

Thinking for Oneself and with Others

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The most distinctive feature of the theory and practice of community of philosophical inquiry (CPI), which at first glance appears contradictory, is how it promotes both communal, intersubjective meaning and thinking for oneself. Typically we think of the two as, if not opposed, then not particularly related. Thinking for oneself is usually associated with 18th century Western Enlightenment - the automatic problematization of collectively held beliefs - skepticism, and individualism. Community is usually associated with the affirmation of collectively held beliefs and assumptions, and with the necessary sacrifice of individual opinion for a greater good.

CPI combines the individual and the collective, not so much in a new way as in a way which has been always been present to us, but which has emerged historically in association with the form of intersubjective discourse called dialogue. Explicit, focused attention on a theory of dialogue is as far as I know specific to the twentieth century, although it has its philosophical roots in German idealism from Kant, through Fichte, Hegel and Feuerbach. It is Feuerbach from whom we have the phrase «I and Thou,» which Rosenzweig, in his metaphysics of dialogue between God, world, and person, passed on to Buber. The philosophy of dialogue travels, in three very different ways, into existentialism in Levinas, into phenomenology in Merleau-Ponty, and into hermeneutics and play-theory in Gadamer.

Gadamer has called Socratic dialogue a «traveling apart toward unity,» which perfectly expresses the apparent antinomy associated with the structure and dynamics of CPI. Dialogue assumes two things at once: the radical incommensurability of individual perspectives, and at the same time an openness to having one's perspective changed through interaction with an other. In dialogue, we are positioned in an existential and interpretive space which Buber (1970) and others have called the «between»- a space which, in hermeneutical terms, is neither that of the interpreter or the interpreted, of the subject or of the object. Dialogue is the event-structure itself of a space of difference, of an interrogation of the other - or of the object of inquiry - or both - which is by necessity also a self-interrogation. It is a unique and significant intersubjective location. Buber evokes this interpretive space for us in his account of the moment of breaking out of objectivization and the categorical typification of experience which he calls the «I-Thou» relation. Levinas refers to it as a «disorientation,» a «disruption» which leads to the «rupture

of the egoist-I and its reconditioning in the face of the Other» (Levinas, 1987, p. 17). The reconditioning leads us to recognize the other in her individuality as the «unique one»- the one who escapes or overrides all the ego's projections, and comes existentially even before the ego. Dialogue theory grounds the subject, not just in the other, but at the boundaries of its own subjectivity - there where it can know itself only in relation to a dialectical intersubjective process of mutual transformation. So even as dialogue individualizes the other, it creates community between self and other.

The structure of intersubjectivity characteristic of communal dialogue demands, not abandoning, but expanding the structure of the dia- into the multilogical. Corrington (1987) uses Peirce's semiology to develop the idea of CPI as a community of signs, or a «sign matrix.» In a community of interlocutors, no statement is isolated from those which have gone before it, nor undetermined by the statement to which it responds - and by implication, by the statement to which it will give rise. This implies a whole - an emergent system of signs - but since intersubjective discourse is in time, the whole quality of the matrix will never be present except as a kind of implicit gestalt, or a horizon. Dialogical thinking is an «unbounded series,» in which any given sign - i.e. idea, or proposition - in that «it is determined by both its antecedents and its consequents,» will never have a fully determinable truth value. «Only in an ideal future will the sign series reach full convergence and total transparency» (Corrington, pp. 12, 13). In CPI, we are drawn toward this horizon, which represents the coordination of each individual perspective in a communal judgment which we can call «truth,» but as is characteristic of horizons, although it is always present it never arrives. In CPI truth, final judgment, is always emerging, always pending, always suggesting itself. Unless we had the strong felt sense of this, we wouldn't do it. Even with this sense, we operate in a paradox of sorts: «full convergence and total transparency» is promised only if each perspective retains its finite, located integrity-i.e. only if each person «thinks for himself.» Yet we enter the «between» of dialogue, the experience of difference, the challenge of thinking with others, with the promise of overcoming our own finitude, in search of that truth «of the long run» which will be everyone's truth. How can these two impulses co-exist, much less foster each other?

Kant provides us with another way into this apparent antinomy of the individual and collective with his idea of *sensus communis logicus*, or logical common sense (as opposed to aesthetic common sense, or «taste»). In his *Critique of Judgment* (1987, pp. 160-161) he provides us with three «maxims» of «common human understanding»:

1) To think for oneself; 2) To think from the standpoint of everyone else; and 3) to think always consistently. The first is the maxim of an *unprejudiced*, the second of a *broadened*, the third of a *consistent* way of thinking.

The first maxim, which he refers to as «the maxim of the understanding,» is indeed associated with Enlightenment for him, and involves throwing off what he calls «passive reason.» The greatest prejudice, on his account, «consists in thinking of nature as not subject to the rules which the understanding through its own essential law lays down as the basis of nature.» (p. 161) In fact he calls this prejudice «superstition.» The one who thinks for herself is obedient only to her understanding, by which I assume Kant means what the transcendental ego can know, and the extent to which the transcendental ego is

able to connect, through the imagination, its empirical intuitions with its conceptual structures. She who thinks for herself accepts only what makes sense to her. Here thinking for oneself is a cognitive disposition reflecting the paradoxical subjectivism of «pure» categorical reason, which «lays down the basis of nature,» i.e. which understands itself to give rather than be given by nature. All that saves it from solipsism is its invocation of a universal, «essential law» of the understanding from which we cannot depart without falling into «superstition.» Without the next maxim, this sort of conviction amounts almost to a superstition itself. It is radical idealism on the level of Fichte, in which the «I» posits the not-1. In terms of intersubjectivity, it is a pre-dialogical condition, the noetic modality which Levinas (1987, p. 68) describes, variously, as «intelligibility,» «reason,» and «knowledge.» He says,

The light that permits encountering something other than the self, makes it encountered as if this thing came from the ego. The light, the brightness, is intelligibility itself making everything come from me, it reduces every experience to an element of reminiscence. Reason is alone. And in this sense knowledge never encounters anything truly other in the world. This is the profound truth of idealism.

The second maxim-»to think from the standpoint of everyone else»-Kant calls the maxim of «judgment,» in that it calls on us to reflect on our own judgment «from a universal standpoint.» (p. 161) It is actually an impossibility (as, in fact, is the first), an ideal of intersubjective transparency or interchangeability toward which the «between» of dialogue represents the furthest boundary. I can only think from the standpoint of the other through reproducing the signs that she produces-whether they be verbal or non-verbal - as my own signs. A sign «received» by me is not the same sign that was «sent,» but my reproduction of that sign, which is another sign in the series. So it maybe more appropriate to speak, as we do in community of inquiry theory, of a «coordination of perspectives,» or standpoints, or judgments. The uniqueness of each standpoint is never abrogated, for it is grounded in the lived body, in me being here now in this place and time and you there now in that place and time; it is a function of existential finitude.

On the other hand, I only know myself in my finitude through my relation to other finitudes, and to a world characterized by finitude, which is already at least a partial overcoming of finitude.' And if I accept the notion that reflection, mind - self-consciousness itself - is only possible when I begin to see myself as an other, then to «think from the standpoint of everyone else» is impossible not to do. «It is,» Mead (1934) says, «as he takes the attitude of the other that the individual is able to realize himself as a self' (p.194). This is a complete reversal of Fichtean idealism, in which the I posits the other; in this case, I am given to myself by an other - an internalized other to be sure, but an other - first an individual other (mother, father), then a universal, categorical one.

Every individual self within a given society or social community reflects in its organized structure the whole relational pattern of organized social behavior which that society or community exhibits or is carrying on, and its organized structure is constituted by this pattern ... (T)he structure of each (individual self is differently constituted by this pattern from the way in which the structure of any other is so constituted. The individual is continually reacting back against

this society. Every adjustment involves some change in the community to which the individual adjusts himself (Mead, p. 202).

Mead's argument knits Kant's first and second maxims together. It shows how they are both possible, and also shows how the apparent antinomy of individual and collective is resolved. The self already comes «othered»- carrying the universal other as the angle of vision through which it posits itself. Its «continually reacting back» is the felt dynamic nowness which is the source of the need and the ability to think for oneself. The location from which it reacts is the location of the «unique one,» the unrepeatability of its finitude. No one else can stand in that particular place and time, yet that place and time is related to every other finite place and time of every other subject as signs in a sign matrix, and in this relation the self experiences infinitude. So just as it is impossible to overcome my finitude and take a universal standpoint, it is impossible to fully enter my finitude except from a universal standpoint. And yet this second maxim also represents a pre-dialogical condition, for it is, not the self positing the other, but the self posited by the other, and in neither case is there a «between.»

Nor is Kant's third maxim - the maxim of consistent thinking, or «reason»- inherently dialogical, for dialogue is an event, a movement, not a form of discourse or argumentation. The third maxim seems to me to represent what we refer to as «reasonableness,» that is, the disposition to give and to expect reasons for judgments, and to expect of oneself and of others that they cohere in a larger framework of reasons, whether those reasons be called «facts» or «beliefs» or «arguments.» Kant says that it «is the hardest to attain and can in fact be attained only after repeated compliance with a combination of the first two has become a skill.» (pp. 161-162) It is difficult to know exactly what Kant is indicating by this «skill» of combining thinking for oneself and thinking from the standpoint of the other. Perhaps he means a bringing into conscious practice the situation of intersubjectivity that Mead describes in the quote above. He says, «The individual is continually reacting back against this society. Every adjustment involves some change in the community to which the individual adjusts himself.» I learn to «react back» from my own finitude, which is both a form of adjustment to the community and also, through that reaction, readjusts the community as a whole, which in turn causes another reacting back and adjustment in my part, and so on. Only when this becomes a praxis for me am I able, Kant would seem to be saying, to think «consistently.» I would suggest that this «skill» is the central skill of dialogue.

Certainly it doesn't cover the concept of dialogue in a complete way, but I am just thinking here about dialogue in the discourse structure of CPI. What it suggests to me is that dialogue is the paradoxical business of going beyond thinking for oneself but only while or through thinking for oneself. Perhaps this is what Gadamer means by «traveling apart toward unity.» One holds to one's understanding even while acknowledging that understanding comes from beyond oneself - that it emerges from a meeting of self and other in a discursive space which belongs to neither. This discursive space is physically symbolized by the space of the circle which we make as we're seated on a classroom floor or around a table. It's a full kind of emptiness, of which each of us forms an outer boundary, but who's inner circle appears infinite. And the dialogue we are undergoing is playing out in multiple modalities- posturally, kinesically, gesturally, auditorally, visually, phonemically, musically (stress pitch and juncture).

The level to which we pay the most attention to in community of *philosophical* inquiry is of course the conceptual. And in this dimension it is logic which plays the prominent role in operationalizing Kant's third maxim. In our communal discourse, logic functions as a referee, or arbiter, or disciplinarian, or set of rules, or operative structure-or the measurements, shape, layout, boundary lines, etc. of the playing field on which the game of philosophical dialogue is played (or plays itself). It is the law of contradiction-the fundamental law of any logic-which demands the skill of combining the first two maxims. It is where the first two maxims meet each other in language: where thinking for oneself must be articulated in universal terms, and where thinking which is understood to be universal must be articulated in terms which the unique one can understand. So the discourse of CPI does two things: it fosters the differentiation of the individual from the collective, but at the same time it is the affirmation of that logos which Heraclitus (1960, pp. 69, 75) says is «common to all,» and reinforces each individual's responsibility to his «one world in common,» to the «intelligence» of «what encompasses him.» And it is logic which frames this differentiating and unifying movement.

Mead's claim that «every adjustment involves some change in the community to which the individual adjusts himself» also evokes a further characteristic of CPI, which is the suggestive ease with which it lends itself to systems-theory explanation. Any community of persons comprises such a system, which is continually emerging through the interaction of Kant's first and second maxims, within the discursive context of his third maxim. When the individual-community interaction has become a «skill» which each member is increasingly good at, then the process of self-correction through which the system builds becomes clearer, more palpable, more positive. It is self-correction which distinguishes a merely homeostatic community from a dialogical community. Dialogue pre-supposes self-correction, and in communal dialogue, individual self-correction is also communal self-correction, because any adjustment of an individual perspective is also an adjustment of the coordination of perspectives, which includes everyone's perspective.

In summary, human dialogue is the intersubjective location where individual and communal, self and other, thinking for oneself and thinking with others, are possible. It is a characteristic of dialogue that it is never automatic-for that is a sure index of objectification, or the I-It relation. Dialogue always involves risk, for it is a continuous process of mutual reconfiguration. It is only as predictable as the next response, and if the response can be predicted, dialogue has ceased or is in remission.

In the theory and practice of philosophy for children it is impossible to avoid the larger educational implications of this model. Once the notion of dialogue has entered educational praxis, as it has in this century in the work of Freire and Lipman, the hegemonic status of the traditional, transmissionist form of pedagogy is permanently thrown into doubt. CPI pedagogy cannot be separated from a larger educational vision based on dialogue. In the case of schools in general and their practices, the concept of dialogue has significant implications, not just for the transformation of curriculum, but the transformation of the whole community of this child-adult collective, this form of intentional community we call school. How would a curriculum planned through adult-child and adult-adult dialogue look? And an administrative structure based on adult-adult and adult-child and child-child dialogue? Certainly we have some prophetic hints in the work of educators like A.S. Neil, George Dennison, Chris Meroviglio, and numerous other brilliant and heroic

experimentalists, the majority unsung, of roughly the last century. But they are still voices crying in the wilderness, while our civilization labors to bring forth a philosophy of childhood worthy of their vision. Lipman's work represents a crucial moment in this labor, which its deceptive simplicity belies. One cannot help but believe that it represents the future of the adult-child relation and its institutionalization in schools.

NOTE

1. The absence of this knowledge may be one of the sources of the bliss and the terrors of infant subjectivity, or what Freud called «primary narcissism.»

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