

Dialogue: a Bohmian Experience

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A personal account of the flow of meaning, in which I moved through 'Wholeness, Thinking and Reality' - A participatory weekend exploring David Bohm's deep concern with communication and meaning. The presentations and Dialogues took place in the Knights Chamber, an aptly named venue for a noble meeting of minds.

The following extracts from the paper 'Dialogue A - Proposal', by David Bohm, Donald Factor and Peter Grant, give some important background for those unfamiliar with David Bohm's approach to Dialogue:

We are proposing a kind of collective inquiry not only into the content of what each of us says, thinks and feels but also into the underlying motivations, assumptions and beliefs that lead us to do so... In Dialogue a group of people can explore the individual and collective presuppositions, ideas, beliefs and feelings that subtly control their interactions. Our approach to this form of Dialogue arose out of a series of conversations begun in 1983 in which we inquired into David Bohm's suggestion that a pervasive incoherence in the process of human thought is the essential cause of the endless crises affecting mankind... We are using the word 'thought' here to signify not only the products of our conscious intellect but also our feelings, emotions, intentions and desires.

DAVID LORIMER began day one, **Communicating with Nature and the Cosmos**, by introducing the main theme of the weekend 'Wholeness, Thinking and Reality'. He spoke, among other things, about the wholeness and holistic nature of language and the necessity of developing the art of listening for real, creative, communication, that is, comprehending the flow of meaning.

In the presentation that followed, PROFESSOR BASIL HILEY elaborated on these ideas in a personal account of David Bohm's interest in language, communication and meaning. These concerns are clearly expressed in Bohm's paper, 'On the Failure of Communication Between Bohr and Einstein', co-authored with D.L.Schumacher:

The most relevant point concerning the discussions between Bohr and Einstein is that they did not communicate, in spite of serious efforts to do so... The main relevant point which can be summarized briefly is that physicists have not been in full communication; if each of those concerned can be aware of implicit judgements, his own and those of others, then full communication can begin.

After a brief hesitation the first Dialogue began in a flurry of conversation, as if the group had suddenly been untethered. However, within a few minutes some of the participants started pulling at the reins. They expressed their concern that the group was not actually engaging in Dialogue. The clarification of the process of Dialogue, 'meta-dialogue', which followed was often the focus of inquiry during the weekend. It revealed, among other things, how as a microcosm of larger culture Dialogue can 'disclose the impact of society on the individual and the individual's impact on society. It can display how power is assumed or given away and how pervasive are the generally unnoticed rules of the system that constitutes our culture', as described in 'Dialogue A - Proposal'.

Interestingly, the authors go on to say that 'it [Dialogue] is not concerned with deliberately trying to alter or change behaviour nor to get the participants to move toward a

predetermined goal. Any such attempt would distort and obscure the processes that the Dialogue has set out to explore... [However] a group of people invited to give their time and serious attention to a task that has no apparent goal and is not being led in any detectable direction may quickly find itself experiencing a great deal of anxiety or annoyance. This can lead to the desire on the part of some either to break up the group or attempt to take control and give it direction'.

My experience of an attitude I have often encountered while attempting to communicate is represented by the following drama, which was played out in the landscape of my imagination.

A man was swimming among a flock of brown ducks, which were paddling along and gently bobbing up and down on the sea. Suddenly there was a terrible commotion. Some of the ducks began flapping and quacking wildly, 'shark! shark!', they cried. Sure enough, heading straight towards the group, weaving slowly and silently through the deep, was a vast dark menacing shadow. Much to the man's concern, although not altogether to his surprise, the beast began to surface directly below him. His feelings of dread, however, quickly turned to those of sadness when he found himself face to face not with a shark but with a distressed, entangled dolphin, blind, and close to death from suffocation.

Our commitment to communication is often very superficial, little more than a paddle. We are frightened of exploring the depths, afraid of what we might find there. We employ all kinds of strategies to avoid confronting these fears. So we learn to dread the very aspects of ourselves that could help us bring an end to conflict. We are hiding from our own light.

HENRI BORTOFT gave a brief introduction to Goethe's method of scientific observation. The group then repaired to the garden to, I believe, explore the relationship between so called 'outer' phenomenal 'objects' and 'inner' conscious experience. This exploration of observation was, appropriately, followed by PAAVO PYLKKANEN'S presentation on the art of thinking.

These presentations brought together, as needs must for our theme, the unbroken wholeness of the world and thinking as phenomena, bringing to mind the questionable understanding of the meaning of 'objective observation', which predominates among the scientific community. Rudolf Steiner, who was particularly interested in Goethe's science of wholeness, points out, simply: 'Naïve consciousness overlooks thinking in its considerations of things perceived'.

On day two, **Communicating with Self and Other**, DONALD FACTOR spoke of how the flow of meaning, which takes place in real communication, is restricted by a pervasive incoherence in the process of thought. This inevitably leads to the failure of communication, perpetuating and proliferating human conflicts. He also clarified the nature of Dialogue, describing it as a river of meaning flowing, around and through the participants, from incoherence to coherence. A course toward the reconciliation of self and other.

Drawing on an analogy from computer systems WILLIAM VAN DEN HEUVEL ascribed the incoherence in the process of thought as virtual viruses, suggesting that everyday wakeful consciousness is a kind of virtual reality, a fragmented world of virtual coherence generated by bad ideas.

During the Dialogues people increasingly expressed their concern about the importance of acknowledging and sharing our feelings, the art of feeling. Some people spoke particularly about fear and the difficulty of maintaining attention to intense emotions; something which lies at the very heart of Dialogue.

In summary someone said, 'To *be* means to communicate dialogically', Dialogue being the conscious experience of the psychological evolution from doing - unconscious unity - to being - conscious unity - when self and other are known to be united and one.