

On the nature and purpose of dialogue

Informed by the study of Bohms' On Dialogue and experience conducting 2,500+ primary research interviews

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"...collective coherent ways of thinking and acting only emerge when there is truly a flow of meaning, which starts with allowing many views, an approach that defensiveness precludes. ...coherence is a way of living rather than a fixed state." **David Bohm**

"Beliefs are hypotheses to be tested, not treasures to be guarded." [Philip Tetlock \(via Ltcwrk\)](#)

"I've really shifted from being a judger of everything to being an appreciator of everything, appreciating how it is. It brings me to a much more intimate relationship. The judging mode is always distancing myself from everything. I'm not even judging the judging. What I'm doing is I'm going closer and closer to the fire all the time." **Ram Dass**

"The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function." F. Scott Fitzgerald

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Lines of inquiry

What is the purpose of dialogue?

The purpose of dialogue is in reaching a deeper understanding of ourselves and the world we live in through the exploration of multiple points of view in an open, collaborative and non-judgmental way. Dialogue is a process to rise from error.

How does the quality of our observation determine what we perceive in dialogue? Put differently, how does the way in which we attend to the world influence what we see? What degrades the quality of observation?

The quality of our observation plays a huge and generally underappreciated role in how we perceive the world. If our capacity for observation is degraded by desire, greed or fear, for example, it becomes very difficult to see what is actually going on in the present moment. By “wanting things to be a certain way”, however subtly, we become distanced from what is actually going on, our observation being clouded by psychological projection. *The truth awaits eyes unclouded by longing.*

When and why do obstacles to high quality dialogue typically arise?

Obstacles to dialogue arise when we cling to our opinions and the assumptions underpinning those opinions and defend them. The instinct to judge and defend, embedded in the defense mechanisms of our biological heritage, are the source of incoherence in our own lives and in society at large. The great challenge with dialogue, as David Bohm would say, lies in simply allowing multiple points of view to be. People generally have a strong habit to defend their view, to agree with views that correspond with their own, and to disagree with those that differ. Fixed ideas and fixed patterns of thinking separate us from one another and from the dynamic world that we live in.

Charlie Munger has something helpful to say about all this: “The ability to destroy your ideas rapidly instead of slowly when the occasion is right is one of the most valuable things. You have to work hard on it.” To do this we have to let go of the very human inclination towards defensive posturing, which gets in the way of the more natural warmth and fellowship that lies at the heart of meaningful dialogue and new, deeper understanding.

How to address these blockages? Bohm puts this nicely in his essay *On Dialogue*:

...it is easy for us to see that other people are blocked about certain questions, so that without being aware of it, they are avoiding the confrontation of contradictions in certain ideas that may be extremely dear to them. The very nature of such a “block” is, however, that it is a kind of insensitivity or “anesthesia” about one’s own contradictions. Evidently then, what is crucial is to be aware of the nature of one’s own “blocks.” If one is alert and attentive, he can see for example that whenever certain questions arise, there are fleeting sensations of fear, which push him away from consideration of these questions, and of pleasure, which attract his thoughts and cause them to be occupied with other questions. So one is able to keep away from whatever it is that he thinks may disturb him. As a result, he can be subtly defending his own ideas, when he supposes that he is really listening to what the other people have to say.

When we come together to talk, or otherwise to act in common, can each one of us be aware of the subtle fear and pleasure sensations that “block” his ability to listen freely? Without this awareness, the injunction to listen to the whole of what is said will have little meaning.

Pillars of effective dialogue: some suggestions

- A commitment to discovery and learning, to revising (and even destroying) one's ideas when the time is right.
 - *Non-attachment to one's own opinions.*
 - *When you know you are ignorant, you become teachable. Saying "I don't know" is where learning begins => "Beginner's mind."*
- Being non-judgmental of self and others
 - *Judgment blocks our ability to listen freely.*
 - *Judgment impedes the other person's ability or willingness to share freely and erodes trust in an open process.*
- Communicating in a way that the person listening understands
 - *Don't use jargon. Simplify language.*
- Letting go of the common urge to control conversation and drive an agenda (beyond learning something new and discovering errors in our own thinking)

Bohm dialogue

A Bohm Dialogue is a freely flowing group conversation in which participants attempt to reach a common understanding, experiencing everyone's point of view fully, equally and nonjudgmentally. This can lead to new and deeper understanding.

Participants "suspend" their beliefs, opinions, impulses, and judgments while speaking together, in order to see the movement of the group's thought processes and what their effects may be.

- *The group agrees that no group-level decisions will be made in the conversation.* "...In the dialogue group we are not going to decide what to do about anything. This is crucial. Otherwise we are not free. We must have an empty space where we are not obliged to anything, nor to come to any conclusions, nor to say anything or not say anything. It's open and free." (Bohm, "On Dialogue", p. 18-19.)"
- *Each individual agrees to suspend judgement in the conversation.* (Specifically, if the individual hears an idea he doesn't like, he does not attack that idea.) "...people in any group will bring to it assumptions, and as the group continues meeting, those assumptions will come up. What is called for is to suspend those assumptions, so that you neither carry them out nor suppress them. You don't believe them, nor do you disbelieve them; you don't judge them as good or bad...(Bohm, "On Dialogue", p. 22.)"
- *As these individuals "suspend judgement" they also simultaneously are as honest and transparent as possible.* (Specifically, if the individual has a "good idea" that he might otherwise hold back from the group because it is too controversial, he will share that idea in this conversation.)
- *Individuals in the conversation try to build on other individuals' ideas in the conversation.* (The group often comes up with ideas that are far beyond what any of the individuals thought possible before the conversation began.)

Insight dialogue

(wiki) Insight dialogue is an interpersonal meditation practice that brings together meditative awareness (e.g., mindfulness, concentration), the wisdom teachings of the Buddha, and dialogue to support insight into the nature, causes, and release of human suffering. Six meditation instructions, or guidelines, form the core of the practice:

The 6 pillars of insight dialogue (wiki)

Pause - Temporal pause; stepping out of habitual thoughts and reactions into experience in the present moment; mindfulness.

Relax - Invitation to calm the body and mind; receiving whatever sensations, thoughts, and feelings are present; acceptance.

Open - Extension of mindfulness from internal to include the external; spaciousness; matures to include the relational moment; mutuality.

Attune to emergence - Entering the relational moment without an agenda; awareness of the impermanence of thoughts and feelings; allowing experience to unfold; "don't know" mind. This guideline was originally termed "Trust emergence".

Listen deeply - Listening mindfully, with an awareness that is relaxed and open; ripens into unhindered receptivity to the unfolding words, emotions, and presence of another.

Speak the truth - Articulation of the truth of one's subjective experience with mindfulness; discernment of what to say amid the universe of possibilities; ripens into an acute sensitivity to the voice of the moment that "speaks through" the meditator.

Resources

Examples of quality dialogue

- [John O'Donoghue & Krista Tippett](#)
- [Krista Tippett & David Whyte](#)
- [Ian McGilchrist & John Varvaeke](#)
- [David Whyte & Thomas Huebl](#)
- [Jordan Hall, Daniel Schmachtenberger, Jamie Wheale in emergent dialogue](#)
- [John Varvaeke & Jonathan Pageau](#)
- [Jonny Miller and Erik Godsey](#)

Books

- Bohm, *On Dialogue*
- Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Art of Communicating*
- Marshall Rosenberg's book on NVC

Articles

- [On having opinions - Blas Moros - The Latticework](#)

Some more quotes that invite reflection on the purpose of dialogue

“...in a dialogue, each person does not attempt to make common certain ideas or items of information that are already known to him. Rather, it may be said that the two people are making something *in common*, i.e. creating something new together. But of course such communication can lead to the creation of something new only if people are able freely to listen to each other, without prejudice, and without trying to influence each other. Each has to be interested primarily in truth and coherence so that he is ready to drop his old ideas and intentions, and be ready to go on to something different, when this is called for.”

David Bohm

“...when one human being tells another human what is ‘real’, what they are actually doing is making a demand for obedience. They are asserting that they have a privileged view of reality.”

Humberto Maturana

“To be confused about what is different is to be confused about everything. Thus, it is not an accident that our fragmentary form of thought is leading to such a widespread range of crises, social, political, economic, ecological, psychological in the individual and in society as a whole... To develop new insights into fragmentation and wholeness requires a creative work even more difficult than that needed for fundamental new discoveries in science, or great and original works of art. Suddenly, in a flash of understanding, one may see the irrelevance of one’s whole way of thinking... along with a different approach in which all the elements fit in a new order and a new structure.”

David Bohm

We communicate to be understood and to understand others. If we’re talking and no-one is listening (maybe not even our own selves), we’re not communicating effectively. There are two keys to effective communication. The first is deep listening. The second is loving speech. Deep listening and loving speech are the best instruments I know for establishing and restoring communication with others and relieving suffering... when we listen to someone with the intention of helping that person suffer less, this is deep listening. When we listen with compassion, we don’t get caught in judgment.

Thich Nhat Hanh

“For Bohm, dialogue offered a different path to truth, indeed a different notion of truth. “We will never come to truth unless the overall meaning is coherent,” he says. Out of creating a larger field of more coherent shared meaning, truly new and penetrating understandings may emerge, often unexpectedly. “Truth does not emerge from opinions,” says Bohm, “it must emerge from something else, - perhaps from a freer movement of this tacit mind.” He continues. “We have to

get meanings coherent if we are to perceive truth, or to take part in truth. This odd phrase, "take part in truth," points to what seems to me Bohm's second foundational idea: what it means to understand wholes. Reductionist science has great power in understanding isolated things, and in applying this knowledge to create new things like new technologies. But its efficacy hinges on its being able to fragment and isolate its subject matter. It fails and may become actively dysfunctional when confronted by wholes, by the need to understand and take effective action in a highly interdependent context. This is why the modern world is full of increasingly stunning technological advances and an increasing inability to live together. The fundamental problem here, according to Bohm, is that "the whole is too much. There is no way by which thought can hold the whole, because thought only abstracts; it limits and defines." ...Bohm believed that the alternative way toward understanding a whole arises through participation rather than abstraction. "A different kind of consciousness is possible among us, a *participatory consciousness*." In a genuine dialogue, "each person is participating, is partaking of the whole meaning of the group and also taking part in it." This is not necessarily pleasant, as Bohm warns. The present state of the systems in which we live inevitably contains great pain as well as great beauty, deep anger as well as unconditional love. If we separate ourselves from what is within the whole, we cannot take part in it - and we return to abstracting, judging and defending: "I am not like that person", or "he is bad and I am good," or "she does not see what is happening and I do." Herein lies the first gateway to generating dialogue and moving toward a more coherent tacit ground. To take part in truth we must see our part in it. There are no "good guys" and "bad guys" separate from ourselves.

Peter Senge

The western world has been trying to break everything into pieces. But there are no boundaries in Nature. Get out an atlas of the world and search for one of those lines in the dirt. It's never there. They're all man made, conceptual boundaries which have no reality save how we respond to the notion of them, which is in our mind alone. Consider your own body, do you think it's separate from the world? If you were to take the surface of your skin and the air it presses against and enlarge that supposed border a few thousand times, what would you find? Just atoms and particles of atoms circulating in largely empty space. Where are the boundaries between you and the earth? You swallow a carrot which goes through your digestive tract. You think your digestive tract is really hollow as well as your lungs; that they have boundaries, an inside and outside. In truth, nothing divides them from the oxygen you inhale and the nutrients you swallow. Whether you take a macroscopic or microscopic view, you will find the universe and everything in it without boundaries. Boundaries are distinctions in our mind, and some are useful. But they really are not there. If you think deeply about it, you come to realize that there is no perceived boundary that is not equally a connection.

Dee hock

In our frantic attempt to know everything through use of the rational mind alone, we have fractured knowledge into hundreds of incestuous specialties and fragmented those specialties into thousands of isolated, insular trades and disciplines. The world is filling with people who know more and more about less and less. Within each specialty, we dismiss as largely irrelevant

all things, events, and ways of understanding outside the ever-narrower boundaries of our discipline. We can ignore all relationships not essential to our ever-narrowing perspective. We can ignore all consequences not immediately affecting or affected by our ever more constricted pursuit. We can abdicate responsibility for even thinking about them. We can each decide and act with our ever-smaller intellectual prisons and narrower mental cells, and defend our acts with logical, efficient, methodical rationality. Never mind that the sum of the whole is social, commercial, and biological madness.

Dee Hock

Do not hold your views too firmly. Every fool is fully convinced, and everyone fully persuaded is a fool: the more erroneous his judgment the more firmly he holds it.

Baltasar Gracian (via ltcwrk.com)

The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function.

F. Scott Fitzgerald (via ltcwrk.com)

There is another trait of great people I must talk about – and it took me a long time to realize it. Great people can tolerate ambiguity, they can both believe and disbelieve at the same time. You must be able to believe your organization and field of research is the best there is, but also there is much room for improvement! You can sort of see why this is a necessary trait. If you believe too much you will not likely see the chances for significant improvements, you will see enough to be filled with doubts and only go for the 2%, 5%, and 10% improvements. I have not the faintest idea of how to teach the tolerance of ambiguity, both belief and disbelief at the same time, but great people do it all the time.

Richard Hamming, [You Get What You Measure](#) (via ltcwrk.com)

Charlie Munger contributed a great quote to my recent book, from Demosthenes: “Nothing is easier than self-deceit. For what each man wishes, that he also believes to be true.” In other words, there’s a powerful tendency to believe that which could make one rich if it were true.

Howard Marks, [How Quickly They Forget](#) (via ltcwrk.com)

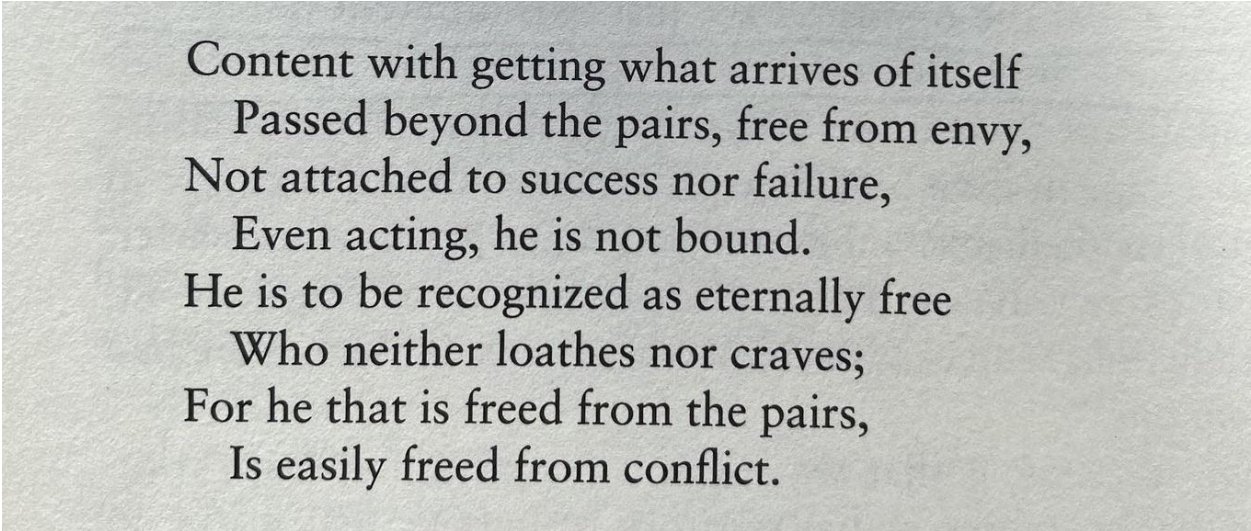
Whenever... anything in nature seems to us ridiculous, absurd or evil, it because we have only a partial knowledge of things, and are... ignorant of the order and coherence of nature as a whole, and because we want everything to be arranged according to the dictates of our own reason; although in fact what our reason pronounces bad is not bad as regards the order and laws of universal nature, but only as regards the laws of our own nature as taken separately. As

for the terms good and bad, they indicate nothing positive considered in themselves... for one and the same thing can be considered good, bad and indifferent.

Baruch Spinoza

Is it change that a man fears? Why, what can have come to be without change, and what is dearer and more familiar to Universal Nature? Can you yourself take your bath, unless the firewood changes? Can you be nourished unless what you eat changes? Can any other service be accomplished without change? Do you not see that it is precisely your changing which is so similar, and similarly necessary to universal nature?

Marcus Aurelius



Content with getting what arrives of itself
Passed beyond the pairs, free from envy,
Not attached to success nor failure,
Even acting, he is not bound.
He is to be recognized as eternally free
Who neither loathes nor craves;
For he that is freed from the pairs,
Is easily freed from conflict.

"What is at first small is often extremely large in the end. And so it happens that whoever deviates only a little from truth in the beginning is led farther and farther afield in the sequel, and to errors which are a thousand times as large."

Franz Bentano