

Chapter 5

The Essence of Dialogue

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Is there any sense in which a human can have a dialogue with a machine? In common usage dialogue means conversation, talk, discussion. However, the term is deliberately chosen here to signify a search for a certain quality in discourse, a quality not found in all conversations, some being nothing more than an exchange of empty words. A true dialogue does not persuade, delude or dumbfound another person, it is a process of finding something out together with another person. It has no pre-set goal, it has no end, and it is pure movement, movement which cannot be frozen and translated into a formula, a rule or a programme. Whether resulting in agreement or disagreement, dialogue helps to achieve clarity. Socrates used dialogue to demonstrate the falsity of the conviction that being able to state something is the same as possessing real knowledge. Dialogue is a means of gaining insight through inner reflection. "Intuition" places dialogue in a meaningful context, a "presence of mind" which gives it life and depth. Dialogue is not a particular behaviour or attitude; only something purely factual which, whether in the form of words, art or music, involves both parties in their total historical experience.

During the conference on *Culture, language and artificial intelligence* the concept of dialogue was touched upon every now and then, at the plenary sessions as well as in connection with the various topics of the workshops. Thus, the importance of dialogue in medical practice was pointed out – as well as its importance in education – as a means of breaking "the contract of error", to which Francis Bacon refers. A dialogical concept of language has been found essential in translating works of literature – in which case translation is regarded as a major factor of linguistic and cultural innovation. One of the workshops discussed the role of dialogue in attaining a critical perspective on the so-called modern and in revealing the anaesthetizing effect of clichés and unmasking the cultural counterfeiters who produce them. Celebrities such as Socrates, Pygmalion and Shakespeare were invoked to help understanding of the essence of dialogue, and several times the question was touched on as to whether there is any significant sense in which a human being can enter into a dialogue with a machine.

In ordinary usage, dialogue means approximately the same as "conversation", "talk" or "discussion". When we deliberately choose to use the word "dialogue" it is, however, to signify that we are hunting for a certain quality

to be found in *some*, but certainly not *all*, conversations. Any conversation could be just an exchange of empty words.

Dialogue could also mean a written work in conversational *form*. There are a number of famous philosophical as well as dramatic works that have the form of dialogues. The point is, however, as is the case with Plato's dialogues, that not only are these written as dialogue, but the primary subject of the dialogues is – dialogue. Listening to Socrates we are taught the art of dialogue and we learn, if we are attentive, what dialogue *is*. And what we learn is that it is not enough to put intricate questions to people. A true dialogue does not aim at persuading the other one, nor deluding him, nor simply dumbfounding him. We enter into dialogue in order to find something out together. The dialogue has no pre-established goal. It builds up – and breaks into pieces again. This process has no end. Like music, like a melody, dialogue is pure movement.

What is essential is not what “is”, but what “will be”. The truth is never to be found at the point of departure. It grows in motion. It originates in ties that are constantly being undone and incorporated in new contexts. This motion cannot be frozen and translated into a formula, a rule or a programme.

We usually think that dialogue should promote mutual understanding and agreement, but it should be pointed out that it is equally important to establish *disagreement* by means of dialogue. How could you genuinely disagree about something if you have not made sure that you understand each other, i.e. convinced yourselves that you *do* speak about the same thing?

Dialogue is: to use language *against itself*; that is, against the petrifying effect of using formulas and phrases without bothering about all that good old rest which is silence.

Dialogue helps us to accept *paradoxes*. To be sure, there are semantic tricks to solve paradoxes – just by conjuring them out of existence – but these tricks, or so-called solutions, very often obscure, or even conceal, the *real* issue.

When Socrates asked people by what *maxims* they conducted themselves and came to their decisions, I do not think he expected to get an answer to that question. But nevertheless I am sure that he expected a result: the conversations aimed at making people *see* things. What he aimed at with uncompromising zeal was the falsity of the conviction that being able to *state* something is equivalent to having real knowledge. The basic concern for Socrates, however, was language *and* action. To what extent can we take refuge in linguistic conjuring tricks when, in moments of uncertainty, we want to do the right thing?

In dialogue, language is not used to lay down truths, but to guide one towards a better understanding. The words play their own joyful games, yet they mirror important glimpses – the hidden meaning of what is said, in the glittering play of words.

The essential thing about dialogue is this: it is a method of attaining insight; that is, of probing into the depth of a phenomenon – looking beyond the formal aspect of it.

To Socrates, dialogue is the *spoken word*, born out of the inspiration of the moment. Thus dialogue is unique, not possible to reproduce. The moment of dialogue is the eternal “now”, and it all hinges on the *appropriateness* of what is said.

Nowadays, “the world of language” prevails over “the world of the senses”. The discursive takes precedence over the intuitive. There is a widening gulf between the world picture we get through our common language, and our individual experiences. Only those who reflect on their experiences develop an ability to deal with new situations similar to, but not identical to, those they have already experienced. A purely habitual action does not transcend what has once been learned. Knowledge requires inner reflection, a dialogue with things.

A true dialogue is never only an exchange of words, separated from reality, as we apprehend it intuitively. Intuition places the dialogue within the framework, in relation to which what is said becomes meaningful. It is this “presence of mind” that gives any dialogue its life and depth, and makes it immediately understandable, in spite of formal imperfections.

Martin Buber, in *Zwiesprache*, states:

We may term this way of perception *being aware*. It by no means needs to be a man of whom I become aware. It can be an animal, a plant, a stone. No kind of appearance or event is fundamentally excluded from the series of the things through which from time to time something is said to me. The limits of the possibility of dialogue are the limits of awareness.

A dialogue need not be mediated by words. Looking at a picture you may find it pretty, skilfully made, well balanced in its composition of form and colour – but to *see* it is something quite different. To get into the depth of it – to make it come to life before your eyes – this is the mystery of artistic creation and re-creation: the dialogue that is suddenly established.

The same is true of a written dialogue; it may come to life when you hear it read or performed on stage, as if it were the first time that this particular string of words was ever uttered. Art thus helps us to penetrate behind the surface of things and establish dialogical relationships.

This applies to music too, of course. Dialogue and music spring from the same source. Victor Zuckerkandl, in his book *Man, the Musician*, relates the following episode:

Imagine a hillside in a warm country; it is morning and the sun is shining brightly. A young man is up in a pear tree, picking the fruit, and as he picks he sings. Why is he singing? I suppose most of you would say: Because it is a beautiful day, and it is good to be young on a beautiful day in a beautiful countryside, picking luscious pears. All this may be so, but there is another, deeper, more essential reason for song in this situation. Our young man might not sing as he picked if the day were not so fine or if trouble weighed on him, but if he sang at all as he picked pears, he would sing the same song – and a different song if it were grapes. The song he sings is the immemorial pear-picking song in his part of the world, a tune that musically makes fruit and picker one, that “brings” the pears to the picker’s hands and consecrates his harvesting of them. It is as though the picker’s hands did not reach out for the fruit but surrendered to it, as though the fruit, instead of resisting the hands, were meeting them halfway, dropping into them of its own accord. Instead of opposition, distinction, we have togetherness, unity.

Words divide, tones unite. Music prevents the world from being entirely transformed into language, from becoming nothing but object, and prevents man from being nothing but subject.

There is something truly *factual* about a dialogue. There are no *formal* criteria to determine whether a conversation is a true dialogue or not. But if there are no formal criteria, how can I *know* that a dialogical situation is a true dialogical event? The answer is: I cannot know it. The true dialogue has no unfailing external observances or *distinctive* features; it is not a particular behaviour or

attitude, only something purely factual. It just takes place. And it involves both parties in their total historical existence.

We cannot give criteria, but as human beings we have a specific sense, attuned to the dialogical dimension of existence; in the same way that we have a sense for the beautiful, for moral values, or for the reality of the persons we are together with and the circumstances we meet with in life.