

The Conditions of Dialogue

Academy of Sciences, Moscow, October 6, 1993

Honorable Vice President of the Russian Academy of Sciences Vladimir Kudriatsev, respected professors, and friends: The distinction conferred upon me by the Russian Academy of Sciences at the session of the Scientific Council of the Latin American Institute on September 21 is of the greatest importance to me. Only a few days after receiving the news, I find myself here with you to express my gratitude for this recognition and to reflect upon the dialogue I have been holding over the course of several years with academics from a number of institutes in your country. This exchange, which we have carried out through personal contact, correspondence, and books, has demonstrated clearly the possibility of establishing a certain foundation of shared ideas, provided, as in this case, that the dialogue is rigorous and free of prejudices. In contrast, I would like to speak today about certain difficulties that can obstruct the free flow of dialogue in general and not infrequently lead it down blind alleys.

I have used the word “dialogue” almost in the Greek sense of *dialogos* and the later *dialogus*, which expresses the same idea and always implies an alternating conversation between people who express their ideas or emotions. But a dialogue, even when it meets the formal requirements, sometimes doesn’t work, and the interlocutors will fail to reach a full understanding of the subject under discussion. The philosophical and scientific form of thinking, unlike the dogmatic form, is essentially dialogic, and it bears a close relationship to that dialectic structure presented to us by Plato as an instrument for approaching truth. Contemporary scholars have once again begun reflecting on the nature of dialogue, especially since the introduction of Phenomenology and the formulation of the “problem of the Other,” whose most illustrious representative is Martin Buber. Collingwood had already made clear that a problem cannot be solved if it is not understood, and that it cannot be understood if the class of question it poses is not known. Question and answer take place within the hermeneutic dialogue, but no answer closes the circle—it only opens the circle to new questions that in turn require reformulation.

The thesis that I will defend today can be stated in the following way: *There can be no complete dialogue without a consideration of the pre-dialogic elements on which the need for the dialogue is based.* To illustrate this statement, let me use some everyday examples that involve me personally.

It sometimes happens that when I am asked to explain my thought in a lecture, a text, or a statement for the press, I have the sensation that both the words I use and the thread of my discourse are such that they can be understood without difficulty, and yet they do not “connect” with these listeners, readers, or members of the press. And these people are not in any worse condition to understand than many others with whom my discourse *does* connect. Naturally I am not talking about those disagreements that can arise regarding the proposals I formulate and the objections the other party may make—indeed, it seems that in that case there is a perfectly good connection. I have noted that kind of connection even in the midst of heated argument. No, I am talking about something more general, something that has to do with the *conditions* of dialogue itself (which would include this exposition—understanding it as a dialogue with another who accepts, or rejects, or doubts, my assertions). I have this sensation of non-connection most strongly when I can see that what I’ve explained has been understood, and yet the person goes on to ask the same question again and again, or focuses upon points unrelated to what has been said. It’s as though a certain vagueness, a certain lack of interest, accompanied their understanding of what I’ve said; as though their interest lay beyond (or closer at hand) than what has been expressed.

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Here we are taking *dialogue* to be a relationship of reflection or discussion between people, between parties. Without being overly rigorous, we might clarify certain conditions that are necessary if that relationship of dialogue is to exist or an explanation is to be reasonably followed. Accordingly, for a dialogue to be coherent both parties must: (1) agree on the *theme* to be discussed; (2) accord the theme a *similar degree of importance*; and (3) possess a *common definition* of the important terms to be used.

When we say that the parties need to agree on the theme of the dialogue, we are referring to a relationship in which each person takes into consideration the discourse of the other person. We should note that to define the subject does not mean that it cannot undergo some change over the course of the discussion, but in all cases each party must know at least minimally what it is that the other person is speaking about.

The next condition tells us that the parties must give the theme a similar weight or degree of importance. We are not necessarily talking about an exact congruence, but simply a similar quantification of the importance each places on the subject, because if one party holds that the subject is of primary importance, whereas for the other party it is trivial, then there may be agreement about the object under discussion, but not about the interest in or function of the discourse as a whole.

Finally, if the key terms of the discussion have different definitions for the two parties, this can have the result that the object of the dialogue, and even the subject dealt with, will be distorted.

If these three conditions are satisfied, then it is possible to advance and for the parties to be in reasonable agreement or disagreement with the sequence of arguments that are being expressed. But there are many factors that can hinder these conditions of dialogue from being met. I will limit myself to looking only at some of the pre-dialogical factors that affect the importance conferred on a given subject.

In order for a statement to exist, there must be a prior intention that allows the person to choose the terms and the relationship between them. It is not enough to say “no man is immortal” or “all rabbits are herbivorous” for the other person to understand what subject it is that I wish to consider. The intention that precedes the discourse sets the ambit, the universe, in which the propositions will be stated. And that universe is not genetically logical, it involves structures that are pre-logical, pre-dialogical. And the same applies to the person receiving the statement. The universe of discourse must coincide both for the person speaking and the recipient of that speech. Otherwise, we would say there was a non-coincidence in the discourse.

Until quite recently people thought that the conclusion derives from the interaction of the premises. And so one would say: “All men are mortal; Socrates is a man; therefore, Socrates is mortal.” And it was assumed that the conclusion derived from the foregoing terms, when in reality the person organizing these statements already had the conclusion in mind. There was, then, an intention launched toward a certain result, and that intention in turn allowed the person to choose his or her statements and terms. This is what occurs not only in everyday discussions, but even in science the discourse goes in the direction of an objective previously formulated as a hypothesis. In this way, when a dialogue is established, each party may have a different intention, aim for a different objective, and may even place a different overall level of importance on the subject. But that “importance” is not given by or in the theme itself—it is given by a whole set of prior beliefs, valuations, and interests that each party brings to the discussion.

For example, in taking “meaning in life” as the subject of their dialogue, two people might agree in the abstract that this is a theme of the greatest importance, and yet one of the parties might be convinced that treating this subject is of little use, that it will solve nothing, and that, lastly, it has no practical importance for daily life. That this skeptical interlocutor

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may nevertheless follow the arguments of the other party, or participate actively in the dialogue, is explained by other factors, but not by the subject itself, whose substantiality the first party has rejected from the outset. In this way, the pre-dialogic elements set not only the universe of the subject but also include the *intentions* of the parties, which in this case lay beyond (or this side of) the topic.

Of course, these pre-dialogical elements are also *pre-logical*, and act within the horizons of the era and of the society, even though individuals often mistake these simply as products of their own personal experiences and observations. And this creates a barrier that cannot easily be overcome until the sensibility of the age—that is, the historical moment in which we live—has changed. It is precisely for this reason that many contributions in the field of science and other areas of human activity have become accepted as being completely obvious and true only later on. But until we have arrived at that “later on,” those who offer these ideas and activities find themselves in a dialogic vacuum, and not infrequently facing a wall of hostility raised even at the possibility of their publicly discussing these new points of view. Once the initial turbulence has passed, and one or perhaps several new generations have made their way onto the stage of history, the importance of those contributions that were “ahead of their time” comes to be recognized by everyone, and people are surprised that those contributions were ever rejected, their importance ever denied or minimized.

Thus, when I express my thought (which does not coincide with certain beliefs, valuations, and interests belonging to the universe of the present age), I understand the disconnection that I encounter with many of my interlocutors, even those who in the abstract would appear to be in perfect agreement with me. In my work of disseminating Humanism I encounter these difficulties with some frequency. Even when one explains the ideas of New Humanism and does so clearly, that alone may not result in a satisfactory connection with many interlocutors, because there are still hindrances in the form of beliefs from prior stages that lead some listeners to place greater importance on questions or factors other than the human being. Of course, many people will say that they are “humanist,” because the word “humanism” can be simply ornamental, while it is clear that such people do not have any genuine interest in understanding the message or proposals of this current of thought and this social practice.

If one considers that any organization of ideas into a system is an ideology, and current fashion dictates “the end of ideologies,” then it is clear that systematic formulations of Humanism will tend not to be taken seriously. Instead, in a contradictory way, the preference will be for instant, piecemeal answers to problems that are global and general, and any systematic answers will seem to be overly broad generalizations. Although it happens, in this age of planetarization, that the fundamental problems we are living through are structural and global, people do not easily grasp this; therefore, we find ourselves facing an agglomeration of destructured answers that, by their very nature, lead only to further complications in a chain reaction racing out of control. This occurs, of course, because the economic interests of the privileged circles manage the world, and more than that because the vision of the world of this privileged few has taken hold even in the most wronged and underprivileged sectors of society. It is pathetic to hear in the discourse of the average citizen the echo of the same chords we have heard struck only the day before in the news media by those who represent the dominant minorities. And this state of affairs will persist, and neither profound dialogue nor concerted global action will be possible until the final failure of all piecemeal attempts to resolve the growing crisis that has been unleashed in the world.

At present, people still believe that today’s prevailing global economic and political system should not be challenged, thinking it is something that can be perfected. We believe, quite the contrary, that today’s system is not perfectible, that it is not something that can be

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gradually reformed, and that piecemeal, destructured solutions will not lead to reintegration or renewal. While these two opposing positions may engage in dialogue, the pre-dialogical elements that act in each position are irreconcilable, both as systems of belief and as sensibilities. Only with the continuing failure of piecemeal solutions will we come to a new horizon of questioning and conditions that are adequate for a dialogue. It is then that these new ideas will gradually be recognized and that those sectors today most bereft of hope will begin to mobilize. Today, even when some claim they will improve some aspect or other of the current system, the feeling that is becoming widespread in the populace is that things will only continue to worsen. That diffuse sensation in people is not indicative of some simple-minded apocalyptic millenarianism—it reveals a pervasive and deep-seated disquiet that, born as a “gut feeling” in the voiceless majority, is gradually extending into all levels of society. Meanwhile, amid all this we continue to hear people reassuring us, contradictorily, that this system can be perfected in a piecemeal way.

Dialogue, a decisive factor in all human construction, cannot be reduced to the rigors of logic or linguistics. Dialogue is a living thing in which the exchange of ideas, emotions, and experiences is tinged with the irrationality of existence. This human life—with its beliefs, fears, and hopes, with its hatreds, aspirations, and ideals of the age—is what acts as the foundation for all dialogue. When I said that *there can be no complete dialogue without a consideration of the pre-dialogic elements on which the need for the dialogue is based*, I was referring to the practical consequences of this formulation. We will see no full dialogue on the fundamental questions of today’s civilization until we, as a society, begin to lose our belief in the innumerable illusions fed by the enticements of the current system. In the meantime, the dialogue will continue to be insubstantial and without any connection to the profound motivations of society.

When the Academy notified me of the distinction it had conferred on me, I realized that in some latitudes of the world something new has begun to move, something that, beginning in a dialogue of specialists, will slowly begin to move into the public square.

I wish to express my gratitude to this great institution, to all of you, and my fervent wish that a fruitful dialogue will deepen and spread beyond the cloisters of academe into the world at large.