Meaningful Dialogue

by Irene Marinoff

To indicate the subject of this essay two popular expressions, which everybody uses and professes to understand, have been deliberately chosen. Through this constant use the significance of the words has evaporated, and one is left with little more than a vague indication of goodwill and low-level understanding. Yet a closer study of both terms is rewarding since it leads straight into the mystery of human—and Divine—communication.

For all time the word 'dialogue' is linked to the name of Plato, who used this literary form to demonstrate his master's method of enquiry and develop his own philosophy. For both philosophers the aim is the apprehension of truth. However, this is not handed over to the pupil in a packet to be passively accepted and absorbed. Socrates is conscious that he knows nothing. If he leads his disciples into making contradictory statements, he does not do so in order to overwhelm them at the end with a ready-made solution in the manner of a *deus ex machina.* He shares his own thought processes with them, teaching them to examine their preconceived ideas. If the disciple takes this seriously he will learn to think for himself and acquire a sensible approach to philosophical problems. It is fascinating to follow the argument in a dialogue as superficially simple as Euthyphro. Twice the disciple is forced to admit that 'piety' is 'piety' because it is beloved by the gods, though he has previously agreed to the opposite statement and granted that 'piety' had a special excellence which makes it 'pious' and consequently beloved by the gods.

In his masterly analysis of this dialogue Romano Guardini remarks: 'But could not Socrates have told him (Euthyphro) what piety really is? To such a question the master of irony would probably have answered: "But I don't know that myself!" Yet the answer might have had several meanings. It might have meant: "I know a few things, but would like to find out more. That can only happen when the other man joins in the search, therefore I cannot give away the solution to him". But perhaps the answer would have meant the following: "I cannot tell him the solution so simply as that. For either he would not understand it at all, and then it would be no use telling him. Or he would understand it as a positive statement, without perceiving the problem. He would swallow the answer and think he had got the gist of it, and then he would be a lost man as far as real knowledge goes. For only the man who is inwardly set in motion grasps the truth"' (Romano Guardini: The Death of Socrates, p. 24. London, Sheed and Ward, 1948).

It is true, we need some categories of thought to bring order into the chaos of existence. But real understanding does not mean possessing a static system into which one can force every phenomenon.

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That would mean petrifying reality. It is essential to remove all prejudices and start thinking with an unencumbered mind. For Plato the philosophical dialogue leads into the world of metaphysics, the world of ideas, the greatest of which is the Good. At this point the philosopher touches the fountain of life itself, and the dialogue proves to be a means of gaining new insights and a new way of life, leading, as it can, from the static *status quo* of thought and life into the unknown, not yet realised.

The man who is 'inwardly set in motion' is enabled to ask the right questions. He has, to say the least, found access to truth. Here he will make the discovery that the most profound questions of life and death are not patient of solutions by the power of reason alone. The clearer his thought, the more acute his discrimination, the more frequently he will strike upon antinomies, as the history of philosophy abundantly proves. However, paradoxes and antinomies are signs that thought has reached an impasse and can merely, as it were, spear life in its fulness on the horns of a dilemma. The dilemma must be faced. In throwing himself straight into life, the man 'who is inwardly set in motion', while he may not acquire much knowledge, will certainly gain wisdom. A dialogue is fruitful only when it opens up a new approach to life and the prospect of a new world. In a very real sense Socrates merits the title 'midwife' as he introduces his pupils into a new world.

Not every pupil of the great philosopher in late fifth century Athens was as mediocre and hide-bound as Euthyphro. There were others. Plato was only the greatest mind to be inwardly set in motion by that 'gad-fly' which ceaselessly tried to sting the mentally lazy Athenians into real thought. The modern reader of the Platonic dialogues will profit by his study in measure of his own participation. Without the readiness to follow the argument where it may lead there can be no fruitful dialogue. This involves a certain risk. Whenever we are challenged to examine our mental equipment, there is the danger of its proving inadequate. If we are honest with ourselves, we must change our mental habits and attitudes. This is a very difficult task, yet the success of every dialogue is dependent on its performance.

That prejudices should be examined as to their validity and that each partner in the dialogue should be moved to work towards an as yet unknown truth are not the only conditions for a successful dialogue. There are others. The study of a passage in St Augustine's dialogue *de magistro* will furnish the reason. The saint and his son Adeodatus are studying the extremely complex problem of the relationship between 'a word' and 'the meaning of this word'. How is it possible that a sequence of sounds can convey a certain sense?—If we overhear a conversation in an unfamiliar language we do not understand a word—yet the speakers do. How does this come about? —One of the most disturbing happenings is suddenly to experience a word in one's own language as a mere sequence of sounds, dissociated

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from all meaning. Something vital is missing—there is a void—but what?

St Augustine and his son tackle the difficult problem with astuteness. The father puts the questions. The son answers intelligently. Towards the end of the dialogue there is a very illuminating passage concerning the process of teaching itself: 'If you knew that what was said is true, you would have admitted it when asked about it in detail; now look from whom you learned this. Certainly not from me to whose questions you gave all the answers. But if you did not know that what was said is true, then neither he *(ille)* nor I taught you. I did not, because I cannot teach at all; he did not, because you are not yet able to learn'.

What is at stake is the boy's assent to truth, his grasping of the meaning. In itself the game of questions and answers cannot convey meaning. The teacher can only teach facts, create a favourable atmosphere, call on all his ingenuity to put the right questions. He cannot provide the experience of meaning, the evidence of truth. Deeper layers of the personality are involved which have to be set in motion. There must be in the pupil an inner—not intellectual—readiness to understand. That is why Socrates insists on complete 'engagement'. On a still higher level one might speak of a 'circumcision of the heart'. Now, if the pupil understands—'Look from whom you learnt that'!—it is the gift of a third. If the pupil fails to understand, it is not, as we have seen, the teacher's fault, nor is it the fault of that mysterious *'ille'*, in Whose power it lies to grant understanding. It is because: 'He did not because you are not yet able to learn'.

This statement implies two things: a pupil's desire to learn is not sufficient for him to understand. Something deeper must be added which is independent of his will. Not every piece of learning can be understood at any given time, nor can the fullness of experience be relished at any hour. Already Ecclesiastes knew that there is a time for everything. This is so because the comprehension of certain truths may demand physical or mental or emotional maturity. Unfortunately no man is master of his own growth. He can only learn certain things when the right moment, the *kairos* comes. Yet the advent of the *kairos* cannot be calculated. It is true, there are pointers in life. Men may try to read the signs of the times. But it is a rare event when the readiness and the hour coincide and bring forth fruit. The *kairos* is in God's hand. Secondly: When the time for learning is right the real teacher is He Who granted the hour and the ability to learn. He enables the pupil to see things in a new light. But the whole process remains a mystery—mystery of Divine Providence and human readiness leading to extended vision and unforeseen horizons.

The insights gained into the nature of meaningful dialogue by the study of the master-pupil relationship are equally valid for dialogues

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between intellectual equals. Neither of the partners must lack the readiness to examine his prejudices and outlook. Both must be prepared for new, unheard-of developments. They must also be aware of the delicacy of the situation in which so much depends on one's right response to the spirit of the hour—which, if the dialogue is to be fruitful, should, by the believer, be recognised as the Spirit of God. It is, in fact, impossible to carry on a 'meaningful dialogue' outside the presence of Christ. 'When two or three are gathered together in My name'. A third is needed for dialogue to make sense and to lead somewhere.

This is corroborated by experiences in a totally different field. Every meeting of human beings, from the fleeting smile accorded to a passing stranger to the life-long relationship of marriage has the shape of a dialogue. In marriage each partner takes his stand, and in action and reaction to each other their life together develops and expands. The less this continuous dialogue is hampered by the obsessional wish always to be right or the unwillingness to open up and transcend one's limitations, the more fruitful it will be. However, in many cases today this marital dialogue is interrupted. The desire to reach an understanding may still exist, but the partners seem to speak different languages. They can no longer communicate with each other. If such a couple decide to consult a psychotherapist at least the possibility of a creative dialogue is guaranteed. Each partner can now address the doctor and find a sympathetic hearing. He can disclose emotional reactions he would never have admitted in the atmosphere of conflict in the home. Thus the presence of a third person, who takes the place of God, ensures a redirection of attention away from the often petty recriminations of the past into a novel future. The personality of the psychotherapist with his great experience is itself proof that life offers more possibilities than the ones hitherto realised by the couple. Then the idea of adopting a new approach to old situations can take root and a renewed dialogue may follow.

The fact that a 'meaningful dialogue' can only be pursued in the presence of a third person is brought home in an article entitled: 'Criteria for Reforming the Church' by Professor Hollenweger, Geneva (*Concilium.* June 1971). In the section: 'The Eucharistic Banquet as *communio oppositorum*' the author writes: 'Particularly in the Eucharistic Feast *"sola gratia"* is applied to thought processes. New alternatives can emerge whenever the struggle for truth is carried on within the horizon of hope—not of resignation and obstinate sticking to one's point—i.e. at the Table of the Lord. . . . Discussions around the Table of the Lord are not about truth, but directed towards the truth. Communion understood as a process of searching for knowledge is of supreme significance, because truth is definitely not a matter of democracy, but fundamentally the gift of Him Who is present in the midst of the *communio oppositorum* and makes this

communio possible. To be sure there is only one truth. But as soon as I define truth it becomes particular, for by definition any definition divides, while by definition the *communio oppositorum* unites'. In a later passage Hollenweger describes the way in which Christ deals with controversial issues. Never does He pass judgement in favour of one side. Instead He raises the whole argument to a higher level, sometimes using a parable, sometimes asking a question that will bring a breath of fresh air to the noisy squabbles of the market place. 'Give unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's'. There is a new vision of two separate planes of living; but how they are to be related in practice is left to the imagination, thoughts and perseverances of the individual. Or again: 'Let him who is without sin cast the first stone'. What a cure for the censorious! To be thrown back on one's own pettiness, to have to come to terms with all one's rash judgements, to be pricked into remorse so that a new life may begin. . . . Taking the happening in the house of Simon as an example Hollenweger writes: 'When He had been kissed and anointed in an unusual fashion by a sinner in the house of Simon the Pharisee and was challenged to pass judgement, He told the parable of the two debtors which ends with a question. That is to say He placed the conflict in a wider . . . context and left the answer to the guests at the banquet. That is to say He certainly did not advocate a "laissez-faire, laissez aller" ideology. He equally refused to settle the concrete dispute *expressis verbis.* Instead, using a parable which stimulates imaginative obedience, He placed the whole dispute in the wider framework of forgiveness and left 'the moral of the story" to His listeners'.

When one considers these Divine questions and parables more closely and translates their contents into the terms of one's own life, one realizes the infinite possibilities of meaningful dialogue carried on by men of goodwill within the horizons of hope and in the presence of the Lord.

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