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The Dialogal-Existential We Feeling and Non-Violence*

The intellectual movement called existentialism (Spiegelberg, 1960, Luipen, 1963, Sartre, 1957) has been a major force in shaping our modern understanding of the nature of human existence. It emphasizes the primacy of *living* (existence) over that of thinking (essence) and it establishes the importance of the individual person as a choosing and responsible agent, capable of consciousness, of willing, and of actualizing intentions. Existentialism states that we are world-creating and culture-building creatures. Endowed with situated freedom of choice, we are responsible for the kind of relationships and world we create.

There is, however, a major division within this school of thought called existentialism which we might characterize as the *atheistic* vs. the *theistic* camp: Secular and sacred existentialism. The atheistic existentialists like Sartre (1953) and Merleau-Ponty (1962) proclaim that we as individuals are autonomous in our will and choice and not in need of a higher transpersonal authority, of God, in the creation of our living. This branch of existentialism addresses its efforts to elucidate the varieties and the essential nature of our human-world- and self-other relationships, and our existential projects. Its main focus is the study of human meaning making and situational enactments.

Theistic or *religious existentialism*, on the other hand, represented by such thinkers as Marcel (1951), Tillich (1952), Scheler (1961), van Kaam (1964), and Rosenstock-Huessy (1970) believes that we must think not only in the dual terms of human-world relationships but in

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a triadic way: Human-world-under God. Religious existentialism holds that we must recognize a higher authority in human life—God—to whose commands and working in the world we owe obedience, to whose authority we must submit in order to find inspiration, guidance, and value—orientation in our life.

While secular existentialism follows humanistic ideals in its study of human consciousness and achievements, religious existentialism places itself in the tradition of our biblical heritage, our revealed religious tradition in order to elucidate human affairs. We must view human existence in the framework of an ethic, of moral values which define the nature of the good life and of good and evil deeds.

Because religious existentialism is based on the power of the word, it focusses its discussion on the religious significance of language: "Speak that I may see thee". (Stahmer, 1968). Religious existentialism can be characterized as a speech-dependent view of reality. It transcends the individualistic point of view which characterizes secular existentialism—the primacy of subjectivity or man making him—or herself—and takes human interrelationships, human relatedness in love and peace as its starting point.

Religious existentialism meditates on the mystery and promise as well as on the problems of our togetherness. Subjectivity as pure self-interest and self-assertion, as unmitigated wilfulness, as greed and hunger for power and control cannot provide an adequate basis for our understanding of the human situation. We act and respond to others, making common cause and nurturing out togetherness because we have first been addressed by God to do so. We cannot authorize ourselves as individuals merely in terms of private fulfilment—this would be hubris—but we can respond to and enact divine commands in the attitude of surrender and obedience: Your will be done! And God's will for us is that we live in loving togetherness.

This religious branch of existentialism has also been referred to in literature as *dialogal-existentialism*, or speech-thinking, because it emphasizes the primacy of language, of speech passing between us and creating our relationships over that of individual consciousness and private thinking. Only when we articulate our awareness and our thinking in speech, before witnesses, when we address each other by

name, when we act under the imperatives of divine values do we enter the moral-religious sphere of existence: the realm of responsibility to and for each other under the authority of divine commands to incarnate the vision of a heaven on earth. We are to live together in love and in peace.

The dialogal-existential perspective holds that we live embedded in relationships, that human life is a life of dialogue between existential partners, between I and Thou. Martin Buber and Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy are probably the best known of the dialogal thinkers, but it must be clearly understood that they were part of a movement, that they belonged to a whole school of so-called "speech-thinkers" who formed a network of co-operation, support, and dialogal-existential exchange called the "Patmos Kreis" (the Patmos circle) and who edited a journal called "Die Kreatur" (the creature) which flourished for many years. This dialogal movement happened in the wake of World War I, in Germany. The war had been an unprecedented bloodbath over a few square miles, a paroxysm of violence, a dreadful war which decimated the youth of the Western world on both sides. How could such a savage war break out between fraternal and presumably civilized nations? How could such collective madness occur?

All the intellectual sophistication and the complex paradigms of idealistic philosophy had failed. All education and scholarship had failed to provide a non-violent solution to the existing conflicts. And subsequent history only confirms our addiction to violent solutions to settle our differences in world politics as in domestic quarrels. If all the thinking and research in the world cannot prevent violence, maybe we have to base our approach on a different method of producing truth. The dialogalists came to the conclusion that this different approach was the method of "speech-thinking". All our effort has to be directed toward the development of genuine dialogue, and to the study of speech-acts, to what can transpire between us as partners in an encounter as we make the effort to remain on speaking terms with one another and build our relationship on speaking the truth to one another. It is through speech and language, generally, that we establish social relations and create culture together, not by thinking. Only in speaking with one another, only by listening and responding to one another seriously, did the speech-thinkers see any hope for genuine non-violent change and growth. Their attitude regarding the impor-

tance of dialogue and of being addressed by name and responding, was formulated by Rosenstock-Huessy: *Respondeo, etsi mutabor!*—I respond, even though I will be changed.

Speaking up and responding have consequences in social and moral reality. They make a difference. *Yes* and *no* establish our decisions in social discourse; they anchor our responsibility and agency. From a dialogal perspective war and violence mean that we are no longer on speaking terms with one another. We speak different languages. Words mean different things to each party. We distance ourselves from each other in terms of *us* versus *them*; we objectify the adversary in third person terms; we fall into an *I-it* or *we-them* attitude and start projecting all the bad qualities and intentions, all the blame on the opponent: the enemy. The other is perceived as evil, as sub-human, threatening us with attack which thus justifies our pre-emptive strike to destroy the other before it is too late. The Psychoanalytic mechanism of projection sets in. Violence ensues. The see-saw of mutual destruction and violent attack is triggered. We deny the right of the other to exist. We aim to annihilate the other. We smash the identity and integrity of the opponent. Violence aims at death.

But before we actually engage in physical violence we have already done violence to one another linguistically by treating each other in third person terms. We have given up the grace of we-feeling, of considering each other as equals in a larger community to which we both belong. As long as we remain bound into a dialogal partnership, as long as we refer to ourselves as “we”, thus evoking our co-constituting togetherness, we can hope to settle our differences amicably, by mutual agreement. Pronouns have serious consequences.

When we make peace, we allow ourselves to be on speaking terms again with each other. We accept each other's right to exist as autonomous bodies within larger we-contexts. While violence uses mostly physical means and force to subjugate the other to one's will—there is always a malicious wilfulness at the heart of all violence—the non-violent solution trusts in the power and wisdom of speech to help us clarify and settle our differences and disputes. The institution of the court-case and the trial represent the essence of non-violent procedure in serious matters—although the sentence may lead to a violent conclusion of

a different sort. Political and scientific debate are other species of non-violent speaking.

The non-violent solution of employing human discourse in mutuality requires the acknowledgment of a *transpersonal dimension* (Von Eckartsberg, 1981). By this we mean that there must be the recognition that there is a higher and sacred quality of integrity at work, inspiring us and summoning us, which I as an individual, or we as a group, as a nation, have no right to destroy or do violence to by asserting our own will, our own self-interest at the expense of the integrity of the other. The non-violent attitude respects the integrity of the other, as an individual or as a group, as the highest value. Integrity here means the right to exist and flourish, autonomously. All life-forms, all species have integrity in this sense, which can not be violated by us. All life-forms seem to have a will-to-exist as well as a right-to-exist. We do violence to the degree that we give up this ruling principle. We impose our wilfulness on the life of the other, even to the extreme degree of killing; Cessation of dialogue; monological mania; the tradition of ruthless totalitarianism which does not recognize any higher power beyond one's own will as ruler, or ruling class.

The dialogal-existential perspective holds that we have to base our affairs, including our thinking, on the principle of consent. Our engagement with others must ultimately be based on mutual consent. We must ask and be answered. We must address each other as unique persons, as moral agents who have a right to choose, to take a request under consideration and then to come to a decision, to take a stance: to say yes, or no. Persuasion, rhetoric, politics come into play: to "woo" consent. Those who cannot yet, or not in principle, speak for themselves: children, the incompetent, plants and animal species, habitats, and our very earth atmosphere, need spokes-persons and guardians to argue their case before the greedy wilfulness of special interests.

In the dialogal perspective the issue of violence and non-violence shapes up as the difference between *wilful self-assertion* at the expense of the other, versus *consent-seeking dialogue* acknowledging and encouraging the integrity of the other. I said earlier that all living forms, non-human as well as human creations have a certain integrity, a life of

their own, a right to exist and to be protected from the wilfulness of individuals and groups of people or nations who are out to destroy them. This integrity, this life-organizing principle is something sacred, something of infinite value in need of nurturing and protection. This sacred quality commands respect, it makes a claim on our attention and response, it issues a demand-character, it calls us into service. Of course we can refuse, and we can be duped by demagogues and false enthusiasm.

The Olympic games, as a human social creation, are one such reality of transpersonal power. The Olympic movement is a palpable current that surfaces vividly every four years on the occasion of the celebration of these games. They rise into public awareness. You feel awed by the elegance, difficulty, skill-level and human challenge of these sports, these examples of cultivated human skills and their heroes. We feel that violence is done to the sport, to the Olympic spirit as a universal human aspiration when it is manipulated for purposes of power politics. The sport is hurt, because an expression of our highest humanity is violated by such an abuse; the value of victory is tarnished if all the best practitioners are not allowed to compete. In this case the wilfulness of national pride asserts itself violently over the desires of the athletes, one kind of transpersonal reality: nationhood violates another kind of transpersonal reality: the spirit of the Olympics, which is and ought to be superordinate and supervening because it embodies the more universal human aspiration of bodily perfection of all of humankind, as contrasted with the lesser and more wilful manifestation of nationalistic prowess and superiority; a case of hubris.

On the level of a friendship or a marriage it can also be argued that the reality of the "we-experience", the transpersonal quality and integrity of a divine spirit that envelops these particular people into a bond of we-ness takes priority in the non-violent attitude while the *I* takes precedence over the *you* in wilful and violent self assertion. The moment this shift in experience and/or in diction occurs, the moment this separation and isolation tendency rises and moves us into polarization, the unifying atmospheric quality of togetherness, of union and belongingness, of being a member in a larger body vanishes. What remains is opposition born of a sense of separation and isolation, of being cut off. This awareness and acceptance of the *primacy of the we* seems to be the pre-condition for a genuine non-violent life. It

seems to be based on an effort of the personal imagination not to surrender the imaginability of and faith in the desirability of the union, which must precede and ground all active efforts of relationship—and culture-building.

If we could only say to ourselves: I *and* you, we *and* you, if we could think and imagine in terms of the pre-existing or promised unity of fellow-humans which would include and encompass the myriads of relationships, of partial 'wes' which we help constitute and sustain in our living. This is a dialogal issue: the way we talk to and about one another, the way we address others even in the privacy of our own imagination. "We" is the pronoun of non-violence. We-both and we-all names the members of a social body who experience a sense of identity, of solidarity, of kinship.

The attitude of violence insists on the separateness of I versus you, of the we versus them, whereas the non-violent stance insists on the primacy of the we of "us", as members of the human race. Unless you are committed to the comprehensive we of humanity you cannot attain non-violence. But who can genuinely say: "we-all" in all circumstances? Only the saint, the moral genius, the great founders, martyrs and servants of our great religious traditions and socio-political revolutions can live out the vision of peace in all of their relationships.

The vision of universal peace originates in the prophetic message of the Old Testament. It has been referred to as the Messianic vision, as the "shalom-vision" which speaks from the revelation of the "end of times" and of the "fullness of times" when all the prophecies shall have been fulfilled for the chosen people who keep the terms of the covenant and the faith. The New Testament accepts this vision and promise as well, of a universal peace but it widens the scope of the vision to include all humans, regardless of ethnic and/or religious differences: the brotherhood of all humans. Love thy neighbour! became a universal injunction, i.e. everybody is in need, in the fellowship of a divine family as a child of God.

The biblical vision thus inaugurates a new meaning for the pronoun "we" in history. For the first time it comes to refer to and include humanity as a whole: we—all of us humans as a family. Our language reference becomes global and discovers a higher ethical imperative

which can transcend tribal divisions and loyalties. A new ideal of peace-making was pronounced. We are still guided by this ideal today—it remains our only hope.

There always has to be the higher unity and authority, the context of integration which bestows a sacred togetherness on the ensemble, on the lovers, the friends, a family, a team, a nation, a religious community, the human family of races. It is in the light, unity, integration, in the protective and species—nurturant atmosphere of a palpable we, that the I-thou, or we-you interaction takes place. The integrative context precedes and makes possible the separation and isolation which crystalizes out of it.

The United States—Russia superpower conflict has to be dialogued in terms of the we-all of the nations of the earth. The survival and redemption of humankind has to be placed above the self-indulgent power-contest and pride of two rivals who act as if only they mattered. The flourishing of the community, of the family, the team, of friendships i.e. all vital we-forms of personal inter-involvement and commitment have to be emphasized and strengthened in our dialogue and our work.

All 'wes' are transpersonal powers. They consist in groupings in which all the individual members and participants are imbued with one spirit. Through this shared spirit they are unified in a common cause and destiny and they try to bring each and all to a flowering, to a fruition. Non-violence promotes the luxuriating of life-forms. Its aim and purpose is co-operation and co-creation, the embrace and encouragement of dialogue.

War and violence is a reality of history. But so is peace and non-violence. War gives way to peace when the warring factions who have not been on speaking terms with one another start speaking again and begin to articulate their relationship co-operatively. Promoting dialogue is an act of non-violence.

From the dialogal perspective speech is the power that transcends all. Speech is the ultimate transpersonal power. "God is the power who makes us speak", says Rosenstock-Huessy, and as long as we speak to one another in a genuine fashion we put our trust in the healing power of language to bind us co-operatively and in a non-violent manner.

The dialogal-existential position, particularly in the work of Rosenstock-Huessy, spells out what the essentials of non-violent culture-building are. In a trenchant formulation, Rosenstock—Huessy says: "Peace is the introduction of change at the right time and with the consent of the parties concerned." In this understanding, violence is change at the wrong time and by force, produced one-sidedly.

Peace, which we have equated with the process of non-violence, is a quality of experience and condition of being-in-the-world which has to be lived and participated in. It has to be known existentially. It cannot be taught as book-knowledge. If we do not have experiences of peace, in our life, in friendship, love, family, team, nation . . . if we do not know what peace, what non-violence really feels like, then we cannot recognize and feel the transpersonal glow that permeates genuine non-violent relationships.

Peace cannot be taught in schools or peace-academies. Peace is not an intellectual matter but a quality of experience and participation in relationships and community life. The individual is instructed in peace by the social experience in his or her family, tribe, community, school, or camp. This experience has to be provided for the young of our society before we can teach any social doctrines. Rosenstock-Huessy (1970) has developed what he calls the "grammatical method" which studies the four social ills which can befall society or any social body: war - anarchy - decadence - revolution. These evils can be conquered by: peace - unanimity - faith - respect, all of which are created in and through acts of genuine speaking between generations and bodies of people under the authority of a divine revelation of the infinite values of love and peace. Religious existentialism addresses itself to these ultimate issues.

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