

Dialogue, Ethics and The Aesthetic Worth of Life

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The Dialogue¹

The ones who dictate and act for their own survival regardless of the existence of otherness soon realize, often too late, that there cannot be such a survival. To realize this is simply to understand the nature of the *dialogue*. The principle is at work in all fields and at all levels. The issue at stake is thus to find ways of relating to nature and fellow humans that both acknowledge and allow the complementary and reciprocal character of such a relationship – a sort of equilibrium made of differences and sharing in order to handle the inferno, inexorability, and creativity of the spiral of life.

To highlight the primacy of the role played by the dialogue for a better life comes indeed from the intimate conviction that *if more people understood the nature of the dialogue there would be fewer problems in the world*. To many, this statement is self-evident. Why, then, are there so many problems in the world?

A predicament, a tragedy, or a disaster perceived as such occurs when one's will or the force of things becomes so overwhelming that it threatens the lives of those whose consciousness makes them realize their plight. In other words, the problems of the world stem from human beings' inability to see that their survival depends on their willingness to negotiate with *otherness*, be it nature or other fellow humans. To negotiate with otherness does not mean to relate to someone or something outside of ourselves as a means for self-interest or to recover our own lost unity to the detriment of others.

For Ralph Harper in *The Seventh Solitude* (1965),

We have a double responsibility: to explore the consequences of a radical nihilism, and to try to recover the nostalgia for unity, justice, and earth. On the whole, more artistic and philosophical effort has been spent on the first, and too little on the second.²

Whether the plague of radical nihilism has affected us equally all over the world is obviously questionable; whether there have ever been unity and justice in this world also remains to be seen. But there is some truth in Harper's saying.

Insofar as we understand unity as a binding in the making between differences and not as a totality of sameness; insofar as a just world means a place where we do all we can to eradicate

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² Ralph Harper, *The Seventh Solitude: Man's Isolation in Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, and Nietzsche* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1965).

absolute suffering; and insofar as to recover the nostalgia for earth means to be attentive again to what we belong, then, yes, there is perhaps nothing wiser than to acknowledge that we do have that responsibility.

In a democracy of some sort it is not only up to politicians and decision makers to create the right conditions that guaranty responsible freedom. Those who believe – or are made to believe – in a Guide who holds the key to resolving the problems of a broken world, of injustice and the environment, are either dangerous actors or innocent victims. The history of humanity and the present world are unfortunately replete with such examples. It is for each of us to act concretely by way of an innocence that overcomes the horror of the self and yet lets the person breathe; it is for each of us to find ways of channeling those energies without destroying the place where we live. No individual or politician has the power to create the best of all possible worlds. To believe so is simply to misunderstand what it means to be a person who lives in a community.

The best of all possible worlds, as Vladimir Jankélévitch once wrote in *Le Pardon* (Forgiveness, 1967),³ is the least bad. It must be a world made for better things; it must be a world where people relate to each other as persons willing to relinquish part of themselves to be enriched by otherness; it must be a world where communities learn from each other, not in order to preserve themselves, but to be renewed by what will no longer be perceived as unwelcome or even simply unfamiliar. Needless to say, one of the conditions for such a world in the making is mutual trust, which itself very much depends on how life in the community is organized, or how communities are made to relate to each other. This is the stuff of political life to which, in an ideal world, every single person should be given the chance to contribute without fearing the diktat of correctness or being subdued by coercive force in whatever form and at all levels.

From a philosophical standpoint, any suggestion that dialogical thinking inexorably smacks of ideology is simply too grotesque for words. To highlight the fundamental of the dialogue is no attempt to build an ideology as if the ability to grasp its essence could bring some kind of salvation. Any idea of promised land of the dialogue would lead to disillusion, frustrations and ultimately conflicts – in other words, precisely the opposite to what the practice of the dialogue strives to achieve. Each time we think or express ourselves in a dialogical fashion, we become more aware of what the dialogue can do as well as of its limitations. Each time the dialogue takes place it leaves a trace that contributes to the shaping of what some might call the *essence* of the dialogue, but what may be more appropriate to call its *fundamental*.

The dialogue *endures* as in Martin Heidegger's *wesen* that he expounded in his *Einführung in die Metaphysik* (Introduction to metaphysics, 1953);⁴ the dialogue pursues its course each time it comes into presence and shapes its own essence that we can recognize from what remains each time it is experienced. Its shape may be renewed but, as long as one can see the relevance of its ethical primacy, it is worth to grasp and bear in mind what constitutes the fundamental of the dialogue.

The *essential-ist* does not think this way. The essentialist is the one who refuses to accept that

³ Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Le pardon* (Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1967) [*Forgiveness*, t rans. Andrew Kelley, The University of Chicago Press, 2005].

⁴ Martin, Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics [Einführung in die Metaphysik]*, trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (New Heaven: Yale University Press, 2014).

essences ought to be thought in retrospect. The essentialist is the one who thinks in terms of essences prior to looking at their traces. The essentialist does not see that the concrete particularity of the trace is a *place* that allows essences to manifest themselves, implying constitutive reciprocity by the same token. Far from being innocent, the essentialist does not allow the alleged sempiternal essence to be seen in a new light. In other words, the essentialist seeks to preserve what is seen as the immutable universal dimension of essences to which individuals should be subsumed regardless of their ethical relevance. Like all practices in the making the dialogue does not follow a guide; nor does it seek to impose itself by shouting *Listen to me! I know where to go!* The life of the dialogue is about *meeting*, as it was for Martin Buber.

As already mentioned, the dialogue can take many shapes, and here is one of Buber's wonderful quote about the fundamental of the dialogue, this time between the informed self and the transforming other:

Here is an infallible test. Imagine yourself in a situation where you are alone, wholly alone on earth, and you are offered one of the two, books or men. I often hear men prizing their solitude, but that is only because there are still men somewhere on earth, even though in the far distance. I knew nothing of books when I came forth from the womb of my mother, and I shall die without books, with another human hand in my own. I do, indeed, close my door at times and surrender myself to a book, but only because I can open the door again and see a human being looking at me.⁵

The dialogue is a working field without immutable fences. The one who thinks in dialogue does not tell us *which* way to take, but rather shows us *how* to find a way to a better life in a world made of differences and similarities. Undeniably, the way of the dialogue can take an infinite number of shapes. This is not to suggest that we should aim at a *synthesis of identification* from describing those instances of dialogue taking place from different spatial and temporal perspectives as in Edmund Husserl's *Ideen* (Ideas § 41, 1913)⁶ – a synthesis of identification that would lead to some transcendental idea and *apodictic* awareness of the dialogue.

We certainly have to look at what the dialogue did, does, and can do, but insofar as its metaphysical essence gives way to its ethical concreteness. The *idea* of the dialogue prepares the ground for its *ideology*; the fundamental of the dialogue must remain concretely ethical.

Cultural Formations

The issue is therefore ethical and is all the more vital when it comes not only to understanding but also experiencing *cultural formations*, that is to say the ways cultures become apparent and ultimately identifiable. What is meant here by *culture* is a particular manifestation of human achievement in the

⁵ Martin Buber, *Meetings: Autobiographical Fragments*, trans. Maurice Friedman (London: Routledge, 2001), 72-73.

⁶ Edmund Husserl, *Ideen: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology* [*Ideen zu einer reinen Phenomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie*, 1913], trans. W. R. Boyce Gibson, (London: Collier, 1962), § 41.

arts, languages, forms of expression (whether secular or religious), and customs of all kinds including political ones. The dialogue, in this context, means therefore a mode of relationship that lets cultural formations unfold by bringing together human beings and, for example, their natural environment, their historical past, traditions, external cultural influences, contemporary trends, other communities, or simply other persons in conversation.

The question of cultural identity formation is a very sensitive one, very often because it is misunderstood or intentionally misused. The idea of identity is too frequently used as a political weapon for cultural domination. In other circumstances, however, it can simply be a means for recognition and therefore for survival under the threat of the dominant culture. Thus, the difficult question is not so much *What is identity?* but rather *What should we do with identity?* Or, to put it in more philosophical terms, *Shouldn't questions appertaining to the metaphysics of identity give way to questions about its ethical condition?* In a sense, identity is no more than a device that enables us to come close to perceiving the unperceivable, the in-itself of things, or, simply, the inner self. We assume that this perceptual device is as *identical* as one can possibly imagine to the inner nature of things or the inner self of persons. Hence, the too often misguided argument against any attempt to work out what identity is: as inner selves and things in-themselves cannot be grasped since they are no more than forms of motivation, desire, or will – the argument goes – it is pointless to seek to pin identity down. Still, if identity amounts indeed to no more than wrapped up emptiness, life without identity amounts to emptiness without form – in other words, meaninglessness. There is no inner nature of identity, only lenses that enable us to see more clearly what is in-itself blurred or unsubstantial, what is felt density or dilation, or, even further, emptiness.

In actual facts, the only possible *in-itself* is emptiness, and human beings have found different ways to handle the matter. The worst-case scenario shows individuals, groups, or even nations impose their own lenses onto others to be seen more clearly, or simply for everyone to identify the same thing. The alleged wonders of cultural identity *as such* for the sake of particularity, homogeneity, or communicative harmony become the will to power at work, thus ignoring the mutually enriching relational dynamics between self and otherness. This is where metaphysics becomes irrelevant and gives way to ethics. To use cultural identity as a means for an end is always the symptom of an unbalance between differences. Opulence and survival become, in this case, the two poles of the struggle for identity – the latter very often ensuing from the former. In any respect, what human beings have been capable of in the course of history for the sake of identity is quite baffling. The drive has been either to achieve sameness, or else to preserve uniqueness – in many cases with destructive effects.

There is no meaningful life without identity, but unless we understand that the existence of identities depends on our ability and willingness to be renewed from each other, in dialogue, there will be coercion, intolerance and conflicts. Needless to say, this dialogical way needs time to be learned and practiced, an increasing challenge for all of us in a techno-world where speed and forgetfulness leave little room for memory, protension, and therefore attentiveness.

Dialogical Aesthetics

Artistic experience can be seen in many ways to be intrinsically dialogical: it is an affair of appeals and responses. The words of the poet or the sounds of the musician emerge from the invisible backgrounds of history, culture, and society to resonate both against and with the world of the one who is willing to listen. This resonance is the response that throws light on the words and sounds whose worlds become thereby apparent. In this sense, dialogue is the place of artistic experience. Even more, dialogue is what makes history, culture and society appear in a slightly different way each time the work of art calls for our readiness to be transformed by it.

This availability, however, comes at a price; Nicholas Davey suggests in *Unquiet Understanding* (2006) that what we should be willing to risk in becoming open to each other, and therefore to other worlds, also implies that we accept to put ourselves in a difficult position.⁷ This is indeed a fundamental condition for the dialogue to be a renewing experience. But for the dialogue to remain healthy, it must rely on a principle of reciprocal freedom and trust – the only shields against coercion and meaninglessness. Moreover, there is the temptation to see in the dialogue nothing but a good will hiding a disguised form of instrumental reason. This is perhaps the crux of the misunderstanding, for the *prose of the world*, to use an expression that Maurice Merleau-Ponty would hold dear, is the voice of the dialogue.⁸

The Aesthetic Worth of life

The fundamental of the dialogue also allows life to be worth living.

The world has never been – and will never be – short of suffering, and there will always be good reasons to get angry and cry out. Suffering can be caused by the forces of nature, by human beings, or by both indistinguishably. There are those who believe that a truer and therefore better world allegedly exists out there, and that human beings should be made to deserve it, for example by behaving morally, or by being subsumed to the established image of such a world. There are those who believe that, as human beings are partly responsible for the suffering caused in our world, a justified solution is to remove the cause of the problem. There are those who believe that all must be done to reach or realize a better world, meaning of course that the end justifies the means. Those are the ones who are prepared to cause suffering for the *idea* of a world without suffering. They would either punish fellow human beings who do not deserve the better world, or else sacrifice them to reach or realize such a world. This is where ethnic, political, religious, or cultural violence begins. And this is where there is ground for offering dialogical alternatives to any form of political, religious, and cultural *ideology*. This is what French philosopher Albert Camus suggested with his conception of “the rebel” (*l’homme révolté*).

Camus’s rebel, however, is not what we usually understand by the word. For him, the rebel worth of true consideration is not the revolutionary who destroys and sacrifices whatever or whoever

⁷ Nicholas Davey, *Unquiet Understanding* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2006).

⁸ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *La prose du monde* (Paris: Les Éditions Gallimard, 1969) [*The Prose of the world*, trans. John O’Neill, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973].

obstructs the path to the image of a better world. The rebel is not the one who yells out of craving for nihilistic subversion with no viable and responsible alternative to offer. The true rebel is the one who stands against injustice, in all its forms, even if it is caused by ideologies *with good intentions*. Camus' rebel was set against any totalitarianism, understood as the logical form of ideology. Blinded by its own image, ideology remains fundamentally unethical and thus capable of the worse.

Camus' obvious totalitarian targets were the mass murders committed by fascism and communism. He understood that to live in a civilized way could not be achieved by seeking to realize in its totality one's abstract conceptions of happiness, equality, or redemption, regardless of the concrete nature of existence. Camus saw the danger there is in any attempts to change the world according to such ideas. Instead, he advocated to simply improve life. The true rebel is the one who offers ways to overcome the injustice caused by those whose abstract conceptions of justice allow them to have blood on their hands. The rebel is not a revolutionary. The rebel is the one who makes life with other human fellows possible: in Camus' words, "I am rebelling, therefore we are" (*Je suis révolté, donc nous sommes*, 1951).⁹

There is indeed something truly concrete in Camus' ethics; there is, in other words, something truly human. It is pointless and even dangerous, as history shows, to seek to resolve for good the tensions and contradictions of life. Those make the stuff of human life. However, Camus' skepticism in the midst of the absurdity of the world was no advocacy for irresponsible freedom, but instead of following and imposing ideological recipes for a better world; instead of eliminating or punishing those who do not fit into the image of such a world in its totality, we should rather concretely improve life. Furthermore, the inexorable absurdity of the world should not lead to despair, for the worth of life is aesthetic; it is the worth of beauty, beyond good and evil, and beyond the values of our world.

Camus' sense of beauty is not yet again another moral value that would dictate how to conduct our lives for a better world. Beauty *makes* the worth of life, not as a model to follow or to impose on others; but for each of us and for all of us to experience what it means to be human, responsible and free. There is nothing more profoundly ethical than this. Camus was born a hundred years ago but his ideas are eternal. The forms of totalitarianism have changed with varying scales and degrees of violence – be they ethnic or political, religious or cultural, social or economical – but the despair and suffering remain.

To those who want to make a better world the message is that there is no end that can possibly justify suffering, for the ones who use any means in the name of the good cause, whether social or spiritual, betray their own conscience.

Don't hurt me, don't coerce me, don't displace me, don't spy on me – just be a friend so that we can enjoy the worth of our lives. That is the dialogical attitude *par excellence*; the one that accepts the rules of the dialogical game of appeals and responses.

⁹ Albert Camus, *L'Homme révolté* (Paris: Les Éditions Gallimard, 1951) [*The Rebel*, trans. Anthony Bower, New York: Vintage Books, 1956].

The Concrete Life of The Dialogue

Being an affair of appeal and response, the aesthetic worth of life also brings in a refined form of happiness, at all levels, in all social contexts, regardless of gender, politics, or religious beliefs.

Swiss philosopher and poet Henri-Frédéric Amiel, most well-known for his monumental *Journal Intime* (1882), saw reciprocity and the act of giving as pre-conditions for happiness.¹⁰ In *Grains de Mil* (1854) he wrote: “Happiness is bound to be reciprocal and is seldom found without giving.”¹¹ We could go further by saying that human life itself depends on our reciprocal willingness to give; and that the nature of the dialogue is precisely to allow that reciprocal willingness to be available to other people and other worlds. In other words, the dialogue is the concrete guarantor of human life. Dictators and decision makers who have little regard for other people and ideas should realize that their own time-bound selfhood depends on their willingness to give up part of themselves; the same applies to civilizations understood here as particular ways of life, cultures and societies defined at specific times and places.

There is as a matter of fact no such a thing as an eternal civilization, and those who have tried to impose their values on the rest of the world or other fellow human beings in the name of an eternity in which we must trust, soon realize (or will realize) at their own expense that their own existence owes to the existence of others. This realization may be called *concrete self-awakening* and is at work in the dialogue. Far from being morally normative or a politically correct trading of opinion, the dialogue enacts one of the fundamental principles, not only of life, but also of existence as a whole; the fact that every single entity in this world exists through its interactions with other entities to constitute a dynamic whole. The question of course is to find ways of channeling the energies involved so that entities are not destroyed, or coerced, to the benefit of other entities. Again, this is what the dialogue allows.

When Lao Tzu wrote in the *Tao Te Ching* “If you want to be given everything, give everything up,”¹² he invoked the nature of things and a way of coping with it; he invoked the inexorability of a world made of complementary differences taking shape in an endless cycle of interactions; he invoked the need to be concretely awakened to this nature of things so that we find the way to let “the ten thousand things” of the world be, including ourselves and otherness.

Civilizations, nations, communities and individuals are only particular instances of these ten thousand things. The sky, the earth, and the environment; objects of all kinds and ideas take shape because of how they relate to each other. Then, every so often, human beings find the need to explain, define, or determine these entities so that they can recognize them easily as part of the ten thousand things that make up our world; or simply to have a better life – for example, we need to understand nature to be able to use it as a reserve for our own consumption; we need to understand the laws of physics to make machines that will enhance productivity, and so on. When the question only concerns human beings, we talk about the identity of a civilization, a nation, a community, or an individual. But just as there is no sky, earth, environment, object, or idea in itself, there is no such a thing as a

¹⁰ Henri-Frédéric Amiel, *Fragments d'un Journal intime* (Paris: n.p., 1882).

¹¹ Henri-Frédéric Amiel, *Grains de Mil* (Paris: Joël Cherbuliez, 1854).

¹² *Tao Te Ching*, trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Harper Perennial, 2006), 22.

civilization, a nation, or a community in itself; there are no individuals in themselves, either.

Cultures and persons always shine in *some* light – the light of *otherness*. This is where lies the ethical nature of existence, and to become aware of how much the selfhood of a civilization or an individual owes to something or someone outside of itself or oneself is surely a vital way of channeling those energies involved in identity formations without begetting destruction and coercion. This is, once again, what the dialogue can facilitate. Cultural dialogues have therefore a very concrete dimension indeed; they allow all the parties involved to last by being renewed. In other words, cultural dialogues are the concrete guaranty of existence in its diversity. They guaranty the reciprocity necessary for the multitude of identity formations that make up the world; and they also guaranty that the act of giving up or emptying some of ourselves will not be used for obliteration or overpowering.

There is thus an indispensable element needed for the dialogue to be possible at all; that element is mutual trust. Another way of putting it would be to say that the dialogical dynamics could only work between human entities, communities, or people who accept the rules of the game. In the political field, this amounts to saying that the principles of democracy only work in a democracy. What emerges here is one of the most difficult issues to handle when it comes to justifying the dialogue in all circumstances, at all levels, and in all cultural settings. To justify the dialogue by explaining it in theoretical terms when one does not have the responsibility to find solutions in real life situations is an easy task. Theory and rhetoric can always be deployed to sound correct.

But what if a government massacres – or simply sidelines physically or culturally – some of its people in the name of national unity, when it is obvious that the reason is to maintain the power of the self? What if a nation takes control of or threatens neighbouring areas – an attitude that so-called mainland soils very often have with “their” islands – in the name of absolute unifying historical origin, cultural authenticity, or territorial integrity, when the reasons are obviously economic and strategic self-interests, namely the power of the self. And what if an individual is about to be put to death because of religious blasphemy or difference?

We cannot answer these questions without considering the role played by the timescale. In order to avoid those predicaments, dialogical aspirations must be transmitted throughout a very long and careful formation process; very long because it must start from childhood and careful because a grave mistake would be to confuse the concrete awakening of dialogical ethics with the unbearable coercion of normative morality. But in the mean time, when massacres, murders and threats are inexorably taking place here and now, what is left for the dialogue to do? It would be tempting to follow again Lao Tzu who said, “Give evil nothing to oppose and it will disappear by itself.”¹³

This is indeed in the spirit of the dialogue, but how many predicaments should we allow to happen before evil disappears by itself? When some people are massacred, coerced, or threatened here and now by their ruling class or estranged communities – and there is no shortage of instances of such totalitarian methods both on the right and left sides of the political spectrum and across some areas of ethnic or religious fundamentalism both historically and at present – shouldn’t the conditions for dialogue be forced upon its enemies, unavoidably in a non-dialogical way? Shouldn’t the ones who are about to be murdered be rescued by force or be given the means of self-defense?

¹³ Ibid., 60.

We can ask the question differently: should we passively collaborate with ethnic, ideological and religious cleansing by letting final solutions, Gulags, cultural revolutions, or other inquisitorial purges take place in the name of the principles of the dialogue? These are, needless to say, dangerous waters as, to use an expression that Camus would have held dear, the end should never justify the means, as further predicaments may arise.

Some regimes that present themselves as truly democratic have, on some occasions, justified the unjustifiable means they used – such as large scale bombing including atomic one – to achieve the end they wanted to achieve, albeit the intention was to create the right conditions for the dialogue in particular sensitive, unsettled, and hostile places. The spirit of the dialogue cannot work if blindly applied to all circumstances; the dialogue is by nature neither an ideology nor a moral code.

From time to time the dialogue needs to be rescued in non-dialogical manners. At the end of the day, if someone or something imminently threatens my life there is little chance that the dialogue will save me on time. Admittedly, on the scale of civilizations, nations, or communities, the picture becomes immediately far more complex because the factuality of reality must be fully known to make sure that a desperate act of self-defense or intervention to set a dialogical life-saving environment is not an act of aggression, or interference for self-interest. In a democratic environment, people are supposed to trust their democratically elected government to make the right judgments and decisions. But we know too well that the same governments can misjudge and take the wrong decisions precisely because the spirit of dialogue they what to instill is imposed as an ideology that suits their own interests. There is that risk; nonetheless, what can we suggest at the very moment when life is being destroyed?

The importance of considering the time-scale and circumstances when it comes to instilling the spirit of the dialogue is not to be overlooked. The concreteness of cultural dialogue, that force that allows the different parties involved to exist through mutual consideration and renewal, is not something we can become aware of in the course of a meeting. It takes many years, if not a lifespan, or even several generations, for this realization to become a cultural instinct. If only those who have little regard for other people and other worlds could realize that cultural dialogue, far from being a threat to their selfhood, is on the contrary the way that selfhood can be renewed and therefore strengthened. And there is here an interesting analogy to make with the way we have been relating to nature and the environment, as previously mentioned. It is indeed revealing that we have recently started to acknowledge the need to establish a dialogue with the natural environment as soon as we have realized that our existence was being threatened because of our monological attitude.

In a similar vein and for the same reasons, isn't it about time that communities and individuals who have totalitarian aspirations come to realize that their selfhood is made of nothing, nothing at all without other worlds, cultures, or religions – that is, without *otherness*.

A selfhood that does not awaken to this matter of fact will not be able to live with otherness and will spread misery instead of the kind of happiness that the aesthetic worth of life can bring.

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