

# Bohm on Dialogue

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David Bohm wrote extensively on using dialogue as a tool for exploring shared meaning and supporting a form of integration amongst groups to benefit the learning that group could obtain from their mutual interaction. In his book *On Dialogue* (2004), Bohm set out his theory of dialogue and it is from this text I will extract the principles for a theory of communication. A good starting point is the following by Bohm:

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. (2004: 3)

Here Bohm sets out the primary purpose of dialogue, namely, **to create something new**. In so doing he underlines the importance of 'listening' in the form motivated by a desire to learn. It requires a genuine curiosity from the listener about what the other person has to say that supersedes a desire to defend the *status quo* of opinions and ideas already held. Most of all it requires participants to listen and be interested in establishing a truth and coherence through interaction that acknowledges the need to drop old ideas and intentions should they prove to be rendered redundant by the shared learning gained. Otherwise there will be a "block":

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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 he thinks may disturb him. And as a result, he can be subtly defending his own ideas, when he supposes that he is really listening to what other people have to say. (2004: 5)

Here Bohm highlights a crucial aspect of interacting with others that can serve to help support *adaptive change* (contrasted with *technical change*) through communication with others. The observation is that when we are confronted with contradiction of our own ideas or theories, our immediate sensation is fear and anxiety – a concern that our current frame of meaning making is coming under attack. In these moments we are not listening. We are formulating a defence to the perceived attack of *ourselves as meaning making systems*. This behaviour and feeling is utterly in contradiction with the objective of listening. This can be so subtle as to be happening even while we believe we are entirely focused on listening. What is striking about Bohm's observation is that it has echoes of Robert Kegan's [Theory of Adult Mental Development](#), specifically Kegan's description of an 'Immunity to Change System', and the anxiety we feel when the 'Big Assumption' in it is threatened.

This also suggests that communicating through a dialogue requires us to surface and not hide the anxiety that may be instinctively felt when confronted with contradictions. Kegan suggests that surfacing the source of the 'Big Assumption' can lead to adaptive transformation and heightened consciousness and complexity. Similarly, Bohm's theory of dialogue would seem to suggest that by being alert to what gives rise to fear and anxiety can open a gateway into the elements of our meaning making to which we are affiliated and defensive about. Adopting this stance in communication can therefore promote a subject/object separation, in Kegan's sense, between what assumptions have us and what assumptions we have.

The dynamic described by Bohm has similarities to a 'condensed optimal conflict event', where there is no option but to be confronted with the limitations of current way of knowing:

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. But if each one of us can give full attention to what is blocking communication while he is also attending properly to the content of what is communicated, then we may be able to create something new between us, something of very great significance for bringing to an end the at (*sic*) present insoluble problems of the individual and of society. (2004: 5)

As Bohm suggests, it is necessary to overcome the fear of letting go (of our current ideas, theories) and instead to listen. But in so doing if we pay attention, notice, make object, those concepts, the very contradiction creating such fear, we promote new insight through the dialogue:

Dialogue comes from the Greek word *dialogos*. Logos means "the word" or in our case we would think of the "meaning of the word". And *dia* means "through"....a dialogue can be among any number of people...even one person can have a sense of dialogue within himself [*pace* Arendt] if the spirit of the dialogue is present. The picture of image that this derivation suggests is of a stream of meaning flowing among and through us. This will make possible a flow of meaning in the whole group...this shared meaning is the "glue" or "cement" that holds people and societies together. (2004: 7)

Bohm characterises dialogue as a process through which learning can act upon us as much as we participate in it. The imagery suggests we open up to a flow of meaning through ourselves that removes blockages and barriers and instead embraces the concept of learning through interaction with others - we are vessels through which the flow of meaning can act. In the same way that Adam Smith's concept of 'sympathy' and Hannah

Arendt's concept of 'promises' serve as a 'glue' for society, so Bohm suggests this quest for shared meaning serves the same purpose for groups engaged in dialogue:

Dialogue has to go into all the pressures that are behind our assumptions. It goes into the process of thought behind the assumptions, not just the assumptions themselves. (2004: 9)

Again Bohm suggests here that dialogue is a process that does not just engage our superficial minds but unearths the emotional fabric of our meaning making, the source of our assumptions, and the process by which we arrived at them. It does so by exploring those assumptions, theories and concepts that we seem most reluctant to relinquish:

The different opinions you have are the result of past thought: all your experiences, what other people have said, and what not. That is all programmed into your memory. You may then identify with those opinions and react to defend them...opinions thus tend to be experienced as "truths" even though they may only be your own assumptions and your own background...for one reason or another you are identified with them, and you defend them. (2004: 10)

As Bohm observes, people leap to the defence of "truth's" when in fact they are our thoughts about personal experiences. In practice we forget John Maynard Keynes maxim that [theories are apparatus of mind](#) and treat them as doctrines and 'dogmas':

We have to look at thought, because the problem is originating in thought. Usually when you have a problem, you say, "I must think about that problem to solve it". But what I am saying is that thought is the problem. What therefore, are we going to do? We could consider two kinds of thought – individual and collective. Individually I can think of various things but a great deal of thought is what we do together. In fact, most of it comes from the collective background. Language is collective. Most of our basic assumptions come from our society...therefore we need to pay attention to thought both individually and collectively. (2004: 12)

Bohm is highlighting the danger of returning to thought to gain insight; thought is the source of the blockage - individual thought is susceptible to the subject/object conflict in which we cannot separate that which is theory and that which is 'truth'. We think using our theories and they act upon us as we think. We need to be clear about this so as not to be subject to them. Furthermore, as Arendt observed, we withdraw to think, but our world and its meaning is in the collective. For that reason, observing the tension between individual thought and collective interaction is a powerful means by which we can see thought for what it is and, in so doing, *make object the theories* that are key elements of our meaning making:

Tacit means that which is unspoken, which cannot be described – like the knowledge required to ride a bicycle. It is the actual knowledge, and may be coherent or not. I am proposing that thought is actually a subtle tacit process. The concrete process of thinking is very tacit. The meaning is basically tacit. And what we can say explicitly is only a very small part of it...the tacit process is common. It is shared. The sharing is not merely the explicit communication and the body language and all that, but there is a deeper tacit process which is common...we have to get started again, because it has become urgent that we communicate. We have to share our consciousness and to be able to think together, in order to do intelligently whatever is necessary. (2004: 16-17)

Here Bohm is suggesting that in order to benefit from shared learning and collective thinking we must surface the tacit process that is thought, we must make object the latent machinations of processing inputs, and subsequently select and map the theories that make up our thinking:

We have been saying that people in any group will bring to it their assumptions...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...you may also think of it as suspended in front of you so that you can look at it – sort of reflected back as if you

were in front of a mirror. In this way I can see things that I wouldn't have seen if I had simply carried out...or if I had suppressed it... (2004: 23)

Bohm proposes that in dialogue we should make object our assumptions without judging them, we should simply observe them, see them as they act upon us, and in so doing surface them, allow ourselves the opportunity to put them in context. This process of examining assumptions is central to the process of gaining insight through dialogue, and it is making object that which in our normal style of communication is embedded and hidden from view:

So the whole group becomes a mirror for each person. The effect you have on the other person is a mirror...therefore, you simply see what the assumptions and reactions mean – not only your own, but the other peoples as well. We are not trying to change anybody's opinion. When this meeting is over, somebody may or may not change his opinion. This is part of what I consider dialogue – for people to realise what is on each other's minds without coming to any conclusions or judgements. (2004: 23)

Here Bohm is differentiating the object of dialogue from the normal form of discussion by acknowledging that the power of dialogue is not in the conclusion but the process. This is utterly at odds with the form of interaction we have in organisations, where we are engaging to gain closure and agree direction. For the most part, this is appropriate and indeed necessary; however it does not promote or facilitate a form of enquiry that can surface the theories that make up our meaning making. Dialogue as a communication technique is a process of discovery about our theories rather than a means of getting answers:

If you hear somebody else who has an assumption that seems outrageous to you, the natural response might be to get angry, or get excited, or to react in some other way. But suppose you suspend that activity. You may not even have known that you had an assumption. It was only because he came up with the opposite one that you



find out that you have one. You may uncover other assumptions, but we are all suspending them and looking at them all, seeing what they mean. (2004: 24)

As Bohm suggests, an emotional reaction to what another has said is a gateway into our meaning making system. These are vital learning opportunities. They are moments in which we are instinctively surfacing our 'Big Assumptions'. If we can, as Bohm suggests, suspend that reaction and explore the assumption threatened gain access to those parts of our meaning making we affiliate most with. Acting on our instincts embeds the assumption further into the recesses of our meaning making system and the opportunity for adaptive learning is lost:

You have to notice your own reactions of hostility, or whatever, and you can see by the way people are behaving what their reactions are....that's all part of the observation, the suspension. You become more familiar with how thought works. (2004: 24)

As Bohm describes it, we are observing thought by suspending our assumptions and enquiring about their genesis. In terms of Robert Kegan's Theory of Adult Mental Development Bohm is describing making object aspects of ourselves as 'meaning making system', and ultimately assumptions that are associated with our 'Immunity to Change System':

We come back to the realisation that the thing which has gone wrong with thought is basically, as I said before, that it does things and then says that it didn't do them...thought has to be in some sense aware of its consequences. That ties up with something similar in neurophysiology called proprioception, which really means "self-perception"...the question is: can thought be proprioceptive? You have the intention to think, which you're not usually aware of. You think because you have an intention to think. It come from the idea that it is necessary to think that there's a problem. If you watch, you'll see an intention to think, an impulse to think. Then come the thought, and the thought may give rise to a feeling, which may give rise to another intention to think, and so on. (2004: 28)

Suspending assumptions and enquiring about the source of our anxiety about them is, as Bohm suggests, a way of making thought deliberate as opposed to tacit; it is a way of raising our consciousness about thinking by promoting self-reflection whilst in the process of thought. As meaning making systems we evolve, and the more involuntary the act of thinking tends to become, we are not aware of what we are doing whilst thinking. This is a useful and necessary characteristic of thinking that allows cope with a huge amount of stimuli in our daily lives, however it also can lead to a level of carelessness to our thinking processes. It could be said at times we become slaves to our way of thinking, dialogue and particularly the means by which we self-perceive is a way of taking charge of our thoughts:

The problems we have been discussing are basically all due to this lack of proprioception. The point of suspension is to help make proprioception possible, to create a mirror so that you can see the results of your thought...thought is constantly creating problems that way and then trying to solve them. But as it tries to solve them it makes it worse because it doesn't notice it's creating them, and the more it thinks, the more problems it creates – because it's not proprioceptive of what it's doing. (2004: 29)

'Proprioception' is making deliberate an action that has become unthinking, and involuntary. Put another way, it makes object that which was subject, the key element required in supporting adaptive transformative learning, and heightened consciousness.

In summary, the key component to the dialogical technique described by Bohm is that act of suspending assumptions that are surfaced through interaction, and which have the effect of creating an instinctive urge to defend. In doing so and in exploring why we are moved to respond in this way rather than having the instinct act upon us, Bohm suggests we can become aware of our thought.

It follows if this possible to do, it provides a technique by which individuals can make object those theories that are embedded in themselves as a meaning making system and provide a means by which they can develop their own mode of thinking to create opportunities to heighten their consciousness and learn adaptively.



## Reference

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