



From the encounter to the dialogue.

Toward a new interpersonal perspective in the era of crisis and conflicts

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The problem examined. In every times troubled by crisis, as well as the ones we're living just now, dialogue is invoked as "the" only way to solve political and social problems. From Condoleeza Rice to the Pope, this is probably the most urgent proposal in the agenda of political and religious leaders. Dialogue is perceived as the key word to build a new era of global understanding, but when it is claimed, it does reveal its paradoxal roots: 1) dialogue demands at least a common will of discussing and reciprocity; in this way it seems possible only among partners who share common values and similar cultures, that's to say, among people who properly don't need any dialogue; 2) dialogue, commonly seen as a valuable instrument of peace, presents, at its very heart, the structure of a conflict (*polemos*). We are facing a double paradoxe, political (the conflict between the urgency of dialogue and its difficult performance) and ontological (the antinomies are the very essence of dialogue).

The philosophical investigation. In this perspective, the main question is: the appeal for the dialogue, has it a sense? As everybody can understand, this is a crucial issue, both for philosophy and politics, because it moves to the very heart of the interpersonal-political relations. This paper explores, from a phenomenological perspective, the role of the encounter as precondition of dialogue. Moving from the structural similarities between the two events (they both present an antinomic nature), and from the phenomenological intuition that we cannot have any dialogue without an encounter, this philosophical investigation reaches the following results.

Conclusions. Despite its illocutionary weakness, the invocation for the dialogue (expressed by the performative "let's dialogue!") has a strong role in the perspective of a dialectic performance. In fact, it 1) identifies and calls to a 2) precise responsibility the partners of the potential dialogue. We could say that it implicitly calls to an encounter and throws a new light on the encounter itself. The encounter, far from being a simple "meeting", plays a very strategic role in the building of the dialogue, because it poses the basis of the ethical commitment of the dialectic event. As we are going to argument, the committment affects the encounter, when in the dialogue the committment is the discourse itself. These reflections bring us: 1) to reevaluate the appeal for the dialogue, beyond its aporias, but first of all, 2) it calls to make every efforts to create the condition of a new culture of the encounter (social, religious, interpersonal, cultural).

I. The appeal for the dialogue. Illocutionary weakness, ethical force

In every times troubled by crisis, as well as the ones we're living just now, dialogue is invoked as "the" only way to solve political and social problems. From the US secretary of State Condoleeza Rice to the Pope, this is probably the most urgent proposal in the agenda of political and religious leaders. Dialogue is perceived as the key word to build a new era of global understanding.

This phenomenological investigation, aimed at a better understanding of the role of the encounter in a dialogical perspective, moves from the analysis of the statement "let's dialogue!", in which it may be formally resumed the appeal for the dialogue¹. Has this preposition a sense? This is not a rethoric question as it could seem at a first glance.

The verb "to dialogue", in fact, belongs to the group of the so called performatives and the utterance deals with the speech-acts domain. The sense of the preposition "let's dialogue!", than, depends on the possibility of translating it into a concrete act.

What I underline is that the utterance has a pragmatic meaning, not only a semantic one²: from that point of view, it has a sense only if the dialogue truly takes place³. In other words, the appeal for the dialogue suffers from an internal weakness, linked to its illocutionary force⁴. A double weakness. As an invitation, in fact, "let's dialogue!" is basically a desire; as a performative verb, "to dialogue", requires to be performed⁵.

We've reached a first conclusion moving from the perspective of the pragmatics: the locutionary act (to say "let's dialogue!") doesn't work without the correspondent illocutionary act (the act of dialoging). For example, the appeal made by the Pope to Israeli and Palestinan people for a mutual dialectic exchange, despite the moral authority of John Paul II, is – pragmatically speaking – an empty statement, if the leaders of the State of Israel and the Palestinan Authority don't *decide to* begin the colloquia. Nevertheless, it would be uncorrect to say that the statement "let's dialogue!" has not a pragmatic efficacy at large.

I argue that the invitation plays indeed a central role in calling to a precise responsibility the partners of the potential dialogue. First of all, it identifies the subjects of the dialectic relation: the appeal of the Pope probably it will not reach any effect, but it clearly indicates that the leader A and the leader B could solve the conflict. In other words, the invitation:

- 1) brings to the stage the actors of the dialogue, it presentifies them and
- 2) by putting in evidence their responsibility, it identifies them as moral subjects. It is interesting to underline that this conclusion reveals some rather unknown components of the performative verbs, as the moral dimension of them.

In a very broad sense, the appeal to dialogue seems to pose the transcendental conditions of an encounter. Not only because it brings to surface the

¹ Dialogue has recently become the subject of increased social interest. Sociological, psychological, political and economic analyses have flourished. But there are also deep philosophical issues generated by critical reflection on dialogue that equally are deserving of inquiry.

² It is not only "true" or "false".

³ On a pragmatic level, the need of dialogue it is not enough make it a real event

⁴ Illocutionary acts are acts done *in* saying something; perlocutionary acts done *by* saying something. The distinction is not clearly given by Austin (*How to Do Things with Words*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1961). For Searle (*Speech Acts*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1969), the speech acts are part of the illocutionary domain at large.

⁵ F. Récanati, *Les enoncés performatifs. Contribution à la pragmatique*, Paris, Minuit, 1981.

subjects of the dialectic exchange, but also because it implicitly reveals that the encounter is a preliminary condition of the dialogue itself. If we reflect, moving from the common sense, it cannot be conceived a dialogue without supposing a preliminary encounter. But this intuition, to be accepted, asks to be carefully examined. In order to prove it, we need to precise the mutual relation affecting both terms, encounter and dialogue, after having examined their definitions. The further step will be to understand how we move from the encounter, that preludes to a wide range of communicative situations (conversation, negotiation, emotion, silence, etc), not only to a proper dialogue.

I. 2 The relation between encounter and dialogue. Encounter as a transcendental condition of it

If we pay attention to it, we cannot help recognizing the deep linkage existing between encounter and dialogue. The encounter (an interpersonal event in which the partners are face to face in a communicative relation), always comes before the making of a dialogue (a face to face confrontation marked by reciprocity and the common will of discussion about a specific issue, in which is going to be produced a new and veritable sense)⁶. This pure phenomenological intuition may be expressed in these terms:

- there isn't any dialogue without an encounter.

Let's reflect: two persons have at least to meet, somewhere and somehow, before beginning their confrontation. At large, we could say that the encounter is *the* transcendental condition (in Kantian sense) of every communication, from conversation to negotiation, from the act of surprising to the silence itself. A question arises, at this point:

- what does it give a special strength to the relation between encounter and dialogue?

The phenomenological investigation reveals the major role of the practical figure of the commitment – as we'll prove in the next chapter –: precisely, the commitment affects the encounter, when, in the dialogue, the commitment is the discourse itself.⁷ Before discussing this statement, in which we recognize the core of our philosophical investigation, it is important to put in evidence the similarities existing between the two phenomena.

We couldn't really think of Plato's *Dialogue* without reminding Socrates who meets Teetetus or Phaedo in the main Athen's square. A brief notice of the encounter is usually given by Plato at the beginning of the *Dialogues*, in the Prologue. Far from being a rhetoric frame or an exclusively literary choice, this moment is essential in order to identify the partners of the forthcoming dialogue and to make them present as veritable moral subjects (because they're going to assume the responsibility of the discourse). As we saw in the previous paragraph, these two theoretical issues are

⁶ The word "dialogue" is absent from the main philosophical dictionary (see for instance: *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* (edited by Ted Honderich), Oxford, University Press, 1995; *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* (general editor Robert Audi), Cambridge, University Press, 1995; *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (general editor Edward Craig), Routledge, London and New York, 1980. The closest reference to this concept is given by the word "dialectic", whose semantic domain is absolutely not comparable with the one of the dialogue. We are now going to propose a very general definition, based on the main ideas of relation and communication. Nevertheless, we appreciate the definition of dialogue given by Francis Jacques (*L'espace logique de l'interlocution*, Paris, Puf, 1985, pag. 126) – *a veritable co-significance* – that points out the making of truth in the dialogical confrontation.

⁷ That's to say, there is a coincidence.

implicitly contained in the appeal for the dialogue⁸: it reveals the strategic role of encounter in every sort of communicative event and its proper nature, both formal (it presents, it identifies) and ethical (it calls the subjects-partners of communication to assume a responsibility).

To conclude: in this paragraph we noticed the first "liason" between encounter and dialogue (the first is the condition of the second). We have to go further, exploring their ontological roots, both affected by antinomies⁹.

I. 3. The ontological similarities between encounter and dialogue

I. 3. 1. The conflict of meanings inside the dialogue

Beneath the surface of a very commonly used term, dialogue¹⁰ is a veritable complex word. Not only because it deals with the origin of western philosophy and the birth of the concept of rationality (*logos*)¹¹, as well, but also because of its contradictory contents. Let's describe some of them.

Peace-war. People commonly perceive dialogue as a synonym of peace, that's to say, a magical word to get along friendly with the others. Nothing more erroneous, indeed: dialogue is basically *polemos*¹², a discourse in which the partners are involved in a dialectic war, where the arguments are the weapons and the participants become adversaries.

Reciprocity-distance. Dialogue requires, at least, the common will of discussing and reciprocity; in this way it seems possible only among partners who share common values and similar cultures, that's to say, among people who properly don't need any dialogue. Dialogue, in fact, is especially invoked in case of conflicts (social, political, religious, cultural) where reciprocity and common will does not play any role.

Opinions-truth. When a dialogue is correctly performed, it produces a sense that goes further the opinions of the participants. This is the peculiar magic of Plato's *Dialogues*, as well as a dialogue between a father and a son. In the dialectic *polemos*, opinions are essential ingredients in order to produce truth.

Dialogue-monologue. Dialogue always risks to become a monologue if one of the participants-adversaries does not respect the dialectic rules as well¹³.

⁸ "In other words, the invitation 1) brings to the stage the actors of the dialogue, it presentifies them and 2) by putting in evidence their responsibility, it identifies them as moral subjects. In a very broad sense, the appeal to dialogue seems to pose the transcendental conditions of an encounter".

⁹ Antinomy means literally "conflict of laws" (*anti-nomoi*). This term, in the kantian philosophy, refers to the contradiction between two propositions whose sense is at least plausible. Because of it, the antinomies compell reason for accepting both (thesis and antithesis). In more recent time, Quine has defined an antinomy a paradox which "produces a self-contradiction by accepted ways of reasoning. It establishes that some tacit and trusted pattern of reasoning must be made explicit and henceforward be avoided or revised". (W. V. Quine, *The Way of Paradox*, New York, 1966, ch. I).

¹⁰ Frequently confused with other communicative events, mainly with conversation and negotiation.

¹¹ K. O. Apel, *Etique de la discussion*, Paris, Cerfs, 1994

¹² U. Curi, *Polemos, filosofia e guerra*, Mondadori, Milano, 2001

¹³ See the argumentation of J. Levrat, *Dynamique de la rencontre. Un approche anthropologique du dialogue*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1993

Dialogue: paradoxe and antinomy. The nature of paradoxe¹⁴, in the dialogical dialectic, is antinomic: it is a conflict between two premises or arguments otherwise plausible. Theoretically speaking, two possible perspectives may be followed in order to clarify a paradoxe. We can decide to solve it (by indicating that contradiction can be avoided) or, in assuming that both the premises are valuable, we decide to enter the very heart of the paradoxe, by accepting it as the way a phenomenon is properly given. In a phenomenological perspective, the one we're going to follow, this second perspective considers the paradoxe as a symptom of the phenomenon. A special kind of phenomenon, that Jean-Luc Marion defines "phénomène saturée"¹⁵, in which intuition is stronger than intention.

I. 3. 2. The conflict of meanings inside the encounter

A conflict of meaning also affects the very heart of the encounter as well as the dialogue¹⁶. We indicate at least three main couples of "antinomic" terms:

I-Thou (Ego, alter Ego). They are the (opposite) subjects of the encounter as an interpersonal relation. This couple of terms, that seems so obvious from the common sense perspective, it is the crux of philosophy from Descartes to analytic philosophy: the foundation of the second person of the intersubjective relation is an essential task in order to found the possibility of an encounter as well. According to the phenomenological point of view, and particularly to the main concept of intentionality (Husserl)¹⁷, the "Thou" is immediately given to the consciousness. In this perspective, the second person is perceived as an object among the other objects. Might it be a truly encounter? The problem is posed by the contemporary french philosopher Jacques¹⁸, who solve it from a "dialogical" point of view, by saying that the "I" is the subject who founds the second person (Thou) in making a discourse. By this way, this subject is not properly known (theoretically foundation) but re-cognized (practically foundation). According to this theory the encounter is not only possible, but also deeply involved in the communicative-dialogical domain.

To look-Being looked. As an interpersonal event, the encounter concerns the act of relating to another person (or to other persons). After having proved, according to the phenomenological-communicative perspective, the existence of the second person (Thou), we have to pay attention to the making of the mutual relation. It is in this domain that we face the conflict between 1) who looks and 2) who is being looked. These two symmetrical movements are the very heart of the encounter, because they are at the origin of the perception of the proper self by discovering the other self. The look, nevertheless, cannot be considered a simple movement of the eyes. It possess a

¹⁴ A very original analysis of the logical-communicative traits of the dialogue is made by F. Jacques, *Dialogues. Recherches logiques sur le dialogue*, Paris, Puf, 1979

¹⁵ J.-L. Marion, *Etant donné*, Puf, Paris, 2005

¹⁶ The semantic structure of the word "encounter" presents itself a sort of antinomy, by putting together the preposition en- and the theme -counter. As a latin term, the preposition comes from in- (a preposition of motion, that deals with an idea of staying in a place or to move toward a place) and -contra (an adverb that expresses the idea of going against something). According to its semantic origins, "encounter" expresses the meanings 1) to stay in a place and to direct against something; 2) to move from a place to another, in order to direct against something.

¹⁷ In criticizing the Cartesian doubt (I can be sure only of the fact that I think and nothing else), Husserl inferred that the objects are constituted by consciousness and couldn't not exist without it, from the premisses that nothing can be conceived without being an object of consciousness.

¹⁸ F. Jacques, *Dialogues. Recherches logiques sur le dialogue*, Paris, Puf, 1979

“communicative strength” that allows us to go further the Sartrean theory of the *regard*¹⁹ as well as the Levinas’ doctrine of the *visage*²⁰, both totally centred on the second person, but also to make a deeper foundation of the I-Thou relation expressed by Buber in a very intuitive-theological way²¹. The main idea of relation as a communication moves from the fact that, the second person is given only in a discourse.

Proximity-distance. An encounter, as a relation, is a truly effort of moving closer toward the other person. In the same time, the only way to discover the second person and to found her/him, is given by the respect of the distance. We are not referring to a physical space, of course. What we mean is to put in evidence the role of the respect, the metaphysical-ethical distance by which we refers to the other in moral terms. The encounter reveals both the sides of the human interactions.

II. 1. The committment, a key word for both encounter and dialogue

II.1.1. The committment, the focus of the will

The committment doesn’t seem, at a first glance, a key-word of traditional moral philosophy. This theoretical domain, in fact, deals preferably with the concept of will, exploring its relationships with the acting person. What we actually want to present is the idea that committment cannot be reduced to the concept of will or to the general field of responsibility. Still, it might be said that committment, according to its irreducible presence, is the focus of the will and the acts of volition in general (choosing, deciding, intentionally moving toward something/somebody, etc).

The strongest argument in order to prove this statement comes from a careful view to the specific dinamic of human acts: before I perform an action, that’s to say, in order to let my will allow to do that act, I have to committ myself in performing that act. If I decide to buy a new car, I try to do of my best myself in finding the money to buy it, the garage to park it and so on. Without no doubt, it is the will to play – practically – a major role in acting, but it calls for the determination of the whole person to reach that goal. If we recognize to the willing ego a mood marked by disquiet and impatience, as Hannah Arendt underlined²², committment has to be seen as the balance that directs action to the scope (previously) desired and (subsequently) willed.

To put it differently, the committment is properly this determination involving all kinds of intentional acts, in order to get the result, after the deliberation of the self²³. If

¹⁹ Sartre, in *L’Etre et le Neant* (Paris, Gallimard, 1970), precises the terms of being-for-others in what he calls “look” (*le regard*). Someone catches us “in the act” of doing something humiliating.

²⁰ In *Totalité et Infini* (La Haie, Nijhoff, 1961), Lèvinas locates the basis of ethics in the face-to-face relation where the Other puts me in question. My obligation to the Other are not contracted by me. They not only precede any debts I incur, but also go beyond anything I could possibly satisfy.

²¹ The main theory of Buber’s doctrine is the conception of two two primary relationships: I-Thou and I-It. I-Thou is characterised by openness, reciprocity and a deep sense of personal involvement. The I confronts its Thou not as something to be studied, measured and manipulated, but as a unique presence that respond to the I in its individuality. Buber rejects the idea that people are isolate, autonomous agents as they encounter and transform each other.

²² She writes: “(...) the normal mood of willing ego is impatience, disquiet and worry (*sorge*), not (only) merely because of the soul reacting to the future in fear and hope, but also because the will’s project presuppose an I-can that is by no means guaranteed. The will’s worrying disquiet can be stilled only by I-can-and-I-do-this, by a cessation of its own activity and release of the mind from its dominance”. H. Arendt, *On Willing*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York, 1978, pag. 37

²³ The “proairesis” is the faculty of choice indicated by Aristote’s moral philosophy.

proairesis is the faculty of choice²⁴, commitment refers to moral strength to assume and perform the deliberate planning. That's why it cannot be confused with the concept of (moral) obligation, although obligation it is commonly used as synonym of it and it may be seen as a consequence of the commitment. In the idea of obligation, in fact, it is the sense of a duty to prevail²⁵. The word "commitment"²⁶, that emphasizes the idea of "making of our best for" getting a result, of undertaking more than feel obliged to do something. In order to have a better comprehension of the concept, we can refer to the Italian "impegno", or the French "engagement".

II. 1. 2. The encounter: a commitment to communicate

After having briefly examined the role of commitment inside the willing ego, we try to understand how this moral structure is so deeply involved with the interpersonal events we are dealing with (encounter, dialogue). Each encounter, from the simple act of looking at the other person, calls for the commitment. In which way? Let's reflect:

- 1) in the instant I see another person, and I want to look at her/him, I have to determine myself in looking at her/his eyes, showing my intentions (a simple look, a greeting, etc). I have, in other way, to commit myself to express what I want.
- 2) the person who looks at me, now, after having crossed the movement of my eyes, may decide to accept or to refuse to turn to me. In any case, she/he cannot be indifferent to my attitude toward her/him. It is committed to an answer.

In these cases the commitment presents its two main faces: it is an effort of the whole person in order to perform a willed-intentional act, followed by a sense of (moral) obligation. Indeed, all the human acts deal with commitment. In what way is commitment specifically linked to the encounter? We argue that this moral component – in the encounter – is basically linked to communication. The commitment, in other words, in such an event, is always a commitment to communicate. It depends on the fact that an encounter is related to the domain of interpersonal events; as a relation, it opens mutually to the other and produces an interaction based on communication. To come back to the previous example, the look I show to the other person is an expression, it expresses a meaning, it may be otherwise considered a question posed to whom I'm looking at. Vice versa, the other person is called (and committed) to give an answer to me. It might be clearer in what sense we said that 1) the encounter involves communication and 2) the specific commitment of any interpersonal encounter is a commitment to communicate. We can understand why an encounter preludes to a wide range of communicative events, from the conversation to the silence: it is – we argue – the starting point of communication itself. And the dialogue? What we intend to prove is that dialogue is "discourse"²⁷ that becomes commitment", that's to say, it is the highest communicative frame in any interpersonal relation.

²⁴ "(...) in the sense of preference between alternatives-one rather than another", in H. Arendt (1978), pag. 60.

²⁵ A sense of duty, we precise, that comes from outside or from inside the human consciousness.

²⁶ A Latin rooted word, from cum-mittere, to put together.

²⁷ The sense we attribute to the term "discourse" is larger than the one given by Benveniste ("language in so far as it can be interpreted with reference to the speaker, to his or her spatio-temporal location, or to other such variables that serve to specify the localized context of utterance") in his *Problems in General Linguistics* (1971). In a phenomenological perspective, discourse has a more general sense ("any piece of language longer – or more complex – than an individual sentence", from *The Oxford Companion of Philosophy*, pag. 202)

II. 1. 3. The dialogue: a commitment made discourse

At the beginning of the *Timaeus*, one of the main Plato's *Dialogues*, Socrates asks to his friend Timaeus where is the fourth man of the company ("One, two, three, but where is the fourth, my dear Timeus?")²⁸. We must pay a careful attention to this question, not a mere curiosity to give dramatic pathos to the scene, but something more essential. What Socrates underlines it is the absence of one of those persons who have committed to dialogue together. It happened the day before, at Socrates' home, where had been decided to examine the problem of the constitution of the State. Socrates is upset not because the dialogue is going to be made among four persons and not five. His disappointment comes from the fact that someone has not respected the commitment. Moving from the prologue of the *Timaeus*, we can see that dialogue is commitment at least in four senses:

- 1) because it requires the total commitment of the participants in doing of their best in reasoning, until the truth is emerged from the dialectic *polemos*;
- 2) because any dialogue is focused on a specific issue; in the case of *Timaeus* it was dealing with a political question; a dialogue between a father and a son it might refer to the difficulty of understanding, for example; from this point of view, a dialogue cannot be confused with a conversation, to which sometimes is compared;
- 3) last but not the least, each dialogue demands a particularly linguistic commitment based on the exchange of questions and answers, opinions and criticism;
- 4) this exchange has to be mutual: it calls to the commitment of reciprocity.
- 5)

This few lines let us understand how far is dialogue from other kinds of phenomena belonging to the domain of communication. Dialogue is "a commitment made discourse" because it involves both the subject of the discourse, the content of discourse, the making of the discourse, the results of this so committed communication. If we would cancel commitment from dialogue, we'd face something completely different: a conversation, may be, marked by a more free attitude.

Conclusions

We've reached the following conclusions:

- The appeal for the social dialogue, despite its internal frailty (one thing is an invitation for the dialogue, another thing is performing a dialogue), has a peculiar pragmatic strength, because it identifies the partners of the dialogue and calls them to assume their responsibility;
- This is a very important frame, we argue, both from a theoretical and political point of view, because a) it reveals the main role played by the moral implications inside a performative utterance and 2) because it proves that also the unsuccessful efforts (and those that seem devoted to a potential success) are useful in the making of the dialectic confrontation;

²⁸ Εἷς, δύο, τρεῖς: ὁ δὲ τεταρτὸς ἡμῖν, ὦ φίλε Τιμαίε, ποῦ τῶν χθες μὲν δαιτυμόνων, τὰ νῦν δὲ ἐστιατοπόων, Platonis Opera, Oxford Classical Texts, Tomus IV, Oxonii e typographeo claredoniano, 1992, I a.

- In this sense, it has to be appreciated and welcomed any public invitation for the dialogue; we defend this attitude because it does not depend on an idealistic-optimistic point of view, but, as we tried to argue, it lies upon the very essence of the dialogue itself (an interpersonal event linked with the encounter and the moral commitment);
- The appeal for the dialogue reveals, above all, the role of the encounter as a pre-condition of each dialogue and the close relation existing between these two events (they both present an antinomic-paradoxal structure);
- A veritable dialogue can be performed only if the encounter of the partners has taken place; it doesn't simply mean to meet each other; it means to accept the other as a term of relation and communication;
- This special commitment, so deeply involved with the communication, become, in a veritable dialogue, the discourse itself.

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