

The Gift and Dialogue

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This is a story of failure: a theory was supposed to work and it did not. When Ellen Saur, one of this volume's editors, asked me to write this chapter, my initial response was that the relationships between the disabled and the helpers is not in my area of expertise. Then I tried to stall and convince myself that I have nothing to say on the subject. In retrospect, all of this was only a defense mechanism at play. Subconsciously, I was worried about whether my theoretical work on dialogue will withstand the test of the mentally disabled. A common failing among philosophers is to omit some groups from theoretical generalizations. Much of what has been said about the humanity omits women, non-Whites, non-Westerners, lower classes, sexual minorities, children, mentally ill, severely disabled, etc., etc. The comforts of clarity that social sciences give us rest on such omissions. What we believe to be true about being human rarely applies to all human beings.

My work was based on the assumption that dialogue is the most profound form of human relation. It was based on Martin Buber and Mikhail Bakhtin's theories of dialogue. Buber makes sharp distinction between the dialogical world of *I-Thou* and the instrumental world of *I-It*; only in *I-Thou* relationship we are truly human. Here is how Bakhtin states this position:

“To be means to communicate dialogically. When dialogue ends, everything ends... All else is the means; dialogue is the end. A single voice ends nothing and resolves nothing. Two voices is the minimum for life, the minimum for existence.”¹

In Buber's words, “I become through my relation to the *Thou*; as I become, I say *Thou*. All real living is meeting.”²

What I called the ontological concept of dialogue places dialogical relation in the center of human existence.³ Dialogue is viewed as more than a form of communication; it is a specific mode of human existence, one that is unique and central to us. Dialogue is a relation rather than an act or a mode of communication. This relation is holistic, direct, and mutual. Dialogue is a primary relation, which means that the fullness of human existence occupies the space between individuals, rather than within the isolated self. To be is to engage in dialogue. Dialogue is a certain rare occurrence in ordinary human life. It requires an alternative type of time, space, and causality; in other words, dialogue is ontologically different from the everyday life. Dialogue is truer, deeper connection among people that requires mutuality and equal status. Or so I believed.

1 Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984, p. 252.

2 Martin Buber, *I and Thou*. New York: Collier Books, 1958, p. 11.

3 Alexander M. Sidorkin, *Beyond Discourse: Education, The Self and Dialogue*. Buffalo, NY: SUNY Press, 1999.

In the context of educational theory, I had to deal with the fact that partners in educational dialogue can never be truly equal, that by definition, there is a power differential between students and teachers. Buber was skeptical about a possibility of true dialogue in circumstances of power imbalance. He clearly stated so in his famous exchange with Carl Rogers. Rogers thought dialogue between a therapist and a patient is possible, but Buber disagreed strongly and convincingly:

You have necessarily another attitude to the situation than he has. You are able to do something he is not able. You are not equals and cannot be. You have the great task, self-imposed – a great self-imposed task to supplement this need of his and to do rather more than in the normal situation. But, of course, there are limits, [...] the limits to simple humanity. To simple humanity meaning being I and my partner, so to speak alike to one another, on the same plane. I see you mean being on the same plane, but you cannot. There is not only you, your mode of thinking, your mode of doing, there is also a certain situation – we are so and so – which may sometimes be tragic [...]. You cannot change this.⁴

Coming from Buber himself, this is a serious claim. He says that situation of power imbalance itself prevents dialogical relation from unfolding, because a therapist has an agenda beyond simply relating to another human being on the most fundamental level. Being a typical philosopher, I have easily found several ways around the problem. First, I was arguing that in schools, education is not the only game, and that students and teachers switch between the imbalanced educational relationship and true dialogue. The second work-around was that our interaction with children often look and feel like dialogue to them, but in fact, are a bit manipulative, because adults have educational objectives in mind. And finally, dialogue may not be an all or nothing, and it can be gradually more or less present in educational relationship. In other words, dialogue can still happen in an imbalanced relation, as long as participants possess the ability for dialogue and the organizational culture allows it to happen.

Then came Ellen's challenge, and all of this does not look so good anymore. My theory has not withstood the test of the developmentally disabled. Dialogue, at least in Buberian and Bakhtinian sense, cannot be essential to being human, because dialogue requires an ability to relate to others. Not all humans possess such ability, and thus not all have developed the capacity for dialogue. We either have to deny the mentally disabled their humanity, or should not allow the capacity for dialogue to define what is human. To be totally honest, I must now admit that only a small minority of the world's population can be admitted into the exclusive club of dialogue-seekers; some because they have no ability, and others because they have no interest or cultural predisposition for what we consider the dialogical relation. To remain honest, I now must to renounce my own theoretical work and some of my beliefs. Thanks a lot, Ellen; thanks a lot.

It does comfort me that not only my theory, but many others will probably fail the test of inclusivity. This happened again and again. Piaget's theory of cognitive development, for

⁴ Martin Buber. *The Knowledge of Man: Selected Essays*. Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1988, p. 162.

example, ignores the fact that most adults who are not White middle class never achieve formal-operational stage of cognitive development.⁵ Erikson's theory is similarly biased towards the Western male. Kohlberg's theory of moral development does not seem to work that well outside of North America and Western Europe and for women. Vygotsky and much of the rest of developmental psychology share the same problem. That is just psychology; the same could be said about grand philosophical worldviews from Kant to Nietzsche, from Plato to Rawls. The concept of authenticity developed by Charles Taylor,⁶ the psychoanalytic theories of the self, almost all known to me definitions of human identity fail the test to some degree.

The question "what is a human being" has been always answered in such a way as to exclude those on the margins. In fact, to define a center, an ideal, the essential human being, one truly needs a concept of the margins, of all those people only marginally fitting a definition of being human. The bias of exclusion does not reside in logical errors; rather, it resides in the type of logic used. The truth of being human radiates from the center toward the margins, allowing for gradations in memberships. The center place can be occupied by different ideas, but the relationship of center to margins remains the same. Let us call this the centric bias. The ontological theories of dialogue certainly have the bias, because the dialogical relation is at the center, and all others are at the margins.

We almost always define ourselves in terms of our abilities: ability to speak, to act, to create, to think, to feel, to be self-aware, to exercise free will. The obvious fact that children gradually progress toward such abilities seems to be a natural movement toward becoming fully human. Through millennia, humans have been mightily impressed with their own abilities in comparison to those of animals, of "savages," of small children, and of the mentally disabled, and developed a habit of understanding themselves in terms of ability, and in contrast to these groups. List of abilities served to motivate children to achieve a certain standard of humanity. But any ability can also be missing or be severely limited in some of us. Human growth and development does not just take diverse paths, but also can take a wrong turn or stop altogether. Those with missing abilities will then be excluded from the human family, or be considered not fully human. We have been to this path many times before, with a consequence of treating other as animals, and thus denying to others humanity, and ultimately, losing it.

We cannot simply give up on the problem. Understanding human existence remains a very interesting problem indeed. When we try to figure out how to treat each other, the definition of human being is always implicitly present. For example, when social workers are trying to treat the disabled with kindness and dignity, they in fact must understand what sort of kindness and dignity a human being deserves. This knowledge is implicit, but not trivial. For example, one may think that the disabled must be locked away and completely cared for, while others might believe they should be integrated into the community and be expected to work and "be normal" as much as they can. Still others might believe the disabled should be allowed and encouraged to develop communities

5 See, for instance, Ashton, P. T. "Cross-cultural Piagetian research: An experimental perspective." *Harvard Educational Review*, 1975, 45(4).

6 Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism and "The Politics of Recognition,"* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992.

and identities of their own. Do we put them in a hospital, in a workshop, or in a leisure club? Do we dance for them or dance with them, or let them dance with each other? Do we let them make most of decisions, even if those we consider wrong ones? Do we hold them responsible for crimes? Do we allow them to own property? All of these choices are rooted in different definitions of humanity, in different answers to the question “what does it mean to be human?”

Now, almost midway through the chapter, I can finally formulate its purpose. The problem I need to address is this: what makes us human if not ability? Can human be defined so as not to exclude the margins? And what conception of dignity should we use? In more specific terms, the questions can be asked differently: how do we know how to treat the developmentally disabled individuals with limited cognitive ability? How do we know what they want and need without projecting our own wants and needs onto them? I will try to tackle these questions through an analysis of social exchange in which the disabled are involved with the rest of the society. I am not simply forgetting the dialogue, but would like to make a theoretical step down, from normative to descriptive discourse about social relations. The intent is, of course, to come eventually back to the normative plane, but in such a way that the disabled are not left behind. I want to find them where they are, before suggesting where they should be.

Let me now turn to Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of gift. The move here is to shift attention from the nature of the self to the nature of social relation in which people are engaged. We might need to define social positions rather than what kinds of persons occupy those positions. Whatever it is, the essence of being human is certainly not locked up in our individual bodies, but rather exists in the context of social relations. Whatever it is, humanity is acquired and lived through interaction with others, dialogue or no dialogue.

Pierre Bourdieu describes gift as an imposition of obligation. He states that, “[T]he initial act [of giving] is an attack on the freedom of the one who receives it. It is threatening: it obligates one to reciprocate, and to reciprocate beyond the original gift...”⁷ Gift exists within the context of reciprocity. Gift is ambivalent: it appears as an act of grace, but implicitly contains a demand and challenge to reciprocate. A failure to reciprocate establishes relationship of dependency, of patronage. Marshall Sahlins contributes fascinating anthropological evidence that demonstrates how gift, an epitome of reciprocity, can create inequality and is at the origins of class differentiation.⁸ Gift is not benign, and not altruistic, although it must always appear as such.

The disabled are a class of recipients of boundless grace and as such are the ultimately dominated group. It is the most skewed and imbalanced relationship in which the enabled expect nothing in return. The disabled are deemed not capable to repay the smallest part of their enormous debt to the enabled. The perpetual debt implies perpetual dependency.

The relationships of domination experienced by the enabled and the disabled do not have an aspect of economic exploitation that usually accompanies other unequal relationships. The only contribution of the disabled to the relationship is to provide an opportunity to

⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, *Practical Reason*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998, p. 94

⁸ See for example Marshall D. Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics*. Chicago: Aldine-Atherton, 1972.

give. The psyche of the giver needs the receiver to fulfill the fantasy of all-powerful and benign master. It is a variation of the domination drive (see Bruehl-Young *Anatomy of prejudices*⁹). The giving has little to do with grace and has much to do with domination. Contemporary liberal democracies live out the fantasy of the benign master taking care of its weak. The fantasy has much to do with the collective self-awareness of a liberal polity, and its urge to take care of those appointed to be cared for. The magnanimous giving on a massive scale is essential for the identity of such societies, just like religion of cultural artifacts were essential for collective identities of previous societies. To be a liberal democracy is to care for the weak, and the disabled, along with a few others are needed to fulfill this role.

Interestingly, other groups of cared-for are either presumed temporary (children and the poor), or have already earned their right to be cared for (the elderly). In other words, all other groups are still a part of the large relationships of reciprocity. The disabled are the only group that is excluded from these relationships, and are an object of the pure gift. It is worth noticing that the inability of the disabled to contribute to the economy of the enabled is rooted in the level of skills deemed by the enabled to be minimal for participating in their economy. This arbitrary level would have been different hundreds of years ago, and it may change again in the future. At any rate a person who is officially determined to be disabled beyond employability, is a receiver of ultimate generosity of the welfare state which she or he is never able to repay. The solidarity of the giver society relies on manifestations of its boundless generosity. The receivers are not really asked for their consent, and they wouldn't be able to express such a consent anyway. Of course, they want to be cared for, we assume. This is an all-powerful attack on their freedom, for the underlying the arrangement is a still implicit recognition that all gifts must be repaid. The smallest thing they can do to at least partially repay the gift is to agree on the terms on which the gift is being granted. Therefore, the disabled must comply with whatever restriction of personal and political freedom we impose on them, with whatever living arrangements we designed for them.

The arrangement is set and has no signs of easing; I offer no proposals about changing it. However, the givers should recognize the limitations of the deeply unequal arrangement, and make changes to it. The cure for domination has never been to overthrow the relationships of domination; it has always been to develop a parallel set of relationships free of such domination. The disabled should not see themselves only in relation with the rest of the society. For a mentally disabled person, the mainstream society cannot serve as the only mirror in which she see his own reflection. Her relationship with the world of the enabled will always remain that of dominated and domineering, at least as long as the paradigm of reciprocity remains prevalent. However, the balanced reciprocity is possible *within* the communities of the disabled. We may have gone too far with attempts to integrate them into the mainstream. Segregation has its own positive side, because it allows for some inevitable imbalances of power to become invisible, to be put outside of the social parenthesis for the dominated group. Integration is not always beneficial to such a group for it makes relationship with the dominant society predominant and obvious.

⁹ Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *The Anatomy of Prejudices*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996.

One of the most unfortunate consequences of the centric thought is the insistence that the disabled must be thoroughly integrated into the mainstream society. The stand against segregated settings comes from the assumption that the disabled must be included into the relationship with the rest of the society. It is, at least in part, a search for meaningful relations, a search for dialogue that feed the sentiment. However, the other side of the inclusion movement is the denial of right to form communities the disabled people see fit. The mainstream society of the enabled enjoys the right to self-segregate into groups based on common interests, mutual affection, similarity of views and culture, etc. In fact, the ethics of dialogue implies the ability to chose one's partners, and by extension, to exclude others from the relation. The institutional structures that overemphasize inclusion deny the disabled this right to chose who to associate with. In order to undo historical exclusionary practices, the mainstream society has never seriously considered the right of the disabled to exclude us from their circle of relationships.

What of the helpers? They are not exactly the same as the larger world of the givers. The helpers closely interact with the disabled, and can significantly impact the larger social context of giving. The helped need to be to some extent left alone and allowed to develop balanced reciprocity among themselves and with those enabled persons that genuinely and truly benefit from relationships with the disabled. Each helper, ideally, must ask himself or herself: what do I get from my relationship with the helped? Sometimes the answer will contained nothing but sentimental feelings of altruism. Altruism is suspect because it denies the laws of reciprocity. I smell a rat every time people appear altruistic and refuse to identify some personal interest. It is only when a helped exposed her vulnerability, or manifests her need to be helped, the relationship may take form of mutuality free of domination. The helpers must find a way of being repaid, or stay away.

These relationships with the helped cannot be the immediate, direct dialogue Bakhtin and Buber had in mind; mainly because of the social context of inequality and domination, but also because of the inability of many disabled people to engage in a true dialogue. However, the helpers can help foster relations among the disabled in whatever form those arise; the friendships, the connections, the loves among the people you may not necessarily be a part of. Perhaps the dignity we must afford to disabled is based on a possibility of constructing their worlds without our interference. The rest of this book is, in my view, a journey into such communities on the margins that are allowed to exist without undue interference from the outside world; those are indigenous forms of relations we may never fully understand. Yet respect and understanding are not the same things, and one is not predicated on another.

The theory of dialogue that originates with Buber and Bakhtin, can survive if it learns from its failures. It has to shed the centric bias. Humanity does not have a center, and no one thing can come into focus to the exclusion of everything else; not ability, not a virtue, and not a relation. What I may experience as dialogue, as the most profound connection, may not be so important to other people after all. Other people may prefer and value a different form of connection, or no connection at all. Their refusal or inability to enter a dialogue with me should be as respected as the choice of entering the dialogue. A true understanding of human condition must include a profound mystery of the Others taken as a group. This is something neither Buber and Bakhtin, nor their followers like Levinas

had seriously considered. In their worldviews, everything is focused on the Other as an individual, and a true relation arises from the Other who does not belong to any particular group, and is readily available for a relation with me. One has to break through group affiliations, social roles and external relationships in order to be immediately connected in a dialogical relation. Theirs is a profoundly centric vision of humanity, which I can no longer share.

One would be wise to accept the relation of non-relation, where the other party is not present at all, or perhaps makes an entirely different sense of the same relation. It cannot be seen as mutual or as reciprocal, or direct or especially authentic. We must learn value of the Others who may or may not be there, or who'd rather relate to each others in their own peculiar way. In relating with the disabled person, I inevitably tell myself a story of that relation. The trick is to treat that story as a fiction, as something that helps me make sense of it, but is not necessarily true. The trick is not to place too much faith in a possibility of dialogue.

This stance of relational agnosticism should be also extended onto everything else, if we are to avoid the centric bias. Simply put, treating someone with dignity cannot depend on empathy. It's OK to imagine a deep connection with the other; it is not OK to pretend the story you are seeing is true. The other may see this as a purely instrumental relation, as unimportant relation, or no relation at all. She may not even know I am there at all. The social world may be a lot lonelier and fragmented than Buber and Bakhtin have imagined; it maybe full of misunderstandings, fantasies, misalliances, and projections. A cognitively disabled person may perceive me as relationally disabled, because of my pretense of magnanimity, and my delusional belief in true dialogue. And who is to say I am right and she is wrong?

Perhaps it is best to think of humanity as a loose alliance of mutually alien species whose perceptions of time and space do not quite sync; who will never be able to understand one another, but who need to share the same planet and treat each other with some respect. One of these species insists on bestowing numerous gifts on another, the latter in turn feels something the first cannot describe or comprehend. The only thing they share is location; they can't help it but bump into each other, for the world is not big enough for them to never meet. Instead of unfounded presumptions of sameness, we must cultivate the cautious presumption of difference, of the unknowable and profound difference beyond relation and beyond dialogue. The most lasting respect comes from recognition of mutual incomprehensibility, or what Lyotard calls the incommensurability of discourse.¹⁰

This is a story I would like to suggest the helpers of the disabled. You are ethnographers sent to study an utterly alien species, and your helping role is truly incidental to the research one. Do not overestimate the degree of similarity between you and those you study. They may look like you, behave like you, but have utterly different motives and explanations. Instead of enumerating their disabilities, assume hidden, misunderstood abilities. Yes, they maybe helpless in our world, but on their planet, they are perfectly at home and can take care of themselves and of you, should you chose to visit.

¹⁰ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

Dialogue is dead; long live dialogue. That is our species' gift, let's cherish and use it. Yet it would be presumptuous and harmful to assume we can measure everyone else against this standard that fits us particularly well. It is important to remember that our little species of *Homo dialogicus* is not the entire humanity, nor will it ever become the entire humanity. It is unrealistic, just as it is unrealistic and self-defeating to imagine the whole planet one day becoming Christian or Muslim, or Green or art-loving, or care about soccer. Therefore, we must afford dignity those who will never be like us, and who we will never truly know, and who will never care to know us.