

¹⁹ *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, ed. Ellis Sandoz, vol. 11 (Columbia University of Missouri Press, 2000), 48.

²⁰ Voegelin, *The Collected Works of Eriv Voegelin*, 50.

However, Bohm sees pragmatic and toxicant communication as breaking down communications. It no longer functions to bring people together or to reconnect humans to nature. It has become a tool for economic and political systems. By proposing dialogue as shared meaning, Bohm criticizes the concept of communication as knowledge and idea transmission. The latter are exemplified by the ideas developed by John Locke, William Wundt, and Claude Shannon.

Bohm writes that according to its popular definition, communication means “‘to make something common,’ i.e., to convey information or knowledge from one person to another in as accurate a way as possible.”²¹ Communication defined this way has a pragmatic intention: building the order of behavior according to the wishes of the communicator.

Through Bohm’s concept of dialogue as shared meaning, he highlights how communication is more than just the transmission of ideas or knowledge. It means “making something *in common*, i.e., creating something new together.”²² This presupposes that those communicating can freely listen to each other without prejudices and without trying to influence each other. Each must be interested primarily in truth and coherence.

In this light, Bohm raises Plato’s idea of communication as substantive communication, that is, to bring people to

²¹ Bohm, *On Dialogue*, 2.

²² Bohm, 3.

koinonia or partnership and friendship.²³ Dialogue is a means through which audiences discover the truth and are invited to overcome intellectual fallacies. The purpose of communication is to reveal and develop the human personality.

Citing Voegelin's interpretation of Plato's thoughts, persuasion is needed so that everyone can love *sophon* or wisdom as a step to know the self and the community. Plato himself describes that in the dialogue, Socrates tries to induce other men to enter into his orbit of the love of wisdom, to restore the order of their souls by entering into the paradigmatic order of the Socratic soul, to establish Socrates' existential community by sharing with him his common desire for divine goodness (*agathon*). Communication builds the right order of the human psyche.²⁴

Closing Remarks

Bohm's *On Dialogue* is an attempt to add a creative dimension to science through his concept of dialogue. As a physicist, he realizes that scientific explanations are deductive and nomological.²⁵ In this deductive-nomological thinking, every natural event can only be deduced from

²³ Plato, "Gorgias," in *Complete Works of Plato*, ed. John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 852.

²⁴ Voegelin, *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, 46.

²⁵ Carl Gustav Hempel, *Philosophy of Natural Science* (New York: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1966), 49.

premises of natural laws and empirical causes. Without these premises, the natural events cannot be explained.

But these assumptions and scientific premises are not static concepts. As Bohm explains, the assumptions can be suspended in dialogue. For Bohm, science is a creative process that is based on the activity of thinking. “‘Thinking’ implies the present tense—some activity going on which may include critical sensitivity to what can go wrong. Also there may be new ideas, and perhaps occasionally perceptions of some kind within us. ‘Thought’ is the past participle of that. We have the idea that after we have been thinking of something, it just evaporates. But thinking doesn’t disappear. It goes somehow into the brain and leaves something—a trace—which becomes thought.”²⁶

By making the suspension of assumptions as an activity of thinking, I believe that Bohm is not being arrogant toward one’s assumptions. It is an authentic human action that is free and open to both natural and human realities. Suspension and proprioception are the conditions of the possibilities of dialogue that help participants transform their understanding of nature and human beings. Martin Heidegger once said that “questioning is the piety of thought”²⁷ that makes someone want to listen to the reality of science and the reality of humans. If my interpretation of

²⁶ Bohm, *On Dialogue*, 52–53.

²⁷ Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. and with an introduction by William Lovitt (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 35.

Bohm's work is correct, then dialogue is a kind of philosophical wonder about the reality of science and its community. It is an exploration of human experience within the context of the scientific community and society at large.

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