

# On being dialogical: *An ethics of 'attunement'*

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*"The nature of the world in which I live, and in which I wish you lived – all of you... and all the time... but even I don't live in it all the time – there are times when I catch myself believing that there is such a thing as 'something' which is separate from something else."  
"The major problems in the world are the result of the difference between how nature works and the way people think."  
(Gregory Bateson in the film *An Ecology of Mind: A Daughter's Portrait of Gregory Bateson*, 2012)*

As this article is one among many in a special issue devoted to the nature of dialogical practices in general, and of *open dialogue* in particular, I would like to orient my contribution just towards a single issue: the very special nature of *dialogically-structured phenomena*, and why the change we need to make within ourselves – within our whole way of being professional persons in relation to all the others around us – is a very deep one and, at this moment in history, not at all easy to make. For almost everything in our professional surroundings – to the extent that they lead us to focus almost all our attention of what goes on inside the heads of individuals – makes it very difficult for us to accept that what 'we go on inside of' is in fact of much greater importance. But, if Bateson is right, and nothing is separate from anything else, then every 'thing', so to speak, merges into everything else, and there are no clear-cut boundaries. So, although we may perceive distinct entities, we do so always *in relation to everything else around them*.

Thus, instead of self-contained 'objects', we need to think in terms of 'forms of life', 'fluid forms', 'feeling contours', 'forms of vitality' (Stern, 2010) and such like – all having their existence within an overall flow that, in fact, sustains them in existence. And this means that, as ourselves beings who owe our own very nature to what, in fact, *flows through us*, the Cartesian subject and object split cannot be fixed ahead of time, as it can in an *atomised* world of already existing, basic things: what we count as objective and what subjective can be different, at different times, for different reasons. Years ago, John Dewey (1896) put it thus, such distinctions are "*not distinctions of existence*", but "*distinctions of function, or part played*" in relation to sustaining or expressing a living whole. In other words, while we 'see' such 'entities' in our *reflective thought* in terms of their objective features, in our more everyday, engaged, practical activities, they have their character in terms of their distinct *meanings* for us, the distinctive movements of feeling they arouse within us, dependent upon the larger surrounding flow of activity within which they occur.

However, in the professional world within which we currently dwell, a disengaged *way of thinking* – modelled on the doing of *logic*, or *mathematics*, or *information processing*, in which thinking is likened to a kind of *calculation* – holds sway. It is what we think of as being *rational*. But in this form of thought, *we find ourselves assuming* that there are 'things' which are separate from something else, and this is not, as will become clear, how dialogically-structured activities – as an aspect of our nature at large – actually work. Thus, it is

this difference, between how currently we have been trained to think, and how *dialogicality* actually works, is, as Bateson points out, that makes it so difficult for us to establish truly dialogical practices out in our everyday world at large. We continually try to make *rational* sense of what they involve in terms of *expectations* and *anticipations* drawn from a wholly inappropriate *atomised* form of thought.

This, then, is the issue I want to focus on below: the nature of the deep changes we need to make within ourselves (within our *way-of-being-in-the-world*), and how, at their heart, is the need to bring together a new set of guiding and organising experiences to *think-with* (Shotter, 2010), prior to our attempts to act in accord with any theories or principles offered us. Instead of the *atomised* world-image that (mis)leads us into thinking of all our activities *being shaped or structured by their causes*, we need a set of exemplary experiences that will provide us with a structure of anticipations as to what to expect will result from our actions within our *living, responsive relations* to our surroundings. For, as Kuhn (1970) pointed out long ago, if we are to use a theory *as its originators use it*, we need a set of exemplary experiences or "*paradigms*" providing a structure of *anticipatory sensitivities* shared with them; without such a shared structure of anticipations, we have no way of testing whether *their* theories work in the same way *for us* as for them. In other words, we need to understand how our actions can come to be shaped by the circumstances within which they occur – we need an inquiry into *meanings* not *causes*.

## From causes to meaningful feelings

As human beings, we do not simply live *in* the world, we are *of* it; our bodies are not just passive recipients of stimuli from an external world; rather, we are (initially, at least) *attuned to our surroundings* in that our perception of them is never merely an objective and factual affair; what we perceive is always *meaningful* in that we gain a "*shaped and vectored sense of the space of possibilities*" (Shotter, 2003, p. 387; Stern, 2010) before us for 'going on' to act within them. For instance, the smiles of others 'invite' us to smile back, we turn to look where others are looking, we sense a 'question' in a speaker's intonation, we allow ourselves to be interrupted by the 'sharp' utterances of others, we feel upset by their frowns, and so on. Immediately, their expressions *mean* something to us, and we show it in our spontaneous responses to them.

It is the turn to a focus on *meanings*, on the shaping and directive function of meanings in our actions as sensed (at

least initially) in our bodies, and away from our concern – as the rational professional beings we take ourselves to be – with trying to discover and explain the *causes* of our actions, that is one of the very many ‘turns’ we must make if we are truly to allow ourselves to become, once again, the *dialogical beings* we were at birth. But as I said above, all of us who think of ourselves as rational beings – and in particular, those of us with a professional training in the so-called psychological sciences, who have been brought up to *think with* (Shotter, 2010) the whole Cartesian/Newtonian tradition as a guide to what *properly rational thought actually is* – the change required of us is very deep. For within that tradition (1) our deliberate thinking is primary; (2) ‘ideas’, ‘theories’, ‘frameworks’, etc., are taken as basic and as shaping in a *causal* fashion what we do in our actions and practices; (3) there is a basic split between subjects (who *think*) and objects (things *thought about*); and most importantly (4) practices are brought about by *the application of models, ideas, theories, approaches, etc...* And we will worry that others will think of us as ‘incompetent’, as ‘unprofessional’, as ‘not knowing what we are doing’, if we cannot *account for ourselves* to those around us by giving *reasons* for our conduct in these terms. This requirement is very deeply entrenched within us. However, all the assumptions listed above are among the very many more that we must give up if we are to *be dialogical* in our relations to the others and ‘othernesses’ around us.

As a first step in beginning to think in a dialogically-structured manner, rather than as external agents wholly in control of the unfolding processes of importance to us, we need to see ourselves as being internally related to still-in-process, flowing ‘worlds’ of intermingling activities, *activities which, as they flow through us, influence us as much, if not more, than we can influence them.*

This means we need to distinguish between the thinking that we as adult thinkers do *deliberately*, and know of ourselves as doing, and the thinking that *just happens within us* without our being aware of it as a result of our immersion within the particular flow of social activity occurring around us, for it is this thinking which, as William James points out, is *“adapted in advance to the features of the world in which we dwell”*. In other words, to repeat, in providing *the background* from which all our more deliberate forms of thought are drawn, it provides a structure of expectations or anticipations as to how any of our statements of principles, rules, or laws, along with any statements of plans, structures, or models, etc., that we might propose, can be applied in practice.

But, how are they first learned? How can we at first be ‘shown around’ the house of ‘Being’ thus to become acquainted with the ‘things’ within it, for initially, the words, utterances, expressions of others cannot designate ‘things’ already well known to us, for the ‘things’ designated would have to be seen as such independently of language, and this is clearly not the case. Words cannot at first be ‘signs’, in the sense of pointing beyond themselves to something else. Initially, the expressions of another must *do something to and in us immediately*, and they do. As Seikkula (2011) points out:

*Trevarthen’s (1990) careful observations of parents and infants demonstrate that the original human experience of dialogue emerges in the first days of life, as parent and child*

*engage in an exquisite dance of mutual emotional attunement by means of facial expressions, hand gestures and tones of vocalisation. This is truly a dialogue: the child’s actions influence the emotional states of the adult, and the adult, by engaging, stimulating and soothing, influences the emotional states of the child (p.186).*

As he puts it, we need to become *“aware of what is occurring in us before we give words to it”* (p.186), for these bodily tendencies at work in us – as feelings that just seem to be happening within us and to us out of our control – can give rise to strong feelings of, for instance, familiarity or strangeness, of joy or distress, of disturbance or peace, and so on. And all such feelings, on the one hand, can be (and often are, currently) experienced simply as *emotions* of one kind or another, and judged as good or bad. But much more importantly, on the other hand, they can be experienced as *uniquely situated action-guiding feelings*, indicative of our degree of attunement, relatedness, or orientation to our surroundings (Shotter, 2008), they are at work, for example, when we read or hear a question and begin to *orient* ourselves towards answering it, or as we inwardly search for the ‘right’ word to give voice to an experience, or we hear a new word used in an already familiar context. Because an *emergent process unfolding over a period of time* is involved, because a movement from what is at first an indeterminate feeling – but, as we shall see, nonetheless a *unique* feeling – to a more well articulated expression of it is entailed, the process involved is not a matter of merely *discovering* what is already in existence awaiting expression. Dialogically structured activities involve the *creating* and bringing into existence of what is uniquely new, what has never existed before. And it is this aspect of our experience I want to explore further here, and to point out why it is so crucial to our becoming, once again (like an infant), *dialogical* in our encounters with the others and ‘othernesses’ around us – an experience which, as we grow into the dominant or official ideology of the authoritative others around us, we tend in our more deliberate activities to forget.

### On open dialogue and our attunement to unique others

*The paradox of dialogue may be in the simplicity and complexity of it on the whole. It is as easy as life is, but at the same time dialogue is as complicated and difficult as life is. But dialogue is something we cannot escape, it is there as breathing, working, loving, having hobbies, driving car. It is life (Seikkula, 2011, p.191).*

Here, then, I want to pursue further Jaakko Seikkula’s above claim. Indeed, as I see it, both life and dialogicality are amazingly ordinary and yet not well understood at all. But the fact is, if we can prepare ourselves to ‘think-with’ *living things* to guide us in our thinking, instead of dead, mechanical things, then not only will that change everything that in the past we have thought of as being well-known to us – the nature of reality; knowledge and knowing (epistemology); the nature of communication and language; meaning and understanding; ways of being (ontology); and our everyday ways of relating to the others and ‘othernesses’ around us (attitudes, orientation, and ethics) – but it will also lead us into recognising the influence of factors to which, in the past, we have given no

attention at all. Some of our old central terms need to take on entirely new meanings, while other very basic taken-for-granted assumptions will turn out to be the reverse of what we took them to be; while some entirely new understandings never before contemplated will need to be entertained; and finally and strangely, our uniquely individual, everyday relations to our particular surroundings will come to the fore in a very unexpected manner.

To begin thinking, then, with what we know of *plants*, say, to guide us in our thinking, as *spontaneously responsive* living beings, intimately related to our surroundings, we live immersed within a world of ceaseless, intra-mingling currents of activity (many of which are, in fact, *invisible* and as such only available to us in terms of *felt* time-shapes) which, to repeat, influence us as much, if not more, than we can influence them. Buffeted by the wind and waves of the *social weather* around us, we inhabit circumstances in which almost everything seems to merge into everything else; we do not and cannot observe this flow of activity as *if* from the outside. I take the phrase "*social weather*" from Lynn Hoffman (2002) who offers it as a metaphor that captures many facets of my view of *communication*. She writes: "... *communication is like a social weather. It fills our sails, becalms, or sometimes wrecks us. Sensing what is called for in a particular context, responding correctly to gestures like an extended hand, feeling a black cloud settling over a discussion, are all examples of a weather system that can impact us in concrete and material ways*" (p. 68). Indeed, we are far too intimately interwoven in with such weather systems for what we can be and can do from within them to be lifted out and examined scientifically as objective entities on a laboratory bench – for, after all, however and wherever we move, we will still find ourselves within one or another such system of social weather.

In other words, our turn here is not only a turn away from the self-contained individual, but also away from the idea that the world in which we live consists for us, merely in the earth beneath our feet – furnished with all kinds of separately existing 'things', along with a whole host of other, individual human beings – as well as the sky above our heads. Instead, the *flowing, dynamical* nature of our relations to our particular surroundings come to take on a much greater importance than we have ever given them before – thoughts of *fixed and static forms* must be given up completely.

On a dimension from plants to computers, we are much, much more like plants growing from seeds, existing within a special confluence of intra-mingling influences, rooted within the *chiasmic intra-acting* of many different flowing streams of energy and materials that our bodies are continually working to *organise* in sustaining us as viable human beings. I speak of *intra-action* rather than *inter-action* because, within flowing, holistic activities, no pre-existing entities can exist as such to be available for what we talk of as *inter-acting*.

Thus, within such holistic, flowing situations, we are, due to their very nature, continually uncertain as to what the situation is that faces us, and how we might act within it for the best. The continuous flowing nature of the "*speech chain*" is typically described by Bakhtin (1986) thus: "...*all real and integral understanding is actively responsive... And the speaker himself is oriented [i.e., attuned] precisely toward such an actively responsive understanding... he expects response, agreement,*

*sympathy, objection, execution, and so forth... [Thus,] any speaker is himself a respondent to a greater or lesser degree. .... Any utterance is a link in a very complexly organised chain of other utterances"* (p.69). Indeed, what Bakhtin refers to variously in his writings as the speech 'process', 'flow', or 'chain', never ceases.

Indeed, in being immersed as listeners within the same intra-mingling flow of activities as those speaking to us, we do not have to wait for them to complete their utterances before we can, in practice, begin to understand their speech sufficiently to start to respond to it. For again, as Bakhtin (1986) notes: "*The utterance is related not only to preceding, but also to subsequent links in the chain of speech communication... The entire utterance is constructed, as it were, in anticipation of encountering this response*" (p. 94). Indeed, a speaker only has to pause in trying to find a 'right word' for us, often, to be able to anticipate what that word might be, and to offer to complete their utterance for them.

But, is this enough for a truly dialogically-structured exchange to take place, for us to be truly listening to a person as who *uniquely* they in fact *are*, rather than as what we assume them to be (as when we fit them into a diagnostic category)? It is at this point we must begin to distinguish between merely *hearing* what a person is saying, or has said, and truly *listening to what uniquely they are in fact trying to say*. For clearly, just as *seeing* can occur in the absence of *looking*, so can *hearing* occur without *listening*, as we well know and express in such idioms as 'turning a deaf ear', or 'his words fell on deaf ears', or 'hearing without listening', and so on. And clearly, in many conversations, especially those among professionals, people listen merely to express their *opinions* as to what *they* think it best to do.

In such listening without attunement, we listen for what is *said*, the propositional content, and we seek to assimilate what is said to what is already familiar to us – we take another's words and make them ours. We fail to meet the other as who in fact they are. In attending to *patterns of already spoken words* (what is *said*), we tend to miss what is felt, the expressive movement of a person's *words in their speaking*.

By contrast, attuned listening – listening in a way in which we are oriented wholly towards the *otherness* of the other – entails letting their speech *flow through us*, so to speak, to such an extent that it 'moves' us, that it generates movements of feeling within us that will, at first, more likely than not make no sense to us; we are confused, bewildered, we don't yet know 'our way about'; however, if we 'dwell in' it for a while, and begin to 'move around' within it, a 'something', an 'it' begins to emerge; it begins to emerge in the 'time contours' or 'time shapes' that become apparent to us in the dynamic relations we can sense between our outgoing activities and their incoming results; later, an image might come to us, we find that we can express this 'something' in terms of *what it is like*; but not so fast, for we can find another, and another image, and another.

This why the bringing of words to previously unexpressed feelings is so important. It is to do with *unique meanings*, with giving us an *orientation*, a way of *relating ourselves* to a particular circumstance that was otherwise diffuse and disorganised, thus to bring an organisation to it that enables us, to draw on terms drawn from Wittgenstein's (1953) work, not only to know our "*way about*" (no.123) within it, but also how to "*go on*" (no. 151) from it.

## Conclusions

I have focused almost solely on our deeply held ways of thinking, and on the nature of *attunement* and on *dialogically-structured* phenomena, because they seem, in fact, to be at odds with each other. Our taken-for-granted ways of thinking atomise their flowing nature. And this is why it is so difficult for us to establish dialogically-structured practices within our professional lives. For often, while *trying* to help clients bring their own inner lives to verbal visibility, rather than *orienting* ourselves towards letting their *unique otherness* flow through us as the *otherness it is*, we can all too easily *violate* their uniqueness by fitting them into a diagnostic category, by assuming them to be a *kind of person* already familiar to us. For this is what our rational forms of thought demand of us. But, this is why it is not just a technical, but an *ethical* issue: the very being of the other as the other they are is at stake.

Thus, if we are to conduct our dialogical practices as a *way of life* we need to train ourselves in a whole new set of 'ontological skills' skills at being a *particular kind of listener*, a *particular kind of looker*, a *particular kind of care-taker*, and so on.

The principles of open dialogue are described by Seikkula (this issue) are undoubtedly of great importance; but there is a great danger. For, clearly, many still currently believe that establishing a new way of working is merely a matter of putting some new (theoretical) principles into practice. For, after all, within the classical Cartesian/Newtonian frame, all our practices are *based on* discoverable rules, laws, or principles.

The danger in assuming this, however, is that, when challenged as to why we acted in a particular situation the way we did, we immediately say: "*We were following a theory in our actions*". While this may excuse us from further criticism by our colleagues, it not only means that we fail to refer to the actual influences at work on us in that situation but it also means we cannot *teach others* to act as we do by the use of such talk. To do that, we need, not only, as Jaakko Seikkula (2011) puts it, to become "*aware of what is occurring in us before we give words to it*" (p.186), but also to become aware of what happens, dialogically, when we give words to any otherwise indeterminate experience; as Bakhtin (1981) makes clear, we provide ourselves with a *particular set of anticipations* as to what next we might expect to follow from it. And this means we need to be careful in our choice of words, for our 'sensings' in each circumstance we occupy are like 'seeds' that can, in different circumstances, 'grow to expression' in many different ways.

Becoming dialogical requires not only constant practice and constant vigilance, but is a matter of our first, as beginners, bodily *sensing* certain movements of feeling aroused in us by the bodily movements of others, and then later *sensing their similarity* to experiences already well-known to us, rather than with 'seeing' patterns out in the world, in giving them verbal expressions. In this view, our use of our *principles* is not in initially *establishing* a practice, but in functioning as a set of *reminders* for use in sustaining and correcting it, for use in noticing lapses, and so on. For each situation we meet is unique; it cannot be codified;

but it can be 'shown' in our actions and 'distinctively felt' in our experiences.

Thus, to repeat, prior to turning to a set of stated principles in seeking to structure our dialogical practices as truly dialogical, we need to school ourselves in gathering together a collection of guiding and organising experiences to *think-with* (Shotter, 2010), without such a set of shared exemplary experiences or paradigms, people may "*talk the same talk, but they will not be walking the same walk*".

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