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THE ROLE AND VALUES OF DIALOGUE IN CONTEMPORARY HUMANISTIC EDUCATION

Abstract:

In the work, the problems connected with educating and bringing up pupils through dialogue have been considered. The first part refers to the Greek philosophical tradition preferring educating within the framework of dialogue; in such a context the best example seems to be the teaching activity of Socrates. In the second part the views of the most known representative of the so-called philosophy of dialogue, Martin Buber, have been presented and critically analyzed. The usefulness of this branch of contemporary philosophy in pedagogy was pointed to with special attention paid to the values which one can and should realize during the meeting I-You. In this context, it has been shown that virtue ethics, undergoing its revival nowadays, may be helpful in forming pupils' character. The next part of the paper refers to the extremely important function of the discussion at school, conceived as an efficient instrument of educating and bringing up pupils, particularly during the realization of the school programme in the area of humanities.

Keywords:

Socratic method, philosophy of dialogue, values, humanistic education, discussion

The dialogue, in particular in the relation teacher-pupil, was used as an instrument of teaching already in ancient Greece. It certainly was known even to the earlier cultures, however, full documentary evidence referring to its usage comes barely from Greece (at least as the European tradition is considered). Socrates, creating and developing his didactics, which meant at his time the theory of putting apt questions, used the dialogue to teach his pupils. Within the frames of specific eristics developed an elenctical method, which was destructive, leading his interlocutors to contradiction and, in the result, often putting them into a rage which was the result of their helplessness in face of his arguments. The second stage of his method of the discussion, the maieutic one is the constructive phase, making it possible both for the teacher and the pupil to approach the truth. Socrates, as opposed to the Sophists, did not intend to teach his pupils the art of discussion for itself, he intended to use it as an instrument of reaching the truth. Maieutics, in ancient Greece, meant the art of obstetrics, and Fainarete, Socrates's mother, was a midwife; in result to name this constructive stage of discussion the Athenian master used tee-name of his mother's profession. In Plato's *Teaitet* Socrates is presented as an obstetrician asking his pupils apt questions leading to "bearing one's own truth".¹ The Sophists often promised their pupils to know the truth, Socrates, however, was very humble as far as the human cognitive capacities were concerned, therefore he somewhat ironically claimed: "I know, that I know nothing". Perhaps because of this when Chajrefont asked in the Delphs who was the wisest man in the world all-knowing Pythia answered: "Of all men, Socrates is the wisest".² The consciousness of one's ignorance mobilizes both the teacher and his pupil(s) to try to solve the dilemmas appearing within humanities by means of solid dialogue. Plato in his numerous writings thought the dialogue to be a good method of reaching the truth, not only in metaphysical matters but also in getting the knowledge about such values as truth, goodness, and beauty.

As an independent branch of contemporary philosophy the philosophy of dialogue developed in the first half of the twentieth century, first of all within the framework of Judaism. At this stage of my considerations, I will pay particular attention to the views of Martin Buber. The philosopher wrote in the years 1919-1920 not very spacious but extremely rich in meanings book, which was eventually published in the year 1923. Some interpreters of Buber's thought claim that in this booklet the philosophy of dialogue reached its peak. In her publication on Buber Janina Kopytiuk writes: "Buber thought, that the most important task of man was finding one's sense of life, and in this light, he evaluated the worth of different philosophical theories. None of them fulfilled his criteria. In looking for the key to the mystery of life he reached both to the mystics of the East, Jewish, and Christian, and to the philosophy of religion. Also German 'philosophy of life' influenced him, and Kierkegaard's existentialism even more. But the desired answer concerning the sense of life he found in Chassidism (Jewish religious movement in Poland, XVIII-XIX century). He expressed it in *Ich und Du*."³ Let's,

¹ Plato, *Teajtet*, trans. W. Witwicki, Kęty 2002, 150-c-d.

² Diogenes Laertius, *Żywoty i poglądy słynnych filozofów*, trans. I. Krońska, K. Leśniak, W. Olszewski, Warszawa 1984, p. 98.

³ J. Kopytiuk, „Moralny charakter relacji ja-ty u M. Bubera" in:

therefore, have a look at the a priori foundations of Buber's philosophy of dialogue. The central category of Martin Buber's philosophy of dialogue is undoubtedly the relation I-You, standing in opposition to the relation I-It, which is, in fact, a separation. In order to achieve his full humanity, a man should take a relation I-You as often as possible. Just to this relation are unbinding attached the values presented by Martin Buber in his theory. Such values will be analyzed below. The analysis consists accordingly of - a description of the construction of the I-You relation; - a discussion of its properties (values); and a description of spheres in which the relationship may appear.

Writing about the construction of the relation I-You, Buber firstly characterizes its first part, namely the You. The notion "You" means man's certain, specific attitudes towards a partner in dialogue, characterized by the respect due to the partner's existential value. Under the word "You" the author means not only an object of relation, but something that appears in a given situation between a subject and an object, and this means the confirmation of the other's value. The essence of a dialogical situation is expressed by Buber in the following words: "Spirit is not in the I, but between I and You. It is not like the blood that circulates in you but like the air in which you breathe."⁴ You, in opposition to It, cannot be influenced by the categories that rule in the material world, i.e. time, space, causality. The being treated as You is saturated by a spirit. When in turn the "I" is considered (of course the "I" of the I-You relation), it is internally well-ordered and can be named "person." In Buber's understanding the notion "person" means a man open to dialogue, ready at every moment to lead a dialogue with a being from which a call comes.

According to Buber, such a relation is characterized by the following features: presence, unmediated, exclusiveness, mutuality, impermanence and responsibility. The feature of presence means readiness of a subject for the meeting, readiness to accept a call and answer it. It is the presence understood as "hic et nunc," because: "The I of the basic word I-It ... has only past and no present," whereas "What is essential is lived in the present."⁵ The feature of being unmediated means that nothing appears between the two objects of dialogue. According to my interpretation, it can be understood in two ways: cognitively, as the lack of any prior assumptions, and valuationally. In the first case, there is nothing conceptual between I and You. As far as the valuational sense of being unmediated is concerned, this means that all additional aims, however worthy they might be, should be excluded from the relation because the only aim of the dialogue is the dialogue itself. The feature of exclusiveness means that only two beings can participate in a given dialogue at a given moment, because man's possibilities of initiating and sustaining a given dialogue are limited, and complete concentration upon one partner in dialogue excludes the possibility of being involved in dialogue with other partners at the same time. It should be mentioned that this limitation does not refer to the Eternal You (God) – able to lead simultaneous

⁴ M. Buber, "Ich und Du", in *Das Dialogische Prinzip*, Heidelberg 1973, p.41.

⁵ Ibidem, p. 17.

dialogues with all other beings. Buber stresses this fact many times.⁶ The feature of mutuality means interaction between the two partners involved in a dialogue. Buber states this outright thusly: "Relation is reciprocity. My You acts on me as I act on it. Our students teach us, our works form us."⁷ Before mutuality appears, we have a situation in which one of the sides in the dialogue sends an invitation to dialogue, and the other side answers it. It is the characteristic trait of such a dialogue that every being can send a call to dialogue, whereas the answer can be supplied only by a being which is a person, first of all by man. The feature of impermanence means in turn that the I-You relation does not last forever, that it has a tendency to become the I-It relation, and therefore constant effort is needed to sustain the first relation and to limit the second. No man, however, is capable of being in a constant relation of I-You, and Buber stresses this sad fact numerous times. Accordingly, in Buber's theory, one can distinguish two kinds of responsibility. This – unfortunately – has remained unnoticed so far by all the interpreters of Buber's theory whom I know of. The first one, explicitly expressed by the author himself and therefore generally acknowledged by critics, is the responsibility of the I for the You. However, one can talk about the second kind of responsibility, expressed by the author only implicitly and strongly connected with the category of freedom, which is the responsibility for giving up the I-It relation in order to get involved in the I-You relation, as often as possible.

Quite a separate problem is the question referring to potential partners in dialogue, in regard to which a dialogue can be initiated, or who initiate it themselves.

Firstly, dialogue may be initiated with nature, that is with different forms of the material world. In this case, "The relation vibrates in the dark and remains below language. The creatures... are unable to come to us, and the You we say to them sticks to the threshold of language."⁸ Because beings coming out of this sphere cannot use speech, they turn towards a man with a call formulated in a way suited to their particular level of development. In the very important *Afterword* to "I and Thou" written in 1957, that is, after more than thirty years of thinking about the theory under discussion, the thinker answered the question concerning the character of mutuality given to man by nature. And so in this sphere, reaching from stones to stars, one can basically talk about "the threshold of mutuality" in which we find the presence of the phenomena of both the biotic and also of abiotic Nature.

Secondly, dialogue may be initiated with a man. According to Buber: "Here the relation is manifest and enters the language. We can give and receive the You."⁹ A man sends his appeal using speech, with one of the languages. This is truly the most essential kind of dialogue. In the above-mentioned *Afterword*, the author answers the question of whether full mutuality is always possible in this sphere. He claims that full mutuality is not possible in every particular relation that it may or may not happen. What is

⁶ Compare my divagations on this subject, to which I often refer. Leszek Pyra, "Values within Relations", in *Analecta Husserliana* LXVII, Printed in the Netherlands 2000, p. 56 and following.

⁷ M. Buber, "Ich und Du", op. cit., p.19.

⁸ Ibidem, p.10.

⁹ Ibidem.

more, there exist such I-You relations in which one a priori cannot count on full mutuality. Such a situation is typical of the following relations: educator-pupil, psychotherapist-patient, clergyman-worshipper. For example: in case of the relation educator-pupil, the educator, in order to bring out what is best in his pupil, must participate in the meeting by also looking at it from the pupil's point of view, practicing the kind of relation which embraces the whole situation. Similar situations appear in two other cases. In the light of the above considerations, it seems obvious that this kind of dialogue is the most important as far as the pedagogical process is considered. Some commentators on Buber's theory call him a "personalist". I think they are right, all the more so as he often stresses the fact that the effort connected with achieving and sustaining the relation I-You confirms the development of personality, the fact that the person is being created. In addition to this Buber often repeats that through the meetings with others we become true persons. The Polish representative of the philosophy of dialogue, called incontrology, A. Nowicki remarks: "Human being is created and modified through consecutive meetings".¹⁰ And in some other book he continues this motif in the following way: "Our independence, our originality, our individuality appear (...) - to a great extent – thanks to interesting meetings."¹¹ One can certainly agree with such an opinion.

Thirdly, dialogue may be initiated with spiritual beings. Here. "...the relation is wrapped in a cloud but reveals itself, it lacks but creates language. We hear no You and yet feel addressed; we answer – creating, thinking, acting..."¹² The above-mentioned spiritual beings are, first of all, it seems, the products of culture. In case of dialogue with them, the I of an artist – every man is an artist in certain situations! – answers a call through the realization of his own artistic visions, whereas the I of the receiving person does so through the reception of the work of art, within concrete aesthetic experience. In the *Afterword* of 1957, Buber distinguishes "the spirit that has already entered the world" from "the spirit that has not yet entered the world but is ready to do so."¹³ As examples of the first, he mentions concrete products of people who died thousands of years ago: the traditional sayings of a master, and the Doric column. In the second case, Buber refers to creative influences and inspiration of the spirit that everyone has felt at some time. Such spirit demands a realization, a fulfillment on behalf of the person within the frame of a given artistic activity.

Among the above-mentioned kinds of dialogue, the most important is the dialogue with the man. According to Buber, only in the dialogue of man with man one can achieve full mutuality, because only in such cases does a call equal an answer with respect to quality – in both aspects, that is with respect to the quality of beings engaged in a given relation, and with respect to means of communication (human speech).

Much attention is paid to Buber's considerations to the dialogue of a human being with the Eternal You. In spite of appearances of other kinds of dialogue, I am not certain

¹⁰ A. Nowicki, *Portrety filozofów w poezji, malarstwie i muzyce*, Lublin 1978, p. 17.

¹¹ A. Nowicki, *Studia z inkontrologii*, Lublin 1984, p.7.

¹² M. Buber, "Ich und Du", op. cit., p.10.

¹³ Ibidem, p. 126.

whether the fourth kind of dialogue is considered in this case. The author stresses the fact that the dialogue I-Eternal You is superior to the dialogues with nature, man and spiritual beings, that it constitutes their base, conditions them and becomes realized in each I-You relation. According to the author, every encounter ultimately leads to the Eternal You; he is deeply convinced that when a given being does not answer a call directed towards it, the answer is supplied – somewhat as a substitute – by the Eternal You, and it is done by particular beings and events of the world.

According to Buber, the dialogue is the process of intellectual, psychical and moral (spiritual) nature, the process in which there appear some changes, usually positive ones within the self, both in the I and the You. The dialogue in the educational context, widely understood, but treated first of all as the method of teaching enables to enlarge the area of the knowledge of those who participate in it, enriches the possibilities of knowing the world of nature and of culture and, what seems to be extremely important I think, enlarges self-knowledge. In this context, one can distinguish between the three kinds of dialogue. Firstly: the dialogue of the pupil with oneself, the so-called inner dialogue, which is not accepted by the Jewish thinker; he thinks that it is simply a monologue. But such kind of dialogue is propagated and developed by some interpreters of Buberian thought, for example, Reinhold Niebuhr.¹⁴ Secondly: the dialogue of the teacher with the pupil, which is certainly the most interesting from the point of view of pedagogy. Thirdly: the dialogue among pupils themselves, especially when the problematics which is being discussed are important for all or at least majority of the participants of the discussion. During discussions pupils acquire some capacities, for example how to: precisely formulate their thoughts, rule over emotions, listen patiently to the partner(s) of the discussion. Dialogue and the discussion refer often to some practical problems, which pupils meet in their everyday life, but they may also refer to theoretical situations, for example, cases described in literary works, with which pupils should be acquainted with before discussions. In such dialogical situation, teacher and pupil become partners, must, however, open to each other, which is the condition *sine qua non* of a real meeting. Educating through dialogue enables the teacher to present his own view upon a given problem, he should not, however, impose any final, definite solution of a problem. The dialogue in humanities takes the shape of a discussion, and cannot be overestimated. It allows to initiate and develop the constructive thinking among young men, allows the critical view upon the existing surrounding reality, including themselves, enables to perceive the reality holistically. The Polish philosopher, Henryk Elzenberg, presents some rules which should be respected in a discussion: the opponent should be respected, what we claim should be precisely formulated, unnecessary divagations should be avoided, uttered opinions should be rationally supported and one should carefully listen to the opponent's argumentation and answer his questions adequately.¹⁵ Humanities require discussions, they enable acquiring and developing not only theoretical problems but first of all practical ones, also the ones which we would call existential ones, therefore

¹⁴ R. Niebuhr, *The Self and the Dramas of History*, London 1956, p. 11, and following.

¹⁵ H. Elzenberg, „Pro Domo philosophorum”, in *Studia Filozoficzne*, vol. 12, 1986, pp. 10-11.

the ones referring to the sense of life. The essence of teaching within the area of humanities comes down both to the method of teaching and to a certain presentation of a moral attitude in regard to reality. It seems therefore obvious that pupils cannot only be passive recipients of the knowledge supplied by their teacher.

In comparison to the sciences, the specifics of teaching in humanities consists in this, *inter alia*, that in reference to the problems appearing within them one can distinguish diverse, often excluding themselves opinions, in sciences usually one explanation (theory) is established as the dominant one. Therefore there appears the danger of skepticism, subjectivism, and relativism. J. Dewey notices, that in humanities knowledge is never ultimate, it undergoes constant modifications, changes in the process of dialectical dependence in the relation subject-object; at the same time, one should remark that the American author locates humanities in the system of values.¹⁶ The teacher should be fully conscious of such a situation. He must know/show that divergent views somehow coexist, influence each other and coexplain in certain contexts. The questions put and the answers delivered should, although it sometimes does not happen, lead to the deeper understanding of a given dilemma, for example of a moral nature. The critics of such discussions claim that they may lead to chaos, but an experienced teacher knows how to organize the discussion in order to avoid such situations. He certainly should be tolerant, open to new views and ready for cooperation. In this context, critical and versatile clarification of a given problem is needed. In the didactical process, pupils learn to make such analysis through imitation. Writing about educational dialogue Joanna Rutkowiak points to its following aims: getting lacking pieces of information, working out a common standpoint in a disputable issue, undertaking an effort to fully understand a discussed problem.¹⁷ Such areas as literature, art, philosophy (ethics especially), sociology, political sciences, economy, ecology mesh with each other, none of the answers delivered can be treated as a final one. Tolerance is a fundamental value as far as the fruitful dialogue is considered. The respect for the other is necessary: it results in this that we treat the other as an unrepeatable person and as valuable as we are. According to Czesław Znamierowski one of the basic moral norms in the relation is friendliness, which "should direct the acts of man and control the movements of the heart and motives of action."¹⁸ Interpreting Znamierowski's views the other prominent Polish sociologist, Maria Ossowska, writes: "To interpret something friendly means that one does not reprimand somebody as long as it is possible."¹⁹ In this context, Ossowska pays also attention to the features like disinterestedness, gentleness, goodness, mildness, devotion, helpfulness, compassion, tolerance, understanding. All these features make dialogue possible. And they help justice and love to appear. True dialogue requires their realization. And one thing more seems to be extremely important: school should teach responsibility, which is traditionally connected with

¹⁶ Compare divagations on this in E. Lindeman, *The Meaning of Adult Education*, Montreal 1961, pp. 108-123.

¹⁷ J. Rutkowiak, „O dialogu edukacyjnym. Rusztowanie kategorialne”, in: Pytanie, dialog, wychowanie, J. Rutkowiak (ed.), Warszawa 1992, p. 28.

¹⁸ Cz. Znamierowski, *Zasady i kierunki etyki*, Warszawa 1957, p. 61.

¹⁹ M. Ossowska, *Normy moralne. Próba systematyzacji*, Warszawa 1970, p. 179.

freedom, as we know. Without freedom, one cannot bear responsibility, repeats, again and again, Józef Tischner.²⁰

J. Bruner in turn, the author of the original, didactic conception stimulating the cognitive curiosity of pupils and the development of positive motivation underlines a great importance of dialogue among the subjects of educational situation. He writes: "Similarly as all-knowing narrator disappeared from the contemporary novel, the all-knowing teacher will disappear from the classroom of the future."²¹ At the bottom of the Bruner's culturalistic theory of education, one can point out the principle of interactivity showing the transmission of knowledge and capacities as a unique exchange among men, which includes both the teacher and his pupils. The teacher partly resigns of his expertise and therefore has a chance, according to Bruner, to share his authority with pupils showing that he learns together with them. This does not mean that he loses authority, he rather becomes a certain kind of a partner in "society of mutual learning": the situation resembling very much one of Socrates and his pupils. Summing up I would like to notice that the dialogue seems to have a great potential in the context of teaching and bringing up young people, the potential which certainly cannot be underestimated.

²⁰ Compare my discussion of this problem in L. Pyra,

²¹ J. Bruner, *Kultura edukacji*, trans. T. Brzostowska-Tereszkiewicz, Kraków 2010, p. 40.