



Bohm

On Dialogue

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"People say, 'All we really need is love.' If there were universal love, all would go well. But we don't appear to have it. So we have to find a way that works."

David Bohm, On Dialogue

"One of my scientific 'gurus'."

The Dalai Lama

"Underlying many of the problems of humanity is our inability to even talk about our problems. *On Dialogue* offers tools that facilitate a true exchange of ideas between people."

Paavo Pylkkänen

"An openness to the irreducible nature of the whole in both science and art summarizes the timeless philosophical stance of David Bohm. The delight to have *On Creativity* and *On Dialogue* made into Routledge Classics has special relevance to our era of fracture, contention, and public duplicity."

Lynn Margulis, University of Massachusetts-Amherst



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David
Bohm

On Dialogue

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PREFACE TO THE ROUTLEDGE CLASSICS EDITION

Re-reading today David Bohm's essay "On Dialogue" is, for me, like unwrapping a precious present. So, it was not only an honor but a wonderful opportunity to be asked to write a preface to this new edition of Bohm's classic article.

I first met David and Saral Bohm at MIT in mid-1989, during the time period when the talks that were the basis for this essay were being given. We talked for several hours about dialogue. I have often wished that the meeting had been recorded, because I have the distinct recollection of hearing so much that made deep sense and knowing that I would remember little. The fine grains of David's perceptions could not be held by the coarse weave of my mind. My feeling is that much of what was elusive to me then is laid out here and hopefully many of us are now more prepared for it.

Since that meeting, there have been many serious efforts to practice dialogue in complex settings,¹ and the idea has

¹ The research done through MIT and in the SoL network is presented in W. Isaacs (1999) *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together: A Pioneering Approach to Communicating in Business and in Life*, New York: Currency.

gained considerable cachet. Meetings of many sorts are billed as dialogues: “stakeholder dialogues,” “cross-sector dialogues,” “civic dialogues.” For example, when Kofi Annan and his colleagues established the UN Global Compact to foster collaboration among corporations to elevate social, environmental, and labor standards around the world, one key element was “policy dialogue” encouraging corporate, labor and civil society organizations “to pursue innovative solutions to complex problems.”² Within many organizations, serious efforts have been made to integrate dialogue practices into day-to-day operations – for example, simple practices like “check-ins” and “check-outs:” hearing, in turn, each person’s thoughts and feelings in a group at the outset or closing of meetings. In one of the world’s largest multinational corporations, a senior vice president has hosted “agenda-less” dialogue meetings monthly for several years, as a way of signaling the need to nurture “collective leadership.”

All of this signals a growing recognition that the complex problems our organizations and societies face demand a deeper listening and a more open communication than has been the norm. “Win-lose” politics and hierarchical authority are simply not adequate for confronting global climate change, the growing gap between rich and poor, and the dilemmas of genetic technology. People “speaking at one another” will not foster the mutual understanding, shared aspirations, and networks of collaborative action needed. Alternatives must be found, both within and among institutions of all sorts.

This growing interest in dialogue is why the re-publication of this talk is so timely – especially if it leads to broader appreciation of what dialogue meant to Bohm and of what sorts of changes it might catalyze. For him dialogue was not just a better way to have more productive conversations, although he was supportive of this aim. It was not just a way to foster reflective-

² See www.globalcompact.org

ness, which he also endorsed. It certainly was not just a method for improving the effectiveness of businesses and other mainstream organizations, a goal about which he was deeply ambivalent, because he knew that helping such organizations become more effective often meant accelerating established and problematic patterns of global industrial development.

For Bohm, the “tacit ground” is what holds a society together, and here is where the changes he hoped to encourage must unfold. “Thought is emerging from the tacit ground,” he says, “and any fundamental change in thought will come from the tacit ground.” Repeatedly, he stresses that a society that works requires a “coherent” tacit ground, and that this is missing today. “Shared meaning is really the cement that holds society together, and you could say that the present society has very poor quality cement . . . The society at large has a very incoherent set of meanings. In fact, this set of ‘shared meanings’ is so incoherent that it is hard to say that they have any real meaning at all.”

Appreciating what real dialogue was about for Bohm starts with appreciating what he meant by incoherence. This is an unusual term for a social critic, even less for a social activist, but a natural one for a physicist. A laser generates extraordinary energy because of the coherence of the light, which may require no more generating power than an “incoherent” light bulb. But, what does this analogy mean in the social world?

In his talk, Bohm often returns to the challenge in dialogue of simply allowing multiple points of view to be. Our habits are so strong to defend our view, to agree with views that correspond with our own, and to disagree with those that differ, that simply allowing diverse views to stand can be almost impossibly difficult. “The thing that mostly gets in the way of dialogue,” he says, “is holding to assumptions and opinions, and defending them.” This instinct to judge and defend, embedded in the self-defense mechanisms of our biological heritage, is the source of incoherence.

Our personal meaning starts to become incoherent when it becomes fixed. The incoherence increases when past meaning is imposed on present situations. As this continues, yesterday's meaning becomes today's dogma, often losing much of its original meaningfulness in the process. When this happens collectively, societies become governed by shadows, hollowed out myths from the past applied as inviolate truths for the present. This leads to incoherence on a large scale, patterns of thinking and acting that separate people from one another and from the larger reality in which they are attempting to live.

Unchecked incoherence grows into absurdity. Bohm tells a story about a psychiatrist working with a disturbed young girl who refused to talk to anyone, until she finally exploded, telling him she would not talk to him "because I hate you." When he asked her how long she would continue to hate him, she said "forever." When he asked her "how long will you hate me forever?" the absurdity of her attitude suddenly hit her and she burst out laughing and the anger was broken. But absurdity widely shared by a culture may be less easy to see – like pretending that economies can continue to grow forever in material production (and waste) on a finite planet, or that unilateral approaches can achieve national security in a world with increasingly deadly and accessible weapons technologies, or that the pace of life can be speeded up indefinitely – as one teenager put it, "people running faster and faster to get to where no one wants to go."

Put differently, the core problem, Bohm realized, is that we do not know how to live together in a changing world. We only know how to live based on truths from the past, which today inevitably results in one group attempting to impose their truths on another. It is easy for us to see this in others – for example, in fanatical "terrorists", radical fundamentalists aimed at overthrowing modern democratic societies. But, how is this different from "democratic fundamentalists" seeking to impose their truth as the one right way to live? Bohm realized that defending core

beliefs and the resulting incoherence was endemic in the modern world. He tells a poignant story about Einstein and Bohr, two men who shared a warm friendship early in their lives but who could not speak with one another in their later years, “because they had nothing to talk about. They couldn’t share any meaning, because each one felt his meaning was true.” If such entrenchment can afflict two such brilliant minds, who among us is immune?

Conversely, collective coherent ways of thinking and acting only emerge when there is truly a flow of meaning, which starts with allowing many views, an approach that defensiveness precludes. But coherence is a way of living rather than a fixed state, and Bohm knew very well the challenge it represented.

First, as a scientist, Bohm appreciated that society’s incoherence cannot be divorced from the very Western scientific rationalism that we hold sacrosanct in the modern world. Although most scientists would decry the very notion of fundamentalism, the way the scientific establishment functions in the larger society belies scientists’ espoused openness. “In a way,” Bohm says, “science has become the religion of the modern age. It plays the role that religion used to play of giving us truth.” This intellectual fundamentalism is largely invisible to us because it is embedded deeply in cultural assumptions that most members of modern society share and which we do not know how to challenge. From our earliest schooling, we learn of scientists as the people who tell us “how things really work.” The problem, for Bohm, stems from the way contemporary science “is predicated on the concept . . . [of] arriving at . . . a unique truth. The idea of dialogue is thereby in some way foreign to the current structure of science, as it is with religion.” Bohm knew that the quest for “unique truth” carries the potential to divide rather than connect people. As Chilean biologist Humberto Maturana says, “when one human being tells another human what is ‘real,’ what they are actually doing is making a demand for obedience. They are asserting that they have a privileged view of reality.”

For Bohm, dialogue offered a different path to truth, indeed a different notion of truth. “We will never come to truth unless the overall meaning is coherent,” he says. Out of creating a larger field of more coherent shared meaning, truly new and penetrating understandings may emerge, often unexpectedly. “Truth does not emerge from opinions,” says Bohm, “it must emerge from something else – perhaps from a freer movement of this tacit mind.” He continues, “we have to get meanings coherent if we are to perceive truth, or to take part in truth.”

This odd phrase, “take part in truth,” points to, what seems to me, Bohm’s second foundational idea: what it means to understand wholes. Reductionist science has great power in understanding isolated things, and in applying this knowledge to create new things like new technologies. But its efficacy hinges on its being able to fragment or isolate its subject matter. It fails and may become actively dysfunctional when confronted by wholes, by the need to understand and take effective action in a highly interdependent context. This is why the modern world is full of increasingly stunning technological advances and an increasing inability to live together.

The fundamental problem here, according to Bohm, is that “the whole is too much. There is no way by which thought can hold the whole, because thought only abstracts; it limits and defines.” This idea of abstracting versus appreciating wholes was conveyed beautifully by Hebrew existentialist philosopher Martin Buber, in speaking of what it means to take in the whole of a person, to see a person as “a Thou.”³

If I face a human being as my Thou, . . . he is not a thing among things, and does not consist of things . . . Thus human being is not a He or She, bounded from every other He or She, . . . but

³ M. Buber, *I and Thou*, translated by Ronald Gregor Smith, Scribner Classics, Simon & Schuster, New York: 2000, 23–4.

with no neighbor, and whole in himself, he is Thou and fills the heavens.

Just as the melody is not made up of notes nor the verse of words nor the statue of lines, but these must be tugged and dragged till their unity has been scattered into these many pieces, so with the man (*mensch*) to whom I say Thou. I can take out from him the color of his hair, or of his speech, or of his goodness. I must continually do this. But each time he ceases to be Thou.

Bohm believed that the alternative way toward understanding a whole arises through participation rather than abstraction. “A different kind of consciousness is possible among us, a *participatory consciousness*.” In a genuine dialogue, “each person is participating, is partaking of the whole meaning of the group and also taking part in it.” This is not necessarily pleasant, as Bohm warns. The present state of the systems in which we live almost inevitably contains great pain as well as great beauty, deep anger as well as unconditional love. If we separate ourselves from whatever is within the whole, we cannot take part in it – and we return to abstracting, judging and defending: “I am not like that person,” or “he is bad and I am good,” or “she does not see what is happening and I do.”

Herein lies the first gateway to generating dialogue and moving toward a more coherent tacit ground. To take part in truth we must see our part in it. There are no “good guys” and “bad guys” separate from ourselves. As members of modern society, we all participate in creating the forces that give rise to what exists, both what we value and what we abhor. The poet Maya Angelou tells a story of her reconciliation and awakening. As a teenager, a member of her extended family raped her. Ultimately, coming to terms with this meant seeing that the emotions and violence that drove her rapist existed within her as well. When she tells this story, Angelou often ends by quoting

Terence Afar, an African brought to ancient Rome as a slave and then eventually freed, “I am a human being. Nothing that is human is foreign to me.” This is what it means to take part in truth.

In short, David Bohm’s basic aim was a different and more viable way of living together. He knew that, in a world of growing interdependence, people who cannot do this are headed inevitably toward escalating conflict. As a physicist, his life had been dedicated to understanding a participatory universe where meaning is continually unfolding. As a human being, he believed that the present crisis offered a unique opportunity to bring that same sort of understanding into the center of human affairs.

It is easy to dismiss Bohm as a romantic idealist – by his own assessment, he envisioned “a kind of culture which, as far as I can tell, has never really existed . . . (except perhaps) very long ago.” But my experiences over the past fifteen years with both the possibility and challenge of dialogue leads me to see him quite differently. I would call David Bohm an extreme realist. He knew that no society has ever faced the sort of global predicament we face, and that we are not likely to muddle through without radical changes in our way of being – together.

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