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The Dialogic Nature of Signs

“Semiotics Institute on Line”

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1.

Dialogue and Alterity

Dialogue and dialogism: formal and substantial dialogue

We may define “dialogue” as external or internal discourse where the word of the other, not necessarily of another person, interferes with one’s own word. It is also a genre of discourse. Philosophers such as Charles S. Peirce and Mikhail Bakhtin consider dialogue as the modality itself of thought.

A distinction must be drawn between purely *substantial dialogism* – or *substantial dialogicality* – and purely *formal dialogism* – or *formal dialogicality*.

Substantial dialogism is not determined by the *dialogic form* of the text, i. e. *formal dialogism*, but by the *degree of dialogism* in that text which may or may not assume the form of a dialogue. In other words, substantial dialogism is determined by the higher or lower degree of *openness towards alterity*.

What does ‘alterity’ mean? Alterity (or otherness) indicates the existence of something autonomous, independent from the I’s initiative, volition, consciousness, recognition. From our perspective, alterity stands for materiality understood as objectivity. The world of physical objects is other with respect to the I. One’s own body, anybody’s body is other in its autonomy from volition and consciousness. But the very other is the other in his\her irreducibility,

refractoriness to the I. Murder is the evidence that the other is able to resist and checkmate the I, it is evidence of the powerlessness of this I.

Of course, the condition of ‘relative alterity’ – classifiable in terms of secondness in Peirce’s terminology – is also another possibility. However, this kind of alterity pertains to the I related to a role (father to child, student to teacher, husband to wife, etc.). On the contrary, the alterity of the other as other, *autrui* as Levinas would say, is ‘absolute alterity’

Consequently, in case of absolute and non-relative Alterity (see Levinas 1961, 1974), the otherness of the other (person) can neither be reduced to the community We – namely Heidegger’s *Mitsein* (*being-with*) – nor to the Subject-Object relation – namely Sartre’s *being-for*. Alterity is located inside the subject, inside the I, in the heart itself of the subject, without being englobed by the latter. For this reason the subject cannot become a closed totality but it is continually exposed to dialogue, it is itself dialogue, a relation between self and other. Contrary to Sartre and Hegel, the self of “being conscious of oneself” does not coincide with consciousness nor does it presuppose it; rather, it is pre-existent to consciousness and it is connected to consciousness through a relation of Alterity. The other is inseparable from the ego, the I, the Self (the *Même* as intended by Emmanuel Levinas), but it cannot be included within the totality of the ego. The other is necessary to the constitution of the ego and its world, but, at the same time, it is a constitutive impediment to the integrity and the definitive closure of the I and of the world.

The relation to the other — as Charles S. Peirce, Victoria Welby, Mikhail Bakhtin, Charles Morris, and Levinas teach us — is a relation of excess, of surplus, of escape from objectivating thought, it is a release from the subject-object relation. On a linguistic level it produces internal dialogism within the word, such that the word will never be an integral word. We will come back to this theme, later on.

Going back to the subject of formal and substantial dialogism: dialogue may be apparent and, in reality, it may be connected with the logic of identity, that is, *monological* logic; or, on the contrary, it may open to displacement in the sense of *alterity*. In the second case, dialogue is far from ‘attainment dialogue,’ where the task of interlocutors is to achieve a given end, namely, to maintain and reconfirm identity. Instead, dialogue in the sense of substantial dialogue is indispensable in *argumentative* reasoning, when a question of reasoning that is not fixed in terms of defence and reproduction of identity but open and available to otherness. Mikhail Bakhtin

showed how phenomena such as unilaterality, ossification, and rectilinear *dialectics* derive from *sclerotized dialogue*, which indicates the lack of openness towards otherness. Monological, unilinear and totalizing dialectics is oriented towards a synthesis and a conclusion which are already given. As such it calls for a *critique of dialogic reason*. This is the critique of the category of Identity that now dominates Western thought and praxis. But we will focus on this topic later on.

As a specific discourse form dialogue is also characterized as a verbal action which, as any verbal action, is either an end in itself or instrumental to something else. In this case it is a means to an end, or – a third possibility – it may be intent upon determining and evaluating ends and means. Consequently, we may propose the following tripartite typology of dialogue:

(1) *Dialogue as being an end in itself*, namely, as *conversation or dialogue of entertaining*. In other words, this kind of dialogue refers to talking for the sake of talking, dialogue with a *phatic* function. This in turn can be divided into:

(1.1) *conformative-repetitive dialogue*; and

(1.2) *di-verting dialogue*.

An example of the variant (1.1) is offered by certain forms of television entertainment which tend to be repetitive, to obey to predetermined compositional-instructional rules; these forms of entertainment work as predetermined decoding processes.

(2) *Dialogue functional to attainment*, which may in turn be divided into:

(2.1) *exchange dialogue*, and

(2.2) *competition dialogue*

(3) *Cooperative or reflective or investigative dialogue*. Using the degree of substantial dialogism as the criterion for differentiation, this type of dialogue may be classified (on an increasing scale in degree of dialogism) as:

(3.1) *re-discovery and revelation dialogue*,

(3.2) *research and construction dialogue*,

(3.3) *exploration and problematization dialogue*.

To sum up, this first lesson is about the key concepts of “dialogue” and “dialogism”, or dialogicality, considered within a Peircean-Bakhtinian theoretical framework. An important working instrument for our analysis is the distinction between “formal dialogism”, which refers to the fact that a text is enacted or represented in the “form of a dialogue” within a given

discourse genre, and “substantial dialogism”, which concerns the “degree of dialogism” of a given text, whether there is a dialogue on a formal level or not. These two concepts do not necessarily coincide. In fact, a dialogue on a formal level does not necessarily imply substantial dialogue, while the latter does not necessarily present itself in the form of a dialogue.

Formal dialogues may be divided into a series of different types and subtypes; the three main types are: 1) “dialogue as being an end in itself”; 2) “operative dialogue”, that is a dialogue functional to the achievement of some other aims; 3) “cooperative and investigative dialogue”, that is a dialogue evaluating means and ends. Each may be objectified in the philosophic discourse and in the various genres of literary discourse

Dialogue may either be dominated by the logic of *identity* or by the logic of *alterity*. In the first case, dialogue tends to reconfirm standpoints, interests and values, and therefore is dialogue only in a formal sense. Instead, in the second case, dialogue is characterized by its readiness to interrogate standpoints, interests and values so that nothing is preconstituted, prefixed and guaranteed. This is the case of substantial dialogue. This means that form is not a determining factor for attainment dialogue: we may have a dialogic form without substantial dialogism and vice versa.