

The Importance of Dialogue Today – Philosophical Aspects*

There are two pre-conditions for the success of a dialogue. The first is that one recognizes the other person, one's partner, as having fundamentally an equal right. That means that one takes his opinion seriously, as a possible opinion which one can then discuss. That does not mean that one has to accept it as right; in this case there would be no need for further discussion. But one has to accept it as a possible opinion. That signifies that the individual who begins a dialogue has to be ready to learn something, that he has to include the possibility that perhaps the other individual might be right, even having at first sight a quite mistaken opinion, and that I, the first individual, was wrong with the opinion I had up to now and have to change it.

This readiness is something extraordinarily difficult for the human being. It is true that everybody lives in the self-evident assurance of his conceptions, which he has taken over from his social surroundings. The stability of daily life is based on those fixed conceptions, a „horizon“ of the understanding of life which is unquestionably accepted. Arnold Gehlen spoke about situations of relief which make new argument superfluous. But now there are doubts about the assurance of this understanding of life, because the behaviour of the other individual makes it clear that one's own conceptions are not at all self-evident and that, besides, having other ideas is possible. It is difficult for the human being to accept this situation. But it is only under this pre-condition that understanding with another human being and, more generally, with another party is possible. [15/16]

I would like to translate that into a simple formula: The first precondition of real dialogue is the capacity to listen to the other. Listen in this sense means more than to pick up the acoustic signs, also more than to understand what the other says; it means to recognize that the other wants to say something to me, something important to me, which I have to think about and may oblige me, if occasion arises, to change my opinion. Hölderlin, whom we already quoted, says: „ein Gespräch wir sind und hören können voneinander“ (that we have been able to dialogue and able to hear from each other). That means the first thing is not that we talk to each other and try to convince each other, but that we are ready to listen to the other. Not the active, but the passive attitude, is the decisive element in a dialogue.

But for a dialogue to be successful, we need a second element, i. e. that we say openly what we think, without reservation. In order to do so the human being needs a great deal of self-restraint, because it is part of his natural aspiration for assurance that he retains his secret thoughts, that he does not express himself freely; he fears that each time he reveals something, he is at the mercy of the other human being, and it is already true, in a small way, that he fears to make himself somehow ridiculous or to expose himself. This is even more true if he fears that the other could use this knowledge against him. It is much safer to restrain oneself (this is true in politics, in particular under a authoritarian regime), and to hide one's real opinion behind noncommittal words, because one fears to fall into the hands of one's interlocutor (as being an informer).

That is why open talk is always a risk; one is at the mercy of the other. It presumes that the other will not misuse one's words and is ready on his side to enter dialogue with the same frankness. This is not a problem in dialogue between old friends, because confidence which has grown over the years exists. The situation becomes difficult with an unknown person, even more so if this person comes from a notoriously hostile party. As I said, such a

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confidence is always a risk. There is no guarantee against abuse. But, nevertheless, here also confidence is an indispensable pre-condition. One has to show it first, one has to advance oneself, if one expects the other as well to trust one. A long time ago Laotse said: „Vertraut man nicht genug, so findet man kein Vertrauen“ (If you do not trust enough, nobody will trust you). It is only mutual dialogue which can progressively create a more solid basis of confidence.

There are even bigger difficulties in the form of communication distinguished from open dialogue, which I would call negotiation. In this case the question is not any more the effort to find truth together, but to [16/17] balance interests which are opposed and threaten to bring about a conflict. Here we particularly need reason as the way to reach moderation; because he who rigidly persists in this demand can only succeed with it by using violence. He asks his opponent to submit. But if we want to negotiate in a responsible way, it is necessary, as I already said, that each side is ready „mit sich reden zu lassen“ (to be open for dialogue). The fact that one must not absolutely get one's own way, that one seeks with all one's might to reach agreement, necessitates reason as opposed to the blindness of passion.

But here again we find the difficulty we already underlined when we talked about the dialogue with a member of an other party; every sign of mistrust is a nearly insurmountable obstacle to the success of the negotiation. If we want to succeed we need mutual trust. We can only realize this if one side has the courage to show confidence and tries, in this way, to obtain confidence from the other side. But this confidence presumes that one understands the other side on a human basis, i. e. that one recognizes in one's partner the human being and that one understands his point of view. This confidence in the other human being one has to deal with is the pre-condition for a successful negotiation. It is only in this way that a reasonable compromise is possible. That is what Buber meant, that the human beings of different sides must first understand each other, and then they can communicate.

But now an important objection arises. Some may point out that I have discussed on a theoretical basis what are the pre-conditions for a successful negotiation; but what happens if the partner does not consider my efforts, or simply refuses the dialogue? This is not an imagined situation, but a widespread reality. Authoritarian systems, religious or political, have the tendency to refuse dialogue. For them, dialogue is superfluous, as they know the truth in any case, and is even dangerous, because it may shake their supporters in the obvious validity of their doctrines. That is why they mostly prohibit their supporters from entering into dialogue with non-conformists (that is what we experienced in Germany during the Nazi period). For them there is only one way to deal with non-conformists, to interest them in their conceptions, that is propaganda, or if this way does not lead to success, to fight them at all costs.

So, what can we do, if the other refuses dialogue? It is impossible to force him to it. The only thing to do is to show untiring patience and to try dialogue. Of course, success is not certain.

But the situation I was talking about at the beginning, i. e. what are the possibilities for the responsible and reasonable human being in our [17/18] difficult world? is even worse because the representatives of the big powers, those which fill us with well-founded sorrow because of their unlimited armaments and financial expenditure, which could be much better used to fight hunger in many parts of the world, these representatives are inaccessible for those who feel concerned and are truly anxious to see a reasonable dialogue come about. We only can appeal to the people, with the danger that our appeal is not heard. What else can we do?

I greatly respect those who retire from this difficult world and, while renouncing the advantages of civilisation, wish to lead their own peaceful life, as far as possible away from the centres of power. But I do not think that this is the right way, because they withdraw from the responsibility of participating in the shaping of a better society.

In this situation I see one solution. It is the education of youth. That means that the educators are particularly responsible for the achievement of peace and security in our difficult and threatened world. This leads me on to the third, but also shortest part of my talk, i. e. to deal with the question: what can educators do in order to bring up a peace-loving generation which feels responsible for peace?

We should not hesitate to start with some very modest things which seem obvious to us. The first is to abolish the enemy-image, be it conscious or unconscious. It is natural for the human being to identify the member of a foreign nation at first sight with the enemy, whom one has to fear or to fight, or at least with a second class human being, whom one despises. That made the difference between the Greeks and the barbarians. And the definition of „barbarian“ has remained up to now to designate a rude, uncivilized human. It is the task of education to do away with all enemy-images, whatever they may be, and to underline that to be different does not mean to be inferior, that behind outward signs, which may seem strange at first view, there is a human being who is related to us in a friendly way through being human. Schoolbooks should be thoroughly revised on this point.

That leads us automatically to the second point: the best way to dismantle discord and to establish friendship between peoples is that people become acquainted with each other across national borders. Modern mass tourism is certainly not very adequate for this purpose, because it is superficial and does not offer the opportunity to know the people of the countries visited. An important way is the exchange of young people who live with the family of the host country. That often leads to friendship throughout life. This sort of exchange is relatively easy between the neighbouring countries of Europe. But what is possible between Germany and the United States should also be possible in the direction of East Asia. Another method which should not be underestimated and which should be encouraged by schools is the exchange of letters between young people.

Not less important is a third point: deep in the human soul, particularly in the case of young people, there is the tendency to intoxicate oneself with heroic feelings, to enjoy danger as a intensified experience of life and to despise any peaceful and orderly life. We pointed it out when talking about Storm and Stress. It is the origin of youth's susceptibility to politically extreme tendencies, to authoritarian mass movements, to terrorism and religious sectarianism. The particular task of education is to counter these tendencies and to give considered judgements. How to achieve this in detail is another difficult question which cannot be discussed here.

But there is a fourth point which I find very important. That is education towards dialogue, towards the readiness and capability to dialogue, for, as we saw, that is the indispensable precondition for understanding between hostile parties. This is, of course, not a subject for teaching and instructing, but a matter of continuous training. A real dialogue cannot be taught, but has to be practised. This is only possible if the educator practises the dialogue with young people and involves them in dialogue training. Here, apart from all differences in age and maturity, all the pre-conditions of a dialogue between people of the same age have to be fulfilled. This point creates great difficulty in this sort of dialogue. The older one has to accept that, during the dialogue, the younger one is a partner with equal rights, and has to be prepared to discuss the question without using his authority. He has to be ready to accept that the younger one expresses doubt about his opinions. It is a difficult task for the educator. There is always a risk that the younger one may misuse the educator's arguments.

There is no guarantee against such a misuse. The educator can ask that the younger one speaks seriously and openly, and that he also accepts being questioned. Dialogue needs an equal effort from both sides. It is important to underline this, because nowadays the need for discussion is often abused with polemical intentions; indeed the attacking party tries to

jeopardize the position of its opponent in demanding a dialogue, without being ready itself to discuss its own position. In Germany we often experienced this situation with students' demands during the students' unrest.

If we want to have a clear opinion, we have to introduce a distinction: a discussion is not a dialogue and therefore cannot be identified with a [19/20] dialogue. A discussion is a particular form of „talking together“, which follows its own rules. In the case of the discussion we have a clearly defined thesis which is examined. Discussion, as opposed to dialogue, has a certain polemical character. In science, discussion has a particularly significant function. Its purpose is to defend a newly defined theory against objections, or, as the case may be, to recognize that it is untenable. Discussion also plays an important role in education, if we want to develop a clear conclusive way of thinking. But discussion cannot replace the real dialogue; there we do not talk about established theses, but about a truth which still has to be found, and, the parties are not opposed, but try to clarify a question. To develop within the hearts of the young generation the capacity and the readiness for a real dialogue, seems to me the most important contribution of education for a peaceful world (which is not threatened by war which would destroy everything). There is, the objection that successful education for peace will show its effects at a time when the generation of our children has grown up and have become men and women who influence political life. We must hope that.