

# FROM CORRESPONDENCE ABOUT DAVID BOHM'S *ON DIALOGUE*

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In late 1998, a European teacher of English asked me what I thought about a book titled *On Dialogue*, by David Bohm. In reply, I proposed that I give my reactions in three parts. First, I would summarize what I thought the book was saying, so as to check my understanding with the teacher's. Second, I would list some features of Bohm's book that might suggest why the teacher had asked me for my reactions to it. Third, having received the teacher's response to Part 1 (my summary of the book) I would write my personal reactions. The following are the three short documents that resulted.

## SUMMARY OF MY INITIAL READING OF *ON DIALOGUE*

Bohm sees our world as full of troubles (p. 48), difficulties and inadequacies (69). He asks

- What is the source of these troubles, difficulties and inadequacies?
- How can or should we deal with them so as to establish a proper order of society (64)?

His answers, as I read the book, are something like this:

In the beginning, many of the troubles we now face were probably minor or non-existent. They have become increasingly serious, however, ever since the dawn of civilization (5000 years ago, more or less). They are passed on from one generation to another through social channels such as conditioning (68).

Bohm says that at the heart of many human troubles is "incoherence" of thoughts and/or of actions. "Coherence," for Bohm, is experienced as harmony, order and beauty (p. 78). He associates this word frequently and closely with "truth."

Incoherence among the thoughts and actions of a group of people, or of a whole society, is inconsistency between beliefs or desires on the one hand, and actual drives

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and actions on the other. Because knowledge is limited, there will always be a certain amount of incoherence, but insofar as incoherence persists, it is incompatible with truth.

A special and particularly deleterious source of incoherence in dealing with difficulties and inadequacies is failure to recognize that sometimes they are “problems” (they involve things which are external to us and which are susceptible of practical solutions), and sometimes they are “paradoxes” (matters which involve inconsistencies or incompatibilities inside us). Some of these inconsistencies or incompatibilities are between what we feel and what we know (63). The most fundamental “paradox,” however, is the illusion that one can still think rationally and solve “problems” when the content of the thinking is not external, but is the thought process itself. The way to deal with any “paradox” is not to try to think out a solution for it. It is rather to focus attention on the inconsistencies it contains. This requires the development of awareness (67f).

Incoherence is a natural and inevitable result of living together without engaging in “dialogue,” in the special sense in which Bohm uses that term. The chief impediment to genuine dialogue is defensiveness about the conclusions, the opinions, and the resulting assumptions that have been formed in one’s mind on the basis of all the experiences of life, both external and internal.

An important reason for this defensiveness is that people don’t understand the nature of their conclusions and opinions. These are results of physical processes that take place in the physical circuitry of the brain as a result of physical signals coming in through the senses. Such processes are governed by the ordinary laws of the physical world, and are therefore shaped and determined physically. They are not, as people suppose, either simple reports of facts or results of free and independent reasoning by the individual — or by a “homunculus” somewhere within the individual. (At some points in the book [55, 60, 82], it sounded to me as if “insights” can however be received independent of the physical processes that produce “thought.”)

A person’s own set of conclusions and opinions have cost that person dearly in experience. Moreover, they constitute both the person’s map of the world, and his or her tools (or weapons) for dealing with it. A flaw in one’s conclusions and opinions could therefore be dangerous. Consequently, if someone else’s conclusions and

opinions differ from one's own, one tends to feel more or less threatened, and the natural reaction to threat is one or another kind of defense.

Dialogue in Bohm's sense, however, can take place only if the participants don't defend their assumptions.

- Our assumptions come from the of things that have been stored in memory.
- When our assumptions are challenged, we tend either to react to the challenge, or to suppress our reactions.
- Neither is fully satisfactory. There is need, at least sometimes, for suspension (not expression or suppression) of reactions.
- Suspension makes possible a fuller kind of attention to what is going on.
- Attention allows us to perceive the similarities & the differences between various inputs.
- These perceptions are the raw material for free creation of new shared meanings.
- Out of new shared meanings, truth may arise. Knowledge & thought (51f) are largely collective, not individual, and constitute a kind of reservoir.. Individuals draw on this reservoir, but they make relatively few changes in it. It sounds to me as if in the course of "dialogue," new concepts/meanings can arise in the dialogue (compare running water in a stream, that purifies itself as it runs?) and these new concepts/meanings can then be taken in by individuals, but that they cannot be created by individual thinking (compare stagnant puddles?) because individual thinking is a basically physical, mechanical process.

And truth brings — or points the way to — harmony within and among the participants, whether in a small group or in a whole society.. This kind of thing could start on very small scale, but then the good news about it could spread around the whole world.

## POINTS OF AFFINITY BETWEEN *ON DIALOGUE* AND SOME THINGS I'VE WRITTEN

I've very much enjoyed finding that Bohm stated certain ideas that have been important in my own writings. I'm grateful to you for spotting them and bringing them to my attention. Here's a partial list:

Most striking is the amount of resonance between *On Dialogue* and the two bits of verse that I put at the beginning and end of *A Way and Ways*.

- Bohm (6, 19 & passim) has a very high aim: to explore for himself and to make available to others an approach to finding new shared truth(s). Compare my phrase “stones for the foundation of something new between us,” and the desire for “[something] to build our house [our relationship, our culture, etc.] on.”
- As Bohm's title suggests, he seems to see life as an intimate interaction between the individual and the group, rather than seeing the individual as primary and the group only as a product of interactions among individuals. This reminds me of my “the singing was here, like a rope, like a bridge, and we were the ends of it.”
- Bohm and I share certain ideas about memory that are rarely developed or emphasized in the language teaching field:
  - Emphasizing that things can happen automatically in what I have (1996, 1998) called the “Files” of LTM when they receive sensory input, without any involvement of what we generally call “consciousness.”
  - Bohm's recognition that “the Files” are organized into networks, and that those networks integrate emotional and purposive elements along with the more “sensory” and “cognitive” elements. (20, 52, 53, 74)
  - Showing how the interpretation — even the perception — of a new experience involves constant interplay between the new incoming sensory data and images supplied from “the Files.” (55)
  - Pointing out the fundamental importance of looking for and noticing differences between what one would have expected and what one in fact is finding.

SOME OF THE POINTS BOHM MAKES ABOUT THE INDIVIDUAL TIE IN WITH MY STUFF:

- Nondefensiveness is essential for the making of a “Counseling” (1980) or “Understanding” (1998) Response, as well as for deep and lasting learning.
- The emphasis (which I got from my experiences with Counseling-Learning ) on the importance of security so as not to become defensive.
- Urgency and insistence with which one tends to hold on to and defend one’s pre-existing interpretations, opinions, etc. Compare my descriptions of the game “Spill & Spell” in *A Way and Ways* and in its 1998 successor.

And a number of points about groups:

- Groups can by their consensus often recognize the valid and the invalid in the contributions of individual members in a way that no one of them could have done, and thus can create new, more “coherent” products. (39)
- One cannot force a community into existence, but can only try to create favorable conditions for it and then let it take shape. Compare my quotation from George Elliott in both editions of *Memory, Meaning & Method* (1976, 1996).

Some points commonly associated with the word “humanistic”:

- Avoid regimentation.
- Avoid bondage to rituals (verbal formulations) and ceremonies (patterns of activity) from the past.
- There are hitherto unsuspected degrees and kinds of human abilities.

Finally, here are a few miscellaneous points where I find support in Bohm’s thinking as I understand it.

- One can try to act “therapeutically” without taking on either the status or the responsibilities of one who is “being a therapist.”
- Reification (58) is a bane of clear thinking.

And last but by no means least, Bohm deplors the human tendency to worship the graven images (either material or conceptual) that have been produced by one's own hands or mind!

I should not fail to mention the very close similarity between Bohm & Gattegno when they talk about entering into a new stage of human evolution, and of course about the need to develop (awareness of) awareness. Both of them also show signs of their previous contacts with Krishnamurti.

One more point occurred to me after I had finished writing the above. For 12 years my wife and I were regular attenders at meetings of the Society of Friends (Quakers). A Quaker meeting illustrates and confirms many of the points Bohm makes about dialogue: There is no preset agenda. People speak one at a time whenever and however they feel led, but subsequent speakers do not criticize or take issue with what others have said, so that there is little defensiveness, and the net effect does indeed often lead to new shared insights.

#### MY REACTIONS TO BOHM'S *ON DIALOGUE*: TABULAR SUMMARY

After three or four unsuccessful starts at writing this third section, I happened to look at what I had written in 1990 (*Humanism in Language Teaching*) about the contrast among various reactions to "the stance of despair," and particularly between what I there called the "secular humanist" and the "religious humanist." I realized that what I had said there was quite relevant to my reactions to *On Dialogue* and to some other books that people had been bringing to my attention recently. This section therefore begins with a restatement and, I hope, a clarification of what I said there.

Secular humanists tend to get excited about human potentials that have hitherto been undiscovered or underdeveloped.	I too tend to get excited about human potentials that have hitherto been undiscovered or underdeveloped.
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But I also think there are built in limitations on people's ability to by their own individual or collective efforts rise above ignorance and self-centeredness.

Secular humanists tend to believe that these exciting potentials have come over the eons with the gradual evolution of blind matter and energy, and over the centuries through cultural conditioning.

I believe that these potentials are parts of an order created by a self-conscious, intelligent God (though I don't pretend to know anything about the methods or duration of the creative acts).

Secular humanists tend to think that the meaning of human activities is found only within this world, with humans as the center.

I think the goal of human activities is preparation for a life beyond this world, centered on God.

Secular humanists tend to think that the goal of human activities should be to increase knowledge, wisdom and social harmony, as well as to contribute to the physical and emotional health of others.

Although I think the goal is beyond this life, I also think that preparation for the life to come is consistent with, and may even require, efforts to increase knowledge, wisdom and social harmony, as well as to contribute to the physical and emotional health of others.

*So secular humanists and religious humanists(as I used those terms on pages 31-33 of HILT) can, should, and commonly do cooperate with each other in exploring human potentials, in finding ways to develop those potentials more fully, and in trying to increase knowledge, wisdom and social harmony, as well as to contribute to the physical and emotional health of others.*

Secular humanists, as far as I can tell, tend to see their own motivations for doing such things in the light of high principles and good will, and I would not dispute them on this..

As a Christian, I see my own motivation for doing such things more in a historical light, summarized briefly in three technical terms:

- God having become a particular human being at a particular time and place (“Incarnation”).
- Me being somehow set free from what

would otherwise have led to certain and permanent disaster (“*Redemption*”)

- Me for the rest of this life becoming more and more like what God wants me to be (“*Sanctification*”).

For more on my view of Christianity in the context of language teaching, see pp. 86-95 of *HILT*.

Bohm is writing for a post-Christian (more generally, a post-theistic) generation that still retains some longing for contact with what he calls “the cosmic dimension.” His goal in this book seems to be to advance the search for a functional equivalent — a working substitute — that can replace what he regards as outmoded spiritual realities such as “God” or “the soul.” I see him, like Gattegno, as trying to play a sort of Promethean role.

The beliefs and assumptions mentioned in the right-hand column in the above table are no doubt hard for left-hand column people to fathom, relate to, or accept, but I feel the same way about the beliefs and assumptions in the left-hand column.

Bohm discounts the conclusions of others by explaining that the thinking that produced those conclusions was the result of physical processes involving physical matter in the brain acting and interacting in accord with certain natural laws (82 & passim). The usual response to this materialistic and deterministic claim is *tu quoque* — that is, the reply consists in pointing out that the materialistic and deterministic conclusion was itself reached by the same kind of process as everyone else’s conclusions, so that if the old conclusions were demolished by it, so too is it itself. At some points in the book, Bohm seems to lay himself open to a *tu quoque* reply. In postulating a special kind of knowledge called “(an) insight” (55, 60, 82-3), he appears to be trying to escape this outcome, but I myself don’t find this device very convincing.

My favorite metaphor about “coherence” is the electrician. An electrician shows healthy respect for currents and voltages and for the laws that govern them, knowing that by one and the same set of laws they can illuminate or heal — or ignite or electrocute. I of course think that Christianity is ultimately about the ultimate “coherence,” in Bohm’s sense of that word. By that I mean that it is about the way things really are, and we

ignore that reality only at our peril. On the other hand, I recognize the great diversity among Christians, so I'm not much of one for details of dogma. One of the students up at Brattleboro one summer asked me if I believe in absolute truth. My reply was that I do, but that I'm very wary of anyone who is absolutely sure that his or her understanding of absolute truth is the absolutely correct one.

There are three points at which I would like to see the Christian community learn from Bohm:

- Most obviously, the technique of dialogue, as Bohm uses that term.
- Related to that and more important, the often subtle but very powerful influences of "fleeting sensations of fear... and of pleasure," (4) which help to shape each person's interpretations of life experiences including the reading of scriptural texts, thus leading to unconstructive defensiveness, strife and schism.
- Most of all, I think Christians are not exempt from Bohm's warning that the Third Commandment may apply to the products of our minds as well as of our hands. Let me quote him in full here:

"If you make an idol, it may stand in at first for some force which is greater than itself, or for some spiritual energy. But gradually the idol is taken to be it — literally; and therefore you give supreme value to that object. We could say that in a way we are worshiping our words and our thoughts, insofar as they claim to be descriptions or statements about reality just as it is. In fact, they cannot do that — we are giving them too high a value. They can cover some of reality, but they don't cover 'all.'" (95

