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Dialogical Existence seen as a Social Relation and its Impact to the Life with Diversity

ABSTRACT

This article compares the philosophical concept of *dialogical existence* of Martin Buber with the sociological one from Pierpaolo Donati, which put its focus on the phenomena of *social relationship*.

After a short introduction in the discussion of the concept of dialogue in different sciences, the first paragraph will deal with the concept of *"social relationship"* by Pierpaolo Donati. It gives a short overview of its main statements, characteristics and its placing in the contemporary sociological discussion.

The second chapter will present the basic ideas of the concept of *"dialogical existence"* from Martin Buber, showing his differentiation of various types of dialogue as well as the characteristics of the two basic relationships *"I-THOU"* and *"I-IT"*.

The common points and the differences of these two concepts are presented in a third part. The outdrawn similarities leads to the conclusion that, even if both concepts are not concurrent, the *"dialogical existence"* can be seen as one form of *"social relationship"*.

The dialogical method of the Focolare Movement is presented in a forth part. It is a concrete example of how the *"dialogical existence"* can forge in a *"social relationship"* with special features and gives a glance on how the two concepts could be connected with each other.

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Connecting theories from different fields of research and concrete examples, this article wants to give a contribution to a wider discussion of the concept of dialogue.

INTRODUCTION

Conflicts are a result of missing or errant communication. One can hear this affirmation very often. It was also an everyday experience in my work in the prevention of conflicts. Of sure one of its causes can be the diversity of the different members of a society, like different ages, cultures, social backgrounds, behaviors or religious belonging. On the other side I noticed also that people, involved in conflicts, could talk a lot with each other explaining their positions, feelings and thoughts, without finding a solution for their problems. This leads me to the assumption that it needs certain abilities in the process of communication in a conflict resolution process. That is the reason why I want to investigate in my research how dialogue, seen as a way of living, can influence the way we see and experience the moments of conflict. In fact, I try to find conditions, which can help that a conflict does not end in the interruption of relations, but can lead to their growth. In base of my experiences, I recognize in the culture of dialogue, which means dialogue seen as a way of life, one of these conditions.

The present article is a product of my work on this aim. It accept the challenge to show that dialogue is not only a single social action but can also become a form of social relationship. In my argumentation I will link two concepts with each other: in the field of sociology, I take the concept so called *"social relationship"* from Pierpaolo Donati and in the field of philosophy the one of Martin Buber called *"dialogical existence"*. After a short description of each one of them I compare these two concepts to show their

similarities and differences. In order to the question of the linking between dialogue and living with differences, I will describe in a short paragraph the rule of diversity in these two concepts.

That the *dialogical existence* becoming a *social relationship* is not only an imagined scenario, but can be found in the practice, shows the description of the dialogical method of the Focolare Movement. For that reason in a forth step I will describe this dialogical method and compare it with the two concepts.

Connecting theories from different fields of research and concrete examples, this article wants to give a contribution to a wider discussion of the concept of dialogue, seen as a *modus vivendi*.

THE CONCEPT OF DIALOGUE

Before starting my short report I want to explain in a few words in which context I use the word *dialogue*. There are many definitions of dialogue, especially in the communication sciences. Shannon and Weaver show that one can consider dialogue as a process of transmission of information between a communicator and a recipient (cf. Krallmann, Dieter/Ziemann, Andreas (2001): 23). The linguistic sciences see in the dialogue a system of symbols with a certain meaning and the participants of the communication act are in the know of this its meaning (cf. Krallmann, Dieter/Ziemann, Andreas (2001): 48).

The concepts, which has to be mentioned above, are the *Oragon modell* of Karl Bühler and the *theory of the act of communication* from John L. Austin (Austin J.L. (1980)). In all of them dialogue is primarily understood as a form of communication, in which two subjects interact with each other by symbols and signs. From the sociological perspective communication is seen as a mutual social interaction (cf. Krallmann, Dieter/Ziemann, Andreas (2001): 141), which is the base of the society, its development and the development of its order (cf. Krallmann, Dieter/Ziemann, An-

dreas (2001): 127). In this way the form of communication called dialogue "produces" the society, the community and its culture, but in the same moment it is influenced by a certain type of culture. Watzlawick explains this phenomena in his *theory of the five axioms* (cf. Watzlawick, and Paul (2011)). Even in the light of this dialectic, we can reassume that dialogue is a form of social action. The concept of social relationship from Donati will help us to pass from a concept of dialogue seen as a social action to one in which dialogue becomes a form of a certain culture.

PIERPAOLO DONATI: THE CONCEPT OF SOCIAL RELATIONSHIP

Before looking on the concept of the "*dialogic existence*" of Martin Buber as a social relationship, I have to explain the concept of "*social relationship*". The description of "*social relationship*" by Pierpaolo Donati goes beyond the common understanding among sociologists. Normally, a social relation means a social act, a type of actions between two social beings. Until now sociologists admit that these social actions, if they were repeated, can become social structures. In this way they underline the influence of the actors on the building and changing of social structures. On the other side one can turn its interests on how the social action or structure influences the social actors. Donati, like Berger e Luckmann, put these two points of view together. But he goes one step further. For him a social relation as a being *sui generis*, which does not depend entirely by its actors, but also can influences their actions. It is a reality which transcended the social actors.

For him, a social relationship should have certain features. It is composed of three elements: the two actors involved and the relationship itself, which stands in the between of them. It has a certain length of time. Social relationship is always oriented to become reciprocity. It is a product of the actors but also influences their actions "because the human person is both: it generates the

society in which he/she lives and is generated by it" (Donati, Pierpaolo (2013): 41). "The individual is essential to evidence the social relation as a result of their actions, but this result exceeds their contributions "(Donati, Pierpaolo (2015): 31). In this consists the *'enigma of social relationship'*. It connects social structures and social actors as well as subjective and objective factors, internal and external one's, over the time (cf. Donati, Pierpaolo (2013): 42). It is not exclusively the summery of the persons being and acting.

How can a social relationships arise? There are three stages of development of social relations: "the socio-cultural and structural forms of individuals in society (values and standards); the subjects-agents-actions, that are conditioned by these forms; the results of those interactions that can actualize (morphostasis) or change (morphogenesis) the socio-cultural structures of departure" (Donati, Pierpaolo (2013): 42). In this way the social relationship is an intangible interhuman reality, which defines "the distance and the integration of the individuals in society: if and how the individual can solve from relations or can build them up, in order to the other subjects, institutions and dynamics of social life" (Donati, Pierpaolo (2013): 41). According to Donati it is very difficult, if not impossible, to define certain social relationships because we have to consider the liberty of the social actors: they can react in the predicted way, but may also act in a different one. But: social relations are intrinsic to humans, because of their social being: we need relations in our life like our body needs oxygen or food. Persons need relationships to know themselves and become a person (cf. Donati, Pierpaolo (2013): 58).

MARTIN BUBER: THE DIALOGICAL EXISTENCE

After this explanation of social relationship, we turn now to the *dialogical existence* from Martin Buber, which according to me, can be seen as one form of a social relationship explained by Donati.

For Buber the dialogue is an expression of a relationship, or rather it is the fruit of the relationship between the basic words *"I"* and *"THOU"*. How might this work? Calling the other person with *"YOU/THOU"*. What is this relationship like? For Buber is very important to make clear that in this relation one can never take possess of *"THOU"* or know him at all, because *"THOU"* is infinite, it has no borders. The relation between *"I"* and *"THOU"* stresses the mutual existence of two beings: meeting one another in authentic existence, without any qualification or objectification of one another. One cannot make the other one becoming part of oneself, but standing in relation with him/her, he/she will become part of it (cf. Buber, Martin (1968): 8). Entering into a relationship does not mean that one have to forget everything about the other one. But it stresses the caution that this knowledge does not affect the relationship with him/her. Because in the relation between *"I"* and *"THOU"* – as said – there is no perception of the partner (cf. Buber, Martin (1968): 11).

How can this relationship be characterized? The relation with *"THOU"*, according to Buber, does not have a goal, avidity or anticipation. It lies in being open to the other one (cf. Buber, Martin (1968): 15f.). It is only possible if one is in an attachment of "love", of respect towards the other. Only in this way one can see the other one out of schemes and plots. Categories like the ugly and the beautiful, the wise and the ignorant, the good and the evil lose their importance (cf. Buber, Martin (1968): 19) because each one can become a *"THOU"*. Another expression stressed by Buber in this context is to *live in the Spirit*. What does that mean? The Spirit is not in *"I"* neither in *"THOU"*, but it is in the between of the two. It can be found in the response which *"I"* can give to *"THOU"*. But beware: if "I" give an answer, *"I"* is analyzing *"THOU"*. In this way *"THOU"* became *"IT"*. Therefore it is better to stay silent in front of *"THOU"* to set him/her free (cf. Buber, Martin (1968): 41f.).

So there exists also another type of relationship such as the one of *"I-IT"*. In this case, one gets to know the other person, its actions, attitudes, thoughts... The other becomes an object, which stands in front of *"I"*. But the *"I"* do not let him/her come into its life, because it will not be touched by what *"THOU"* wants to tell it. In this way "I" takes part on the reality, but the reality does not become part of *"I"*, because *"I"* is not in relation to *"THOU"* (cf. Buber, Martin (1968): 8). The world of *"IT"* helps "I" to describe things, to see them, to know their characteristics (cf. Buber, Martin (1968): 9). So both types of the basic word couples are important and have their place in human lives. But a real meeting can evolve only in the relation *"I-THOU"* (cf. Buber, Martin (1968): 21f.) because that is where the other person is no longer in front of *"I"* but enters in its life.

Only this relationship is the base of a real dialogue. This comes clearer in Buber's description of the three forms of dialogue: In the *technical dialogue*, dialogue is seen only as a tool for communication. The *monologue disguised as dialogue* describes a situation of dialogue where both actors are talking only about themselves, in order to show their own way of thinking and being, which is linked more to the relation *"I-IT"*. In the *"real" dialogue* the *"I"* draws near to the other person, without making demands or wanting to encounter him/her and which creates a sense of reciprocity (cf. Buber, Martin (1968): 166ff.). Here the dialogue arises from the relation *"I-THOU"*. Important is to dialogue with all one's being. For Buber dialogue does not mean to talk to many people or to use many words, but to be "involved" by the being of the other one, his life, thoughts, ... And that could happen without saying a word (cf. Buber, Martin (1968): 167).

What characterizes this "real" dialogue or the *"dialogical existence"*, as the author calls it? Buber claims that there is a possibility to get into dialogue with everyone in the way descripted before. Such a dialogue stresses the need of an extreme openness for the other person, which has to become reciprocal. This is not possible

without the attitude that one can always learn from the other one, because he/she is different from it. In this way, the different perception of situations becomes an enrichment (cf. Buber, Martin (1968): 15) for both. If *"I"* dialogues with another one in that way, he/she has to be an integrate person: if one do not know who he/she is, how can one get in dialogue with the other one? Nevertheless, he affirms also that only saying *"THOU"* one becomes him-/herself. The *"I"* becomes itself staying in relation with a *"THOU"*. Only saying *"THOU"* to the other one, *"I"* can become *"I"*. That is why the real life find its expression in a relation (cf. Buber, Martin (1968): 15).

Even if Buber admit that dialogue is inherent to all human beings – only standing in dialogue with the others, one can become itself – it cannot be prescript, forced or imposed. For Buber the principle of dialogue is not primarily a form of reality, but an attitude to meet the reality, without using, receiving and exploring it (cf. Werner, Hans-Joachim (1994): 20ff.). One has to turn towards the other one. It means to «talk» to the persons, without considering him/her an object. With these attitudes, one can talk to the life of the person in front of him/her (cf. Buber, Martin (1968): 150ff.).

To summarize, for Buber dialogue is inherent to human beings. It consists in being in relation with another one without trying to understand, or to capture him/her. This stresses the capacity of releasing the own perceptions, ideas and beliefs. Therefore, dialogue is not only a way of talking with each other or verbal communication. It is a type of relationship, which has its own characteristics and attitudes for acting.

After this explanation of the definition of dialogue in the concept of Buber, *"I"* will look on his concept from the point of view of the sociology. This is the reason why I am examining in a further step the differences and the common points of the principle of dialogue of Buber and the concept of Donati, which can approve that the "*dialogical existence*" can be a form of social relationship.

DIALOGUE = SOCIAL RELATIONSHIP? – A COMPARISSON BETWEEN THE TWO CONCEPTS

What are the similarities between the two concepts?

For Buber all real live consists in relations, because the "*I*" can become such one only standing in relation with a "*THOU* "(cf. Buber, Martin (1968): 15). Donati affirms that it is the relation which tells me, who I am (cf. Donati, Pierpaolo (2013): 24f.) Both describe a reality which stand between the two actors, which becomes reciprocal and both see dialogue and social relationship as a reality "sui generis". Especially Donati underlines it, describing the social relationship as a process and in the same time as a fruit of this process; it is created by social actors and exceed them in the same time Donati, Pierpaolo (2013): 23). In both concepts a relationship consists in different elements, like the actors and the relation between them, and they have a certain length of time.

Where are the differences between them?

Buber gives first concrete explanations for certain types of social relationship, discussing attitudes which define and distinguish the relationship of "*I-THOU*" and "*I-IT*". His concept of relationship goes beyond the one of Donati, as one can be in relation not only with social beings, but also with animals, things and the religious wisdom. Here it comes clear that Buber discuss the phenomena of relationship from a more generally point of view, while Donati describes it in his concept a social one. But in his concept also the relation of "*I-IT*" can be a real social relationship and not one of second quality, like in Bubers descriptions.

Conclusion

In this short chapter were shown the similarities and the differences between the two concepts. It can be noticed, that the both concepts are not two different description of the same phenomena. They are not concurrent and exchangeable between each

other. But as described in this chapter, there can be found many similarities. So, in my view, the dialogical principle of Buber, intended as the relation between "*I*" and "*THOU*", with its named specific characteristics, can be seen as a description of one type of social relationship, even if Donati claims, that it is impossible to describe a social relationship.

DIALOGUE AND DIVERSITY

In this part of my analysis I would like to look at these two concepts, namely *the dialogical existence* and the *social relationship*, underlining the role of diversity in them.

We can observe that in both, *dialogical existence* and *social relationship*, there are stringently required two different actors. It cannot be the same actor, otherwise it would be a monologue but not a dialogue. Also for a social relationship, there must be two different social actors. Diversity is intrinsic to dialogue and relationship; without it they cannot exist.

Beside this consideration, we do not find a concrete description of this issue in the concept of Donati. He does not describe certain attitudes or actions as characteristics of a certain form of social relationship, because for him social relations cannot be described in details. That is why one can see even a conflict, an interruption of a relation, as a form of social relationship. This openness of his concept does not allow to abstract concrete attitudes for living with diversity.

The concept of Buber in this case is much wider. Explaining the relation of "*I-THOU*" and "*I-IT*" he lists and underlines at least three attitudes: to *consider*, to *observe* and to *turn towards* the other one. For him it is clear that for getting in touch with the other one, with the person, who is different from the "*I*", it is needed the third attitude: to turn towards the other one. Only with this attitude the other one (*THOU*) can say something in

the life of *"I"*, without becoming an object. Only in this way they can meet each other as persons. To do so, it is needed another attitude: to recognize the existence of differences, different point of views and different approaches to see phenomena. This drives to the conclusion, that there are many ways to see the reality and that there is not only one truth but many of them. That is why nobody can say from himself, to know the whole truth, which leads Buber to another attitude: encountering *"THOU"*, *"I"* has to be aware that it can always learn something from *"THOU"*. In this way I can have new insights and can see the reality in a more holistically way.

Being in contact with the different of me, helps also to know better oneself. Another concrete attitude which comes up from the description of the relation of *"I-THOU"* is that there are no longer the ugly and the beautiful, the wise and the ignorant person, the good and the evil, etc. but a *"THOU"* which can enrich me. So being in touch with somebody who is different from oneself is always an enrichment, which leads to a growth of the person.

Summarizing, differences are inherent to the concepts of "*dialogical existence*" and "*social relationship*". It is necessary for both of them. Buber told us in a generally way how to handle with the one who is different from me and how this differences can become an enrichment, while Donati leave this questions open.

DIALOGUE AS A SOCIAL RELATIONSHIP IN THE DIALOGICAL EXPERIENCE OF THE FOCOLARE MOVEMENT

After these descriptions of *dialogical existence* as a form of *social relationship* and of the rule which plays diversity in both of the concepts, one can ask: is it possible that this type of dialogue can become praxis? How can a *dialogical existence* become a form of *social relationship*?

To respond at this question I want to look on the experience of the Focolare Movement. Before doing so I give a short explanation of what that movement is, how it was born and were it takes its inspiration of dialogical experiences. For sure, this cannot be a wide and comprehensive description of the movement and its spirituality, which are more complex[1].

Focolare Movement – what is it about?

"The Focolare Movement, present everywhere in the world, is like a vast and varied family. It began in 1943 during the Second World War as a current of spiritual and social renewal. 'A people born from the Gospel,' is how it was defined by its founder Chiara Lubich (1920-2008) (...). Its purpose: to work cooperatively to build a more united world, following the inspiration of Jesus' prayer to the Father 'May they all be one' (J 17:21), respecting and valuing diversity. It focuses on dialogue as a method, has a constant commitment to building bridges and relationships of fraternity among individuals, peoples and cultural worlds. Persons of every age, vocation, religion, conviction and culture belong to the Focolare."[2] Its foundress Chiara Lubich "never gave a thought to founding a movement or setting up an association of some kind."[3] All has its beginnings in discovering God as a Father who loves everyone and in living the gospel as their personal response on this love of God.

As said, the base of the life of the movement is the life of the gospel. The same is true for its *"dialogical method"*.

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[1]   For more informations: www. Focolare.org/en

[2]   http://www.focolare.org/en/chi-siamo/, 07.11.2016.

[3]   http://www.focolare.org/en/movimento-dei-focolari/progetto/, 07.11.2016.

The dialogical method of the Focolare Movement

Looking on its spirituality and its activities ones can immediately notice that the dialogue plays a huge role in it. Its members are in dialogue with many persons, associations, members of other churches and religions. In its statutes, there are delineated 5 dialogues: within the Catholic Church with other ecclesial movements, the ecumenical dialogue with other churches, the dialogue with other religions, with men who have no religious belief and with the contemporary culture. The history of the Focolare Movement, and in particular its dialogues shows, that the dialogical method of the spirituality of communion is a result of its way of living the gospel (cf. Catalan, Roberto (2010): 69). In the follow I want to describe this dialogical method.

For Chiara Lubich – foundress of the Focolare Movement – it is obvious that one has to dialogue with every kind of person. The reason behind this approach lies in her Christian faith and her experience, that all humans are children of the same Father in heaven and brothers and sisters among themselves. That is why dialogue has to turn towards all (cf. Catalan, Roberto (2010): 70).

This dialogue turned to everyone is one concrete expression of Christian love. To live it, one has to know a certain "art of love". For Lubich it consists in here five points, which are like the alphabet, which ones have to know for being able to read. Knowing these five points and putting them into life, one is able to live like a Christian.

(1) The Christian love is directed towards everyone. (2) It takes the initiative. (3) It leads to concrete acts. (4) It tries to understand the situation of the other one, to have empathy with them and to feel what the other feels.(5) It does not stop in front of the difficulties, but tries to love even the enemies (cf. Catalan, Roberto (2010): 81). It founds its size, strength and also its model in Jesus on the cross. As he has donated all of himself for understanding and saving all human beings, the Christian is asked to follow his example: to put all his ideas and concepts in second order

for being opened for the one next to him (cf. Catalan, Roberto (2010): 85f.). This art of love is the fundamental of why and how the members of the Focolare Movement are in dialogue with the persons next to them. It is the base of their dialogical acting, of their dialogical method.

If one lives the dialogue in that way, it could become a social relationship, with its own characteristics. The first one is the openness for the "different", which "does not mean to convince each other of the own convictions or to agree on everything. It means rather to accept that one can think differently from one's own "(Catalan, Roberto (2010): 136). A second one is the confidence that grows from sharing ones one life (cf. Catalan, Roberto (2010): 136). This form of dialogue reduces prejudices, because it facilitates the understanding of each other and the respective ideas (cf. Catalan, Roberto (2010): 139). It also helps to getting to know oneself better: for talking with the different from oneself, it is a need to know the own positions, ideas and beliefs. But also standing in contact with the other one, confronting one's own positions with his/her, is a way to know better his-/herself (cf. Catalan, Roberto (2010): 142ff.). Living the dialogue in this way, diversity loses its negative connotation and can become a mutual gift.

The dialogue of the Focolar Movement assume in this way different forms: the dialogue of life, sharing life-experiences (cf. Catalan, Roberto (2010): 102), of collaboration, working together for the same goal (cf. Catalan, Roberto (2010): 106), of religious experience (cf. Catalan, Roberto (2010): 120) and the academic dialogue (cf. Catalan, Roberto (2010): 128).

Similarities with Bubers concept of dialogical existence *and the* social relationship *of Pierpaolo Donati.*

After this short explanation of the dialogical method of the Focolare Movement I want to confront it with the two concepts explained before.

From my point of view this mode of dialogue can be seen as a social relationship. Donati said that a social relationship cannot

be explained and cannot exists in the description of certain kinds of actions but it is a reality sui generis, which stands between the actors and is not the summary of their actions. For me the described method of dialogue of the Focolare Movement does not really explain in details, what somebody has to say in which circumstances, or if one has to say anything ecc. It is more likely an attitude to encounter the other one. This dialogue stands between the actors and is more than the summery of their actions. It is a reality, which is created by the actors, but itself influences the convolved actors.

The similarities with Buber are many in this matter. As seen, for Lubich it is possible, or more likely a necessity to get in dialogue with everyone. Also Buber claims that the *"I"* can see in everyone a *"THOU"* with whom he/she can enter into a real dialogue.

Buber affirms in his concept that a requirement to live the principle of dialogue is the life in the Spirit. A description of such a life in the Spirit can be found in the spirituality of the Focolare Movement; the spirituality of communion. Its basis can be found in the Christian love, which has its own characteristics as described before in the so called *"art of love"* (cf. Catalan, Roberto (2010): 81): the Christian love is directed towards everyone, it takes the initiative, leads to concrete acts, tries to understand the situation of the other one, to feel what they feel. It does not stop in front of the difficulties, but tries to love even the enemies and founds in Jesus on the cross its strength and model, giving away, like him, all what can obstacle a real dialogue with the other one. (cf. Catalan, Roberto (2010): 85f.). Especially this last attitude is comparable with what Buber calls *"the acting with and towards the other one"*. Buber explains in his concept that the *"I"* has to forget what it know about *"THOU"* and its characteristics, for being open to get into a real dialogue with it; to be able to turn toward the other one. Forgetting ones ideas about *"THOU"* does not mean that *"I"* could not remind itself. In both description of dialogue it is underlined that one has to be engaged in the dialogue authenti-

cally. In force of that attitude practiced repeatedly it can become part of one's identity, become a way of live; become a "culture". It is also interesting that in both experiences the reason for such an attitude lies in the relation to a transcended being, in discovering and living it in all day life.

In both, the description of Buber and the praxis of the Focolare Movement, this way of living dialogue generates reciprocity.

SUMMARY

This article has given a short overview of the concepts of *"dialogical existence"* and the one of *"social relationship"*, drawing their similarities and distinctions. The argumentation of this article intended to show that even if these two concepts were developed in different science disciplines, they can complete each other and our view onto the reality. The concrete experiences of dialogue practiced in the Focolare Movement could be an illustration of how it is possible to see in the "*dialogical existence*" a "*social relationship*". Practicing such attitudes repeatedly in everyday life, as described in the chapter before, it becomes a dialogical existence; a social relationship. It becomes a kind of culture, in which the dialogical existence is fundamental for the personal life.

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