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DEBATE

DIALOGUE: ON TAKING THE BULL BY THE HORNS IF ONLY TO SALVAGE THE CHINA SHOP

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Abstract: A partir da leitura crítica dos ensaios contidos no volume Dialogue: An Interdisciplinary Approach, conclui-se que as preocupações no campo da pesquisa sobre diálogo são de ordem conceitual e epistemológica. Esta resenha procura mostrar as profundas divergências ideológicas nesse nível.

"The kimono they wear out there in the western world is called a frock," says a Japanese girl. A western counterpart of hers is equally complacent about her conviction: "The Japanese call a frock a kimono". The question is, who is getting it right? Or could it be that they are both saying the same thing and getting it right in different ways (or going equally wrong)?

Armed with the logical form tactic, our semanticist will jump at the opportunity for clinching the issue. "Appearances, as I have all along been telling you, can be deceptive. The apparel, that is, does *not* oft proclaim the (wo)man. For the surface form of the two utterances, in much the same fashion as the garments incidentally in question, conceals the essential. And what is essential here is the common underlying structure viz. The statement of the proportion 'kimono : Japan :: frock : West' ". And, sure enough, under appropriate paraphrasing 'kimono' and 'frock' turn out to be but

different values that a certain variable takes in the domain of Japan and the West. To be a kimono, in other words - and here even Quine should applaud enthusiastically -, is to be another value of the very same variable as it is to be a frock. And it is the constancy of this variable across the two sides that makes the formula a correct equation. By the way, if a particular language does not lexicalize this conceptual variable, well, all the worse for the language - it is, if you wish, a typical case of a hole in the pattern.

The ontology of conceptual universals is thus upheld (never mind Quine), the meaning reification ploy fully legitimized and the possibility of, or at least the eventual reduction to, pure rational exchange vindicated and shown to rest on the bedrock of logical truth. A straightforward Fregean reduction along the above lines oh what looked an East-West communicational stalemate would alone suffice to call the Kipling bluff, for the twain does meet after all, albeit at the vanishing point of the logical truth! But then, what does one do about those sceptics and heretics who keep mumbling about family resemblance, language games and similar anti-essentialist mumbo-jumbo? Forgive them o Lord, for they know not the latest in human biology -the cracking of the genetic code, the DNA, and the rest of it all!

Yet, an impressively large group of scholars representing diverse disciplines assembled at the Campinas International Encounter on the Philosophy of Language in 1981 had presumably come round to the view that time had come at last to take the dialogic bull by its twin horns rather than continue to regard it as a somewhat awkward aberration, a mutant beast, vaguely related to its distant but more familiar cousin the Unicorn, seen for long grazing with epistemological impunity in philosophical pastures. And the result of the Encounter is the volume *Dialogue: an interdisciplinary approach* (John Benjamins Publishing Company, Amsterdam/Philadel-

phia, 1985).

As Dascal notes in his editorial introduction, there seem to have two reasons why the phenomenon of dialogue has for the most part been eschewed by the new 'sciences of man'. First, its familiarity and pervasiveness which made it look fairly crystalline and unproblematic. Secondly (though this would apply only to those who did try a sneaking hand), its complexity which led most researchers, trained as they were in the divide-and-conquer approach of analytic sciences -to postpone tackling it till simpler objects of investigation had been satisfactorily grappled with.

But, alas, the course of scientific progress is often marked by ugly surprises. Many, in fact most, of the papers in the volume reflect a widespread disenchantment with the divide-and-conquer approach. Their authors argue, each in his own different way and from the vantage point of his own specialized field of research, that there is more to dialogue than a simple-minded conflation of otherwise independent monologues (Geraldi et al, Maia, Campos), that communication is a lot richer than the smooth exchange of propositional contents (Lorenz, Granger, Gil, Ehlich), and that, for all you know, a fuller understanding of even monologic discourse can only be had by recognizing the essentially dialogic character of natural language (Jacques, Campos, Parret). What most of these scholars share further is the opinion - though not everybody voices it with the same conviction - that new conceptual tools (and probably a whole new approach, possibly holistic) may well be the need of the hour.

Does this mean, then, that we are witnessing a paradigm shift? Well, the question itself may be premature. If so, any answer is bound to be precipitate. Besides, paradigms don't shift as easily as frames in a slide projector. In fact, they are in general admirably resistant to all attempts at foundational revision, tend

ing to develop a certain resilience that enable them to absorb most shocks. The more so in the case of those paradigms that are rooted in antiquity and well entrenched not just on one but several academic fronts. A quick glance at such titles as David Harrah's'Logic for rational dialogue' and Maria Nowakowska's 'On a formal structure of dialogue' should dispel any doubts as to the awe-inspiring prestige that the paradigm under discussion enjoys. Understandably thus Daniel Vanderveken's 'What is an illocutionary force?' is part of a recent trend whose avowed aim is to confer scientific respectability on the theory of speech acts by forcing it into the Procrustean bed of mathematical logic.

All the same,the volume under examination also gives clear indications that the paradigm is no longer at ease with the sporadic disturbances both within and without. George Meggle's 'To hell with speech act theory' is, however, by the author's own admission, the impulsive railings of 'a disappointed former lover' gone berserk and should at best be viewed as a spell of comic relief.

Two of the papers assembled in the volume deserve a special mention in this regard. They are Donald Davidson's 'Communication and convention' and Andrew Woodfield's 'Communicating about the contents of other minds'. Both are meant to be dampers on what their authors consider premature enthusiasm for the new- found sense of freedom from the paradigm. Davidson's essay is an attempt to persuade the reader that "convention does not explain what linguistic communication is, though it may describe a common feature" (p. 24). The consequences of such a conclusion, as the author is rejoiced to foresee, are simply dramatic; rather than a prior understanding of conventions being a necessary first step to defining language, it may indeed be the case that "language is a condition for having conventions" (ibid.). In much the same vein, Woodfield argues that

content-ascription - identifying the content of another mind - is entirely independent of features of the social, linguistic community in which the speaker is placed (p. 294). Just as Davidson champions the ontological integrity and epistemological primacy of language vis-a-vis convention. Woodfield pleads for both realism and individualism (for the author, the former entails the latter) about intentional content and its total independence from environment, linguistic or whatever.

Both Davidson and Woodfield are, let us not forget, forging their ways upstream. Davidson is pitting himself against the by now largely consensual view that language is *essentially* conventional. Woodfield has for his adversary Tyler Burge who has argued elsewhere against positing noumenal thought-contents and holding instead that there can be nothing more to thought- content than is attributed by content-ascription.

To be sure, the volume under review would only be the poorer if it were not for the inclusion of these two papers. The importance of the two papers in the context of the present collection arises precisely from the fact that they put major stumbling blocks in the way of anyone (and this, as noted earlier, applies to the majority of the remaining authors) discontented with the classical approach and wishing to adopt new perspectives on dialogic communication. I shall, therefore, devote a disproportionately large amount of time to the two papers making only passing references to the others, and that too, only insofar as they help highlight, contrast or counterbalance certain of the specific issues that come up.

Davidson begins his reasoning methodically (a redundant remark for the reader accustomed to the characteristic style of this doyen among contemporary philosophers) by first establishing that in order for the thesis of conventionality of linguistic communication(I am deliberately refraining from using Davidson's "communi-

cation by language" so as not to prejudge the issue) to be anything more than a trivial commonplace, more evidence than the arbitrariness of linguistic signs will need to be invoked. For, "while what is conventional is in some sense arbitrary, what is arbitrary is not necessarily conventional" (p.11). It is only when one ponders the question of what it is for an utterance to have a particular meaning that the notion of convention comes in handy, for the question requires one to relate meaning to human attitudes such as beliefs, desires and intentions etc. Davidson looks at three separate but compatible types of theories that have been advanced in the respect - those that can claim conventional links between grammatical moods and illocutionary intentions, those that posit a conventional use for each sentence, and those that seek conventional links between individual words and either extensions or intentions. He finds all of them equally unconvincing.

In attacking theories of the first type, Davidson concentrates all his fire on the position advocated by, among others, Michael Dummet that the utterance of a declarative sentence, barring special circumstances, entails the making of an assertion as well as intention on the part of the speaker to say what is true. At the end of a carefully worked out, step by step analysis of the claim in its minutest details, Davidson concludes that neither intentions nor ulterior purposes can help determine uniquely and unfailingly the meaning of a sentence: "...it is not an accidental feature of language that ulterior purpose of an utterance and its meaning are independent *in the sense that the latter cannot be derived from the former*"(my italics)(p.19). Davidson calls this feature the principle of *the autonomy of meaning*.

I find Davidson's arguments against Dummet impeccable, but his conclusion only partially so. Granted that the ulterior purpose of an utterance and its so-

-called literal meaning are *independent*, why make the case for autonomy only one-sided? On the strength of the very same arguments that Dawidson marshals against Dummet's thesis, one could equally well clamour for the independence of ulterior purposes from the tyranny of literal meanings - call it the principle of the *autonomy of ulterior purposes*. True, it suits the convenience and ulterior purpose of a philosopher commited to out-Tarskying Tarsky in approaching natural laguages (cf. "...literal meaning may not (and in my view does not)go beyond truth conditions" p. 14) to immunize literal meaning against all talk of intentions and ulterior purposes. It suits his convenience even more that the less powerful claim he diplomatically opts for gives sufficient elbow room for the pragmaticists to go worrying about speaker meaning, interpretation-in-context etc - for, so long as they do not venture out of their territory and the no man's land skirting it, no harm should be forthcoming. Furthermore, by wilfully confining themselves to their allocated land, they would in effect be legitimizing literal meanings.

When all is said and done, the question to ask is: How does all this help us to understand the phenomenon of dialogue? A dialogue, let us remind ourselves at this stage, occurs in real life and its participants are real people. And real people have beliefs, desires, and what have you and are, in a way, defined by these mental attitudes. To say that communication among real people is at the mercy of independently existing meanings is, one might wish to argue, to reduce all talk about human liberty to a complete farce. Besides, one could equally well argue, as indeed the present reviewer has been led to believe lately, that literal meanings, far from being ontologically guaranteed a priori, may in fact be products of a communal consensus at a historically given moment. If it can be granted that a community is, if not wholly at least partially, defined

by a common conceptual system, George Lakoff's claims in his 'Metaphor, folk theories and the possibilities of dialogue' can be seen as pointing in this direction. What Lakoff does not explore to its ultimate consequences is the obvious conclusion from his own basic thesis: that metaphoricity, and hence literalness, has to do with the nature of the conceptual systems in dialogic confrontation. Anyhow, in real life individuals do interact with one another. They do this thanks to an already existing network of communal relations. But it is also true that even as they talk they are making new community links. This has consequences which I shall expatiate upon towards the end of this paper.For the time being let us simply note that literal meaning is of no help in "explaining" (mind you, this is a theory- laden word) the possibility of communication through dialogue for the simple reason that the explicandum is a part and parcel of the explicans.

Yet the idea that there is a level of literal meaning or some surrogate entity such as logical form - the repository of reason untainted by human attitudes including passions and the axle that ensures dialogic movement - haunts a number of writers, though a few have achieved a great measure of success in exorcising it.

Gilles Granger in his 'Discussing or convincing:an approach towards a pragmatical study of the languages of science' dismisses outright the concept of supra--human absolute meanings. Says he, "The temptation to imagine a scientific knowledge utterly independent of its modes of expression is perhaps natural; however, such Plato-inspired illusions are meaningless"(p.348-9) Likewise, in his 'Science and controversy',Fernando Gil argues that scientific controversies help generate the 'scientific truths' of any epoch and are hardly decided by apodictic rationality but on the relative strength of persuasion of the parties in a dialectic confronta-

tion. E.M. Barth's plea (in 'Toward a praxis- oriented theory of argumentation') for substituting 'truth' by the notion of 'agreement' in model theoretic semantics goes in the same direction.

On the other hand, it is Woodfield's thesis that there is a a strong case for Platonic realism about thought-content ("a feature of the cognitive state") which, according to the author, is in no way determined by content-ascription ("an interpersonal communicatory activity"). If Woodfield is right it is the psychology and not sociology that should provide us with the beacon light in our endeavour to understand communication. Again, if Woodfield is right, Granger and Gil missed the wood for the trees, and Barth is beating his wings in the void.

What Woodfield does in his paper is take a fresh look at a certain 'thought experiment' proposed by Burge and argue that the story has a different moral. Put very crudely, the experiment is the following. Sam cannot possibly have arthritis in the thigh because he is a speaker of English and the English language guarantees, in virtue of its semantic structure, that no one in Anglo-land will contract arthritis in any part of his anatomy save the joints. But in Burge-land things are different. In the Burgese language the word *arthritis* (not to be confused with its English homonym) is a cover term for all rheumatoid ailments. So Sam cannot and can have arthritis in the thigh, in Anglo-land and Burge-land repectively. Now, what about the sentence 'Sam believes that he has arthritis in the thigh'?Well, it depends. If the speaker is an Angle he has ascribed a false belief to Sam, but not if he is a Burgese. This is Burge's position, according to which there is no intentional content over and above the possibilities of ascription. Woodfield, on the other hand, is equally convinced that ascriptions can change even as the content stays the same, and what is more, in some cases,

"though the social and linguistic environment stays the same."(p.302). If in Anglo-land nobody can have arthritis in the thigh, it is not because nobody can have a thought-content corresponding to what might be correctly describable as 'So-and-so has arthritis in the thigh' if the English language so permitted. That is to say, there must be, thinks Woodfield, a true thought-content so that a given thought-ascription can be adjudged false in relation thereto.

Note that so far this is a dead end, for the situation is one of 'my word against yours'. Fully aware of this, Woodfield seeks to justify his stance by relating it to certain wider issues. He reminds us that intentional contents are characterized by their intra-systemic cognitive role, whereas content-ascriptions are acts carried out in a 'modelling language', say English.What secures a nearmatch in most cases of content-ascription is the"empirical fact that the cognitive structures of most human beings really are similar to the semantic structure of public language" (p.299). One wonders what on earth count as *empirical* evidence for a claim relating structures inaccessible to direct observation to others that have no real existence outside of the system. Even if we set aside this vexed question, isn't there a likelihood that we are somehow begging the question? However, unmindful of such possible objections, Woodfield goes on to reiterate the old positivistic claim that no modelling language, including the ascriber's mother-tongue is ever an adequate model of any subject. Thought-contents, that is to say, cannot be captured fully in any modelling languages, because all modelling languages, including natural languages are imperfect. We are forced to conclude that Woodfield's thought-contents are logical constructions of the sort Russell and Wisdom recognized and precisely therefore not reducible to content-ascriptions.

The affinity between Woodfield's position and that

of Donaldson that we looked at a while ago must by now be obvious enough. My misgivings concerning the former are of a piece with the objections I made to the latter. What use is a logical construction like 'thought-content' inaccessible, by definition and by fiat, to other minds, if we are looking for a theory of communication in real-life settings? I hold this against Woodfield because it seems to me that his whole argument boils down to a defence of private language which is the negation, as Wittgenstein never tired of showing us, of the very possibility of dialogue and hence, *a fortiori*, of natural language.

Something like the 'thought-contents' of Woodfield or the 'literal meanings' of Davidson still crops up in the papers by some of the other writers who are, on their own admission, liberal in their theoretical commitments. Herman Parret's 'Contexts as constraints on understanding in a dialogic situation' is a case in point. Thus even as he claims things like "... a theory of *dialogue* is fully dependent on a theory of understanding" (p.165) and "... understanding as an ability is a practice-in-the-world and not an activity of the inner life on inner life primitives" (p.168), when it comes to spelling out a programme, the author opts for a level of significance, that of propositional content, which is obtained by "abstracting" from contexts of all kinds, epistemic , doxastic, or what-have-you. Also smuggled in is Woodfield's idea of "approximation"which, as far as I can see, is what sustains Parret's hope that perfect understanding (by which is to be understood, not consensual but alethic truth) is attainable through the progressive narrowing down (elimination) of misunderstandings.

Of the three papers in the volume that directly address the issue of misunderstanding or communication gap, two (Danilo M. Souza Filho's 'Dialogues breakdowns' and Marcelo Dascal's 'The relevance of misunderstanding') discuss the phenomenon from the standpoint that

there is a hard core of rationality common in fact or in principle to all dialogues, and that any given dialogue can be fruitfully examined in terms of the degree to which it deviates from the ideal dialogue where reason is optimally used to serve information transfer.The third, Jean-Luc Petit's 'The making and breaking of dialogue' is openly sceptical on this.Petit doubts if such an enterprise - "possibly a carry-over from a Platonic tradition" (p. 430) - is any good even in the case of the so-called scientific discourse which is thought by many to be the *summum bonum* of the Apollonian dream (no Dionysian dig intended). Dascal's onion metaphor for the multi-layer conception of significance has a consequence that the author seems not to have perceived: the level of pure propositional contents will turn out to be only as real as the slippery and elusive 'hard core' of an onion.

The volume under review contains other papers which I have not referred to but which the interested reader may peruse with profit. My central aim has been that of bringing to the fore some of the fundamental concerns of most authors. I hope to have shown that the most urgent issues in dialogue research are not methodological, but have to do with conceptual, ontological and epistemological questions.It is pointless to ignore the profound ideological differences on such basic issues.

One last point. Debates on issues of far- reaching consequence seem, as Fernando Gil opportunely notes, to have a certain polarizing effect on the issues themselves. I am persuaded to think that this phenomenon, amply attested historically, may be worth looking into with philosophical interest and may well turn out to be a veritable goldmine. If dialogic confrontation does polarize the issues involved, it may be due to the fact that the participants who initially see themselves as engaged in a dialectic struggle are, as the polemic

gathers momentum, led by the very dynamics of the confrontation to see their roles as eristic. If so, the final truth *in* and *about* dialogue may not be forthcoming from the interplay of the opposites or the resolution of the contradiction. It may indeed *be* a contradiction. Thus when Davidson says "...we cannot confidently ascribe beliefs and desires and intentions to a creature that cannot use language. Beliefs, desires and intentions are a condition of language, but language is also a condition for them" (p. 24), he may after all be getting to a profound truth, precisely by letting the cyrcle run its full course. By the same token, the epigraph to the volume that says that "the investigation of dialogue is parasitic upon the existence of dialogue" will probably need to be complemented by the truism that "the existence of dialogue is parasitic upon the investigation of dialogue". Existence, in other words, may be both a predicate and an attribute.

The last laugh, then, is probably reserved for Zeno.