

DIALOGUE AMONG CIVILIZATIONS: WHAT FOR?

Hernán López-Garay

Centro Investigaciones Sistemología Interpretativa
Universidad de Los Andes
Mérida
Venezuela

Dr. Hernán López-Garay received his Electrical Engineering degree in Bogotá (1970), his M.Sc. in Systems Engineering at Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, (1973), his M.A. in Systems at Lancaster University (1978), and a Ph.D. in Systems Theory and Planning from The Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania (1986). He is professor in Interpretive Systemology at the University of Los Andes, in Mérida, Venezuela, where he has been since 1974. He is a member of the Spanish General Society of Systems research, co-founder of the Latin American Systems Association (ALAS), and is studying the justice system and its role in Latin America.

Western civilization has been driven by the ideal of the creation of a global community embracing the notion of a world constituted by equal and free men. The distorted form this ideal has taken today is called globalization, an order increasingly seen by many as very unjust and inhuman. What could be more pressing today than to reflect on the conditions of possibility of a dialogue among civilizations about the realization of a new and more just global order? We discuss why current western societies and their social systems impede such a dialogical project. Consequently, a vital task for intercultural dialogue could be that of helping to disclose the conditions which impede this project's realization. Some reflections as to how to go about such a task will be discussed in the final sections of this article.

INTRODUCTION: ON DIALOGUE AND CIVILIZATION¹

We would like to start our reflections on dialogue among civilizations by clarifying the notions of *dialogue* and *civilization*. Roughly, a *civilization* is considered to be a group of peoples, which through an extended period of time have developed a common *culture*. This means a distinctive system of values and practices, a common language and way of looking at the world and acting, in sum a distinctive way of being. Let us recall that the word culture is related to cultivate. A civilization cultivates what? It cultivates, for a prolonged period of time, a collective way of being, a "we." More precisely, it cultivates the *ground** of such a being, that is, the bringing forth of it and its embodiment in traditions, practices, language.

Dialogue is not *negotiation* or *polemics*. In negotiation, the parties involved are con-

cerned with the satisfaction of their personal interests. Negotiation usually ends in some form of accommodation of interests that all parties accept. In *polemics*, the parties are not, like in *dialogue*, involved in the work of reciprocal elucidation of the subject under discussion. According to Foucault, the polemicist sees his interlocutor "...not as a partner in *the search for the truth*, but an adversary, an enemy who is wrong, who is harmful, and whose very existence constitutes a threat... his final objective will be, not to come as close as possible to a difficult truth, but the triumph of [what he thinks is] the just cause he has been manifestly upholding." (Rabinow, 1984, p.382, emphasis added). In *dialogue*, on the contrary, there is a cooperative search for truth. Dialogue means shedding light (*dia*) into things through the spoken word (*logos*), bringing forth that which is hidden, namely, the *ground* or foundation of what is present (Giannini, 1992, p.134), and which nevertheless pertain to the essence of things.

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Consequently, things cannot be things-in-themselves because only through dialogue are they completed as such (by revealing their hidden parts, their foundation). Things have a sort of virtue, the virtue of being 'spoken,' being named. It is characteristic of their being to pay heed to the revealing power of *logos*. They cannot be by themselves, because they cannot name themselves. *Dialogue* seeks to bring the full presence of things for you and for me, for

us. The purpose of dialogue is to shed light on things, to clarify them, to bring them forth to full presence.²

Dialogue is often distinguished from *narrative*. The former deals with things being 'solidly' present and aims to complete their presence by bringing forth the *archai*, i.e. the universal a-historical principles—the invisible support of their presence (Giannini, 1992, p.145). *Narrative*, on the con-

*Editor's note: the use of "Ground" and "Foundation" throughout this paper is as an approximate and less than satisfactory translation of the German "Grund." Reference, for example, Heidegger's *Vom Wesen des Grundes*.

trary, deals with the historical aspect of the being of things and aims to shed light on the fleeting presence of what occurs. *A narrative recounts how a determined thing has come to be what it is.* (*ibid.* pp.66-67). Dialogue tries to fix the hidden foundation of things whereas narrative aims at displaying its historical character. Nevertheless, narrative and dialogue are strongly interrelated: they are both *methods*: The former is used by mythology, the latter by philosophy, both for their common enterprise, i.e. "...to make feasible *the way* which leads from our *actual routine* [what we currently are] to a meaningful *transcendence* [where we become *one* again with the eternal]." (*ibid.* p. 42. Free translation). As we will see in later sections of this paper, this *three-element scheme* will constitute the fundamental framework of the moral enterprise of the West. Let us recall in passing that the word morality comes from *moralis*, Cicero's rendering in Latin of the Greek word *êthicos*, which means a man's "...set dispositions to behave systematically in one way rather than another, to lead one particular way of life." (MacIntyre, 1985, p.38).

An example of the dialogical method in the service of this moral enterprise can be seen in Aristotle. As Giannini (1992) points out "...[i]t can be shown that the theoretical accomplishment of this requirement [i.e. to bring forth the way, the bridge, that makes possible for us to pass from our current non-transcendental state to a state of transcendence, or at least come closer to it] represents for Aristotle the main objective not only of his metaphysical but also of his *ethical* thinking." (p.42, italics added). As for the narrative method, the Christian narrative provides an illuminating example of the interplay of the aforementioned *three-element moral scheme*: "the Christian myth will restore ritually the secret code [the way] by means of which the human's history and the individual's temporality become commensurable with total temporality." (*ibid.* p. 43).

The relationship between dialogue and narrative—or rather *meta-narrative* as the all-embracing mother narrative of a culture—through the aforementioned *three-element scheme* can be further developed showing how the latter provides the context of meaning within which dialogue can unfold its search for the hidden aspect of the visible in particular and the good in general.³ Plato's philosophy illustrates this relationship. His philosophy may be interpreted as deeply founded in the (meta) narrative of the fall of the soul (similar to the original sin of the Christian narrative). According to

this interpretation, the entire saga of the human soul revolves around remembering its holy origin so that it can find its way back to its celestial home, the World of Ideas, which are the basis of reality. Contemplation of this world is the *telos* of man (i.e. what makes man a man and not a clock whose *telos* is to tell time), the good to be pursued. The dialogical method aided by memory is crucial in finding this path back home. Through dialogue we can come in touch with the Ideas and hence with the transcendent world where the human soul came from. (*ibid.* pp.145-153). We have other examples of this relationship between dialogue and narrative; Aquinas philosophy and the Christian narrative, the Enlightenment and the narrative of Progress. In sum, we are suggesting that epochal narratives give dialogue the cues for its task. In this way, dialogue and narrative complement rather than oppose each other.

Let us now shed some light on the main subject of this paper, namely, dialogue among civilizations. According to the aforementioned notions of dialogue and civilization, one could suggest the following idea as a possible pointer to explore the subject of dialogue among civilizations: *intercultural dialogue should aim at disclosing the foundation of the way of being of the participating cultures—their particular cultivation of their collective way of life—so that in the context of such display of ways of being human, “we” the human race can discover our humanity as a whole and hence disclose a new way of transcendence, a new way of being united together at a global scale.* This is a first answer to the question: dialogue among civilizations: what for? To this answer a question suggests itself: is it possible?

2. EXPLORING CONDITIONS FOR INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE IN THE PRESENT

Let us imagine a dialogue among civilizations as follows. Picture a room with representatives of different cultures of the world, eager to start a dialogue on the felt need to create a real global human community, not merely a global economic community centered on the dollar! The dialogue room is gradually filled with the spoken word. One representative raises her hand to say that perhaps the model of the European Community could shed some light as to how to form a global community. It would be a process of transferring to the global level the political space and the demo-

cratic institutions of the West, she says. The latter has proved, this representative continues, to be respectful of cultural variety and individual freedom. Surely, she adds, these characteristics would be desirable in a global community. Other participants disagree. They think it is precisely the purpose of intercultural dialogue to bring forth, gradually, the shape of such a community, not to predetermine it. Moreover, they feel the representatives in this dialogue room have only one mission, namely, to create a world forum for the peoples of the world to evolve, gradually and at all levels, a global community. Someone says that this has already been created and is called the UN. The dialogue goes on. At times something magical seems to happen. It is as if dialogue had managed to transport the speakers to a different dimension, one where words had a certain independence from the speakers, and dialoguers were merely the medium through which words are spoken!

All of a sudden this exercise of our imagination is stopped by a thought that comes to mind: How are they communicating? They speak different languages! Almost at the same time a similar swift thought comes to rescue our reflection on impertinent questions. The thought has come in the form of a little voice, full of arrogance and sarcasm saying: "God! What is this nonsense of language being a

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ghost that takes *possession* of human beings and which speaks through them! Moreover, what is the issue with people speaking different languages? Don't you know there are interpreters! Don't you know English is becoming the standard universal language? Ask businessmen and they will tell you. They have no language barriers when they carry out their business with different cultures!"

This theme of language which has come up in our short imaginative exercise, is indeed a central one because, contrary to common belief, language is not just a mere instrument humans use to describe an external objective reality independent from the observer. When language is thus understood, then our arrogant imaginary voice is right: What does it mat-

ter if someone labels an orange, ‘naranja’ or ‘arancio’ or whatever? A standard language can be built or chosen and the problem of communication between human beings is “solved”. Altavista, on the Internet, is already doing that! However, this instrumental conception of language has been seriously questioned in the last century by thinkers such as Wittgenstein (1978) and Heidegger (1982). Language opens a *clearing* where things make their presence. In this sense we human beings do not speak a language. Language speaks through us. Furthermore, language embodies and makes possible *a way of life*: a set of practices and traditions, a set of standards of rationality and justice, a conception of morality, religion, politics, economics, etc. If you abstract language from its cultural context you are left with a corpse, an empty shell, what people nowadays call an “international language.”

Now, it is against this background that people speak and that things are presented. Dialogue, as we have said, is about bringing forth the hidden side of things, to make them complete. Hence, we have here a serious problem for intercultural dialogue, a problem that cannot be solved with UN translators or businessmen’s interpreters. We have to approach this situation with a different attitude, one whose essence we are not able at this point to disclose, even though we can start unfolding it by labeling it the *anthropologist attitude*.

Accordingly, if we come back to our imaginary dialogue room, the participants should orient their interventions toward bringing forth the cultural foundation of the views and things being proposed. This stage of dialogue we might call “field work.” Unless this fieldwork is done, participants will have no common ground to engage with or to evaluate rationally the theses advanced by the participating cultures. “Abstract the particular theses to be debated and evaluated from their contexts within traditions... and then attempt to debate and evaluate them in terms of their rational justifiability to any rational person, to individuals conceived of as abstract from their particularities of character, history, and circumstance and you will make thereby... [dialogue] effectively impossible.” (MacIntyre, 1988, pp.398-399).

Are both western and eastern participants prepared to undertake such a task? Please, let us notice we are really thinking about the formation of a *dialogical global community*, one where dialogue would play a fundamental

role not only in its design but also in its realization and sustenance. To put it differently, the institutions and citizens of this global community would be literally soaked in dialogue. The closest idea that comes to mind to illustrate this dialogical global community is the ancient Greek *polis*.

No doubt, a proud citizen of a modern liberal society would say that her society is a model of dialogical society. Witness, she would say, how different views of the world and even different cultures are able to live together harmoniously in liberal democracies, such as the United States. In this society citizens debate every single issue they consider to be of common concern. Is this not enough proof that these democracies are really dialogical societies? Following, we will examine these liberal societies closer to reveal that their dialogical foundations have been badly eroded in the pursuit of a neutral ground where different cultures and conceptions of life can live together harmoniously. Such “neutral” ground will turn out to be rather compromised with a particular conception of the good life—the liberal conception—as we will see in a moment. In the next section, we will describe briefly the historical-ontological conditions which have made possible the search and effort to constitute a morally neutral society. Such conditions, as we will show, have fostered the debasement of a dialogical society and of dialogue itself. Let us see why.

A first look at the liberal societies of the West may reveal that their political institutions have been able to make room for the harmonious co-existence of a multiplicity of religious and moral conceptions. Supposedly, these societies have done so through what political liberals like Rawls call an *overlapping consensus*. According to Sandel’s interpretation of Rawls’ work, overlapping consensus means that: “...different people can be persuaded to endorse liberal political arrangements, such as equal basic liberties, for

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different reasons, reflecting the various comprehensive moral and religious conceptions they espouse. Since political liberalism does not depend for its justification on any one of those moral or religious conceptions, it is presented as a ‘freestanding’ view...” (Sandel, 1998, p.190). A few pages further, Sandel continues explaining what this “overlapping consensus” requires. It requires from the citizen the adoption of a crucial division between public and private life. In connection with this point, Rawls argues that, in order to secure social cooperation based on mutual respect, toleration and fairness—particular moral or religious conceptions should be bracketed and people should pay attention only to political argument. “In modern democratic societies like ours [i.e., USA’s] where people typically disagree about the *good life*, bracketing our moral and religious convictions is necessary if we are to secure social cooperation on the basis of *mutual respect*.” (Rawls paraphrased by Sandel, 1998, p.196. Emphasis added). In other words, a member of a liberal society should split his/her life in two halves: a public life and a private life. In the public arena he/she should apply only political values to decide on matters regarding the basic structure of society and its legal ordering. Moral and religious values should be set aside from the public life. The latter values belong to the realm of his/her private life. In sum, Rawls’ political liberalism requires *a-moral* citizens.

Can such a split be maintained? MacIntyre (1988), and Sandel (1998) think not. However this situation in itself would not be a problem were it not for two additional factors. One is that not only is there not a common moral framework shared by all citizens in these liberal democracies, but also the frameworks they have are fragments inherited from previous moral and religious conceptions of life (MacIntyre, 1985). The other factor is that in western societies there is still a drive to provide a rational justification for human action. The fragmentation of the moral language, however, makes it impossible to fulfill the rational drive. For in any serious debate concerning collective action, once the parts involved are forced in the unfolding of their arguments to reach the level of their premises and the moral ground where these premises are rooted, then the lack of an overarching moral framework impedes them from reaching any settlement of the issue being debated.

Division thus gradually permeates society and the problem of keeping the community integrated increases as more and more moral/political is-

sues cannot be resolved. The citizen's feeling of frustration and disenchantment with democracy spreads throughout the social fabric.⁴ Dialogue is not seen anymore as a viable way of building a democratic society. Negotiation and polemics take hold instead.

It is not difficult then to imagine that similar problems may arise in our attempts to create a global society. For instance, picture our imaginary dialogue table where different cultures are participating in a dialogue to define a new global order. A situation like the following might arise. Throughout the day the participants have been airing their views on the issue of the type of justice which is going to order the global society. The Western representatives have proposed ordering the global community following a Rawlsian notion of justice as fairness. After serious discussion of this matter, the non-western participants propose a different conception of justice. Now, the participants have to decide which notion of justice to choose. As their dialogue deepens on this issue it is revealed that the notions of justice are irremediably 'contaminated' by moral and religious conceptions. Furthermore, the more they try to bracket these conceptions, as the western representatives propose, the more they come to the realization that the liberal framework itself not only does not bracket its own moral conceptions, but also proscribes any other conception of the good life. As a participant summarizes it, "not only does liberalism have its own *broad conception of the good*, which it is engaged in imposing politically, legally, socially and culturally wherever it has the power to do so, but also that in doing so its toleration of rival conceptions of the good in the public arena is severely limited."⁵ At this point someone makes the remark that their dialogue is becoming a *polemic* and reminds other participants that dialogue is about shedding light on the foundational underpinning of issues. For instance, she says, it would be interesting to expose the assumptions of the liberal proposals and what it is that has made them possible? Moreover, what is the implication of this proposal for intercultural dialogue and the idea of a global community? Is it not a liberal proposal? And, if liberal societies seem to have problems promoting real dialogue among their citizens—inasmuch as their moral and religious views have to be bracketed from civic life—then would not dialogue at the intercultural level be also difficult or even impossible to promote?

3. THE DEBASEMENT OF DIALOGUE IN THE PRESENT

In order to answer these questions, it seems we need to take a look at the nature of the *assumptions* of current liberal societies. In so doing we will be able to understand better the very idea of dialogue among civilizations, which as our imaginary participant mentioned, looks like a liberal proposal. At the outset we are puzzled by this statement of the participant because, if the root of the proposal for intercultural dialogue is liberalism itself and if, as we are beginning to show, liberal societies do not seem to be able to promote dialogue, then how can we explain this? Certainly, a simple answer is that what these societies understand by dialogue is what we call

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mere *negotiation*. This answer, however, would be a very unfair one, to say the least. In the last two centuries we have witnessed great philosophical, political, and humanistic thinkers in the West whose work clearly demonstrates that the issue of a global community is for them more than mere global markets. On the other hand, we cannot deny that liberal societies are displaying a mode of being which seems animated by the ideal of a *rootless* or at least schizophrenic man; in public life, a groundless man

(i.e. a man without moral or religious view, without tradition or history). In private life, a man with moral and religious views and definitely with a conception of the good life—although he can change his conception from one day to the next if he so pleases! This culture, we will say, is *anti-dialogical*. Let us see why.

It can be shown that the conception of human beings, and of the world in general, as groundless characterizes Western culture at the present time (Taylor, 1991, 1989; MacIntyre, 1985, ch.3; Heidegger, 1955, 1973). According to this view, things (and man) are things-in-themselves i.e. things appear as they are, without a hidden side: “what you see is what you get.” Things do not present themselves in a context. They are groundless, and so is man. This does not mean that man can have no moral or religious values. What it means is that they do not constitute his essence, they are nonessen-

tial to his very being. That is why he can change them according to fashion or whim. And that is also why he wants to support a society whose institutions protect precisely this “freedom,” which modern man so much values.

Now we can see why dialogue would not find a fertile land in a liberal world. In such a world the spoken word has no hidden side of being to disclose because being is conceived of as groundless. Perhaps this is the reason why dialogue (as defined in this paper) has become nonessential to human beings and why negotiation or polemics (the latter frequently embodied in political and academic debates) has taken its place in our modern societies.

But here also lies the possibility of recovering dialogue since in the history of the West (starting with the Greeks, particularly with the Socratics), beings have been conceived of as transcendently rooted. The peculiar rootless condition of beings in general and modern man in particular should be most notorious. Dialogue should be called to reveal this rootlessness. The paradoxical condition of this call is more clearly stated thus: What makes dialogue necessary at present is the rootless condition of being but, paradoxically, this has undermined the conditions necessary for dialogue.

Now, if this is happening to dialogue what could we say about its historical companion, meta-narrative? Is it also being debased? Notice that for us humans of the present modern world it is very tempting to answer all these questions with a ‘so what? things change.’ In the past we saw the world differently than today. Hence there is no reason to expect that things will continue to be the same forever. What is the big fuss about not seeing man grounded in a culture, in a history, in a meta-narrative? There is nothing like the freedom of not being attached to any tradition or any culture in general. Nothing like the feeling of owing one’s existence to nothing but oneself. Nothing like finding meaning to one’s existence in one’s self only! By being detached one can be one thing one day and another the next day. One can choose any way of life one wants. This is real freedom.

In the *Malaise of Modernity*, Charles Taylor reflects deeply on the consequences for Western man of the rootless-man societies he has created in the last century. It is now clearer than ever that we will not be able to survive as a moral community nor even as a mere animal species, if we continue traveling this path.⁶ Hence, it is vital to regain our capacity to “ground” ourselves again, to become subjects dependent on the *Other* or rather, to their

representations; Physis in the Greek world, God in the monotheistic religious, the People in the Republic, etc. (Dufour, 2001). To understand what this means, let us add a historical perspective to what it could mean to be 'grounded' again, and how this relates to dialogue.

4. THE ORIGINS OF THE ROOTLESS MAN: THE FRACTURE OF THE *THREE-ELEMENT MORAL SCHEME OF THE WEST*

In the past, philosophical dialogue and meta-narratives exposed the unity of moral language in a society and this helped its members orient themselves to their individual and collective lives. Thus, in the time of the ancient Greeks, the Socratic philosophers revealed through dialectics (the dialogical method) the foundation of things as Ontic Logos (the ordered and perfect world of Ideas which are the basis of reality); in medieval times the hidden side of things was revealed as the Christian God and its Church; in the Enlightenment as Transcendental Reason. In each case things were explained in terms of these supra-sensory representatives of the foundation of things. Human life found its full sense in relation to these representatives because an answer to the practical question "how ought I to act?" always sought to harmonize with that totality represented by God, Reason...etc.⁷ This was led by epochal meta-narratives which not only explained the world and gave man cues as to how to relate his actions harmoniously with the hidden mystery—the transcendental—but they also explained our historical becoming, i.e. the place we come from, where we are going, and where we are now. In other words, the *three-element moral scheme* we mentioned before in our section about narrative and dialogue, was present throughout the history of the West since the Socratic Greeks.

Now, until very recently (the nineteenth century) people in Western civilization made sense of their individual and collective lives in narrative terms. From the great Homeric Narrative to the Narrative of Progress, human life (and by this we mean the entire spectrum of human activity, its political, moral, religious, economic, and everyday life activity in general) found its unity in the context of those great narratives and was constituted by them. Their narratives provided them with the basic framework within which they made rational choices and hence determined in a coherent and

unified way the course of their lives. *Narratives were the fundamental ground where our humanity was rooted.* Meta-Narratives embodied ideals, with all the compelling force ideals have for a culture. Thus, for the Homeric Greeks, the Homeric Narrative was not just poems sung to divert people in festivities and other memorial days. Nor did Medieval Catholics think that the Bible and the theological conception of the world rooted in it was just a story to tell their kids at bed time. For them it was real! Their actions were enacted by their (meta) narratives. Even now, when it is clear that the narrative of progress is dead, and with it also the end of meta narratives—or metaphysical *dreams* as Weaver (1948) would say—Western man is still somehow guided by some of the fragments of this and previous narratives.

How did it come about then that we neither understand ourselves nor our common ground in (meta) narrative terms anymore? A short answer is that the project of the Enlightenment and its narrative of progress have failed (MacIntyre, 1985; McMyler, 1994). The meaning of this failure is deeper than we can see, because it means not only that the project was not successful but also that our will to find another meta-narrative has waned. A crucial aspect of the Enlightenment project was its attempt to secure a rational foundation for morality, by searching universal and abstract principles valid for every rational being. The failure of this moral project, according to MacIntyre (1985), has to do with the fracture of the *three-element moral framework*, which guided Western civilization until the Renaissance. This framework, in MacIntyre's terms, consisted of three fundamental elements; "untutored human nature, man-as-he-could-be-if-he-realized-his-*telos*, and the moral precepts which enable him to pass from one state to the other." (*Ibid.* p.54). But the rise of science and its rejection of Aristotelianism had (together with other historical events, such as the gradual emergence of a rejection of tradition and the Church) as an effect the elimination of the notion of *telos* from scientific and moral discourse, and with it the elimination of the second of the three aforementioned elements. The Enlightenment received this fractured moral framework and made an attempt to fit a set of inherited moral values and precepts into it, which made no sense unless the second element was brought back into the picture. Hence, the project had to fail, but the rational ideal somehow prevailed. In order to live with it we have made an accommodation by establishing a division in our moral beliefs and the rest of our life: In the realm of moral

beliefs Reason plays no role.

Thus, moral relativism has taken hold of modern man—since, as one could expect, if we have no rational standards to discriminate between different and competing moral conceptions, then morality, the conduct of life, becomes just a matter of preference. To reconcile this situation with the ideal of reason modern man has become a *disengaged* human being i.e. disengaged of any cultural and traditional attachments. This condition man defines as a state of freedom; freedom to choose whatever he wants to be. The result is a society made up of individuals who have nothing transcendent (i.e. a common history, a common life project, a meta-narrative) to share except an interest in exploiting each other in the most effective and

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efficient way possible. Now, since in that society I can choose whatever way of life I want, and since such a choice cannot be rational, then preference is my sole guide, but preferences can change. Consequently, today I can be X and tomorrow switch to a Y mode of living. In this way modern man becomes a *person without history, a narrativeless being!* Mulhall and Swift (1992) express a similar point thus: [the freedom to

choose the moral attitude one prefers as its only justification] entails regarding the self's relation to its ends as purely voluntaristic; and it also involves regarding that self's transitions from one position or end to another as an essentially arbitrary process. *Such a person cannot be said to have a history*; there is no way of telling an intelligible story of her movements through moral positions and through life—*no narrative thread concerning the development or refinement of her self-understanding.*" (p. 76, emphasis added).

6. CONCLUSION: DIALOGUE AND THE RECOVERING OF "GROUNDED" MAN

In this paper we have painted a very sketchy picture of dialogue both at

an ontological and a quotidian level of human existence. In fact, since the Socratic Greeks, dialogue has been raised to the level of a very sophisticated dialogical method of inquiry, which has imprinted western culture with a distinct characteristic. We have also indicated the relation of dialogue to the cultural meta-narratives that have defined different epochs of Western culture and hence different ways of connecting man to the Other, the transcendental. We have suggested how philosophical dialogue has always tried to articulate, in very abstract terms, the foundation of being which is displayed metaphorically in those meta-narratives.

Now, in the light of the arguments gathered in the previous sections of this paper the question arises: Dialogue among civilizations: what for? We feel we can now identify a significant objective for such a dialogue: *To help man become grounded again!* The task of intercultural dialogue would be to bring forth philosophically, politically, socially, economically, and morally, the peculiar nature of existence in the present, as a void, ungrounded and fleeting. Only if we can understand our present condition can we have a solid ground to decide our future. But this would not be enough to “ground” man again. *A history* of the sequence of transformations about the nature of being (or rather of its representations) up to its present manifestation as a void, can do so. Hence there is the need to create a meta-narrative that discloses historically the end of narratives and the debasement of dialogue. Here, dialogue can also help although the boundaries between dialogue and narrative become very fuzzy.

The reader may be asking herself what intercultural dialogue has to do with these tasks. Something that distinguishes several non-western civilizations from the West is the fact that non-westerners still (although this is changing very rapidly through globalization) understand themselves in meta-narrative terms (i.e. non-western man is still “grounded”). In this sense, these cultures can provide living models of what it means to see life in non-fragmented ways. The main contribution of non-western cultures to dialogue among civilizations is to reveal themselves in dialogue as grounded!

How do we organize this dialogical/narrative process on a global scale? Fortunately, in the past few years there have emerged several proposals in this direction (Spinosa et.al.,1998; Taylor, 1991; MacIntyre, 1990; Sandel, 1996). These involve both intra (west) and intercultural participation. For instance, in his latest work, MacIntyre (1990) has proposed that Western

universities become living models—to society as a whole—of communities where the unity of life is collectively pursued through the development and maintenance of traditions of moral inquiry. Public dialogue among universities representing different traditions of inquiry will be promoted. Different joint projects will be undertaken. The attitude permeating this whole experiment will be akin to that of the anthropologist getting to know a new culture: the participants will have to learn each other's "language." The *anthropologist's attitude* means to really try understanding and experiencing from the inside the tradition which each participant in this project represents, a task which *entails comprehending how each tradition has become part of our current state of fragmentation*. The redesign of the entire curriculum and of the universities' organizational structure to accommodate this project are also discussed in this proposal. Science, philosophy, and the humanities would be taught by placing their contents in the historical context of the tradition of inquiry which the university represents, and by showing the role of that specific content in the current fragmentation.

Only if we can understand our present condition can we have a solid ground to decide our future.

Spinosa et.al. (1998) have tried to extend similar ideas to other Western institutions like the justice system, where one can often find various legal traditions at play. They also have focused their attention on the redesign of educational systems, which has as its main goal teaching students to become articulators of their national cultural values, something which in our current condition requires the unbundling of different, fragmented, and competing views. If I understand their project correctly, the articulation must revolve around what they call marginal practices. These are those social practices which, through the process of fragmentation, have been displaced to the margin of society but which one can still find "breeding" in some of its corners, albeit with great difficulty. They are the carriers of past ways of life to which they were integral. To try and understand how these practices have become marginal will help us to understand how our present condition has emerged. "Proceeding this way helps us see that in the history of the West things, people, and selves appeared in significantly different ways in different epochs. Hence the notion that there is any one right ordering of concerns and modes of understanding is bracketed ... Concerns today appear in a national culture that emerged

from conditions that led people to experience life quite differently from the way we now experience things and people.” (*Ibid.* pp. 159-160).

One can imagine the United Nations as the organizational setting for coordinating, not only within Western culture changes in educational and justice systems like those mentioned before. Its most important role, however, would be to promote dialogue among civilizations aimed at understanding our present condition and recovering our narrative capacity. The United Nations, however, also needs an intercultural dialogue to begin a revision of the United Nations Charter because it has become the political and military arm of the culture of the West, of the rootless man and globalization. One might think in terms of a Chart of Human Duties, and to de-emphasize the individualistic tone of much of the human, which, we are afraid, is based on a rootless conception of man.

At this point many might be thinking; is this whole proposal nothing but mere utopianism, just an idealistic dream? My answer is yes and no. Yes, if by an idealistic dream is meant what Robert Weaver calls a meta-physical dream, i.e., the development of a new meta-narrative (a historical narrative) for the West and for humanity as a whole. No, if we recall that there was a time when Western man conceived of himself in historical terms. There was a time when Western civilization as a whole embarked on the search for the good life, when universities functioned as living models of community life and helped to articulate the search for the good life through their various educational processes which allowed man to become grounded in his cultural meta-narratives. Certainly, I am not proposing a return to the old good times. I do not intend this writing to be a piece of nostalgia. What I am proposing is to help man ground himself again so that we can, as a result, become really *free*!⁸ And this last sentence is another answer to the main question I have raised in this paper: Dialogue among civilizations: what for?

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Notes

¹This section draws its inspiration on the subject of dialogue and civilization from MacIntyre (1988) and on the ontology of dialogue and narrative from Giannini (1992, Ch.III and pp.131-142).

²Ideas exposed, for instance, in the Platonic dialogue *Cratyle*. Later, in the history of Western civilization, the Platonic dialogue, the dialectical method, turned into a search for and capturing of fixed essences, which were assumed to reside somehow in the things themselves.

³Our understanding of the relationship between dialogue and meta-narrative through the search/disclosing of a transcendental good can be further enriched by Taylor's (1994) reflections about the debasement of modern practical reason. "When one understands practical reason aright, one can see that the goods about which one reasons in its context-related way include transcendent ones, and that this reasoning does not by any means have to be comprehensive only, but can be highly revisionist. True, in this latter case the context will largely be provided not by established practices, but by *models or stories embodying a higher perfection* (like those of the Gospel)." (p. 36, emphasis added).

⁴In a recent book Sandel (1996) has examined this malaise of American democracy and the relation it has with the erosion of the public's current values and conceptions of life. His idea is that the moral fabric of the community is in disarray, and that our political institu-

tions reflect this condition. As a matter of fact, he finds two major problems with American democracy which reflect the erosion of morality: “One is the fear that, individually and collectively, we are *losing control* of the forces that govern our life. The other is the sense that, from family to neighborhood to nation, *the moral fabric of community is unraveling around us.*” (p. 3, emphasis added). In other words, the loss of self-government and the erosion of the community’s moral fabric are two major manifestations of this disenchantment with liberal institutions in American society.

⁵This summary is a quote from MacIntyre, 1988, p.336.

⁶As to the consequences at the psychological and sociological level of becoming disengaged subjects, i.e. individuals who owe their existence to nothing transcendental but to themselves only; see, for instance, Dufour (2001) and Bordieu (1998).

⁷Inspired in Fuenmayor (1997).

⁸The idea of freedom we cannot develop it in this writing. But certainly it is a very different conception of freedom than that of current liberal democracies. Ours is closer to the idea of becoming conscious of our finite condition: we cannot be disengaged, abstract, omnipotent beings. To associate freedom with limitless power and the desire to control everything, man himself included, I do not call freedom. Freedom, on the contrary is to learn to listen to our situation, to our historical becoming, The dancer who listens to the music and becomes one with it, is he a prisoner, a slave of the music or has he achieved a different dimension where such valuations are nonsense and where a new experience of freedom is achieved?

CHARACTER & IDENTITY

The Sociological Foundation
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Perspectives



Edited by
MORTON A. KAPLAN

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Character and Identity is designed to explore the lives of individuals who have had the integrity and courage to help sustain good societies and to resist their degradation. Although the authors are aware that no formula can determine how to produce such individuals

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MORTON A. KAPLAN is Distinguished Professor of Political Science Emeritus from the University of Chicago and publisher of *The World and I* magazine. He is author of many books including *System and Process in International Politics*, *Science, Language and the Human Condition*, and *Character and Identity, Vol. 1: The Philosophical Foundation of Political and Sociological Perspectives*.

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