Introductory Notes

ON DIALOGUE

Andrea Marcelli

1. *The outset of a problem:* Echoes from a Sombre Empire*?*

Perhaps one of the most intriguing themes is that of the dark side of European culture, when conceived as a whole. In this regard, Cappelletti provides a historical frame of reference for the homogenization of Europe. The most prominent unifying force was a military one: firstly, that of Alexander the Great, who took the Greeks' everlasting fascination with the exotic Middle Eastern empires and transformed it into an act of appropriation; secondly, that of the Romans, whose institutions became the fabric of all provinces. In addition to the above military exploits, Cappelletti remarks that a fruitful process of cultural contamination occurred between the Greek and the Jewish culture – eventually resulting in the birth of Christianity.

In such a new social and intellectual scenario, the leading paradigm of dialogue was not anymore that of men between each other or, occasionally, with the personified forces of nature. Instead, the cultural *intelligentsia* of the time focused on the Abrahamic confession, which posited the existence of an Author of all beings and of a dialogue with «him». Being privileged by definition, all presumed relations with God gave rise to new forms of authority, thus laying the foundations of future European institutions.

Similarly, Miéville describes European culture as often imbued with totalitarian attitudes, which impede dialogue and its healthy development. His letter to Campagnolo is echoed by the latter's

paper: for Campagnolo, although dialogue – i.e. the foundation of contemporary law – has always opposed democratic values to authority of regimes based on violence, dialogue itself has often figured as a tool in the hands of imperial élites.

As shown by the political institutions fostered by Christianity in the late antiquity, a society based on language is also a society that may exploit hermeneutic privileges as ways to withhold power from certain classes or groups of people – either within or without the borders of the soon-to-be nation states. Going back to Cappelletti's historical outline, an ambivalent scenario unfolds. On the one hand, the early Christian idea of an external Being, whose language ought to be understood, is seminal to the development of modern science. However, on the other hand, it was not until the Reformation that it was finally (and painfully) acknowledged the right to seek natural truths, and not just spiritual ones. For Banfi as well, it was thanks to economic and material changes that culture became increasingly mundane, as opposed to the institutional escapism of the Church or to a self-appointed *intelligentsia* hierarchs.

Notwithstanding the increased user base of European knowledge, von Balthasar gives voice to some substantial concerns: is it the case – he asks – that the flattening of «cultural pyramid(s)» result in excessive homogenization? Indeed, widespread access to means of communication and tools of inquiry helps individual instances to emerge; besides, technological and moral conformism crushes local communities. The concern is that the instruments that so efficiently make room for new ideas and items are, in fact, the very shovels that dig the graves of other cultures and people. That is, even when they become democratically shared, hermeneutic traditions run the risk of absorbing minorities and reducing cultural variation. As Roy puts it, the more Europe grew as an exploiter, the blinder it became to everyone that would not abide by its self-empowering narrative.

Von Balthasar's worry is echoed by Campagnolo: in a dramatic turn of events, it is not surprising that different cultures survive by countering syncretic absorption. In particular, certain groups

manipulate politics and alienate it from the very democratic bases that made – their motive being mere survival, and not an *a priori* rejection of dialogue. For example, Christianity, in its early stages of self-defence against the imperial rule, became averse to unrestricted dialogue. Similarly, the exclusive exchanges of rebels between peers tend to build echo chambers, which foster radicalism and sectarianism. Again, the hermeneutic privileges of minorities may be seen as necessary to their survival – yet their secrecy, as Weil would remark, indicates they are gagged rather than liberated.

In order to clarify the above qualms, it is fruitful to read Campagnolo's retrospective analysis of Europe's socio-cultural background. With a universalist regard, the author considers that most European cultures share the same feature: that is, they display cultural traits that allow for their civilisation to perceive itself as always incomplete – i.e. open – by means of a continuous feedback process. Theoretically speaking, such a feedback system could go on indefinitely. Consequently, it tends to both grow internally dense and spread globally even when it is not enforced. Thence, the conundrum. On the one hand, European culture appears to be always open to new inputs – to the point it demands maximum hospitality (openness) of itself. On the other hand, however, it is inevitable that most of the things that come into contact with such universalizing culture end up being framed by its ready-made concepts (if not outright devoured). Such is the dilemma of appropriation – i.e. a tormented tension between openness and closure, which follows from a historical asymmetry: be it that of the conquerors and the conquered ones, or simply that of exporters and self-appointed innovators versus the (often-unwilling) recipients of their services and technologies.

2. *Grounds for dialogue*

Weil maintains that one of the duties of free thinkers is that of preserving memory of the past, thus ensuring that the hotline between a society and its own past is never busy. Following his direction, it is possible to trace back some of the most constitutive

values of European culture, which come handy when dealing with the aforementioned anxieties.

Before digging deeper in such conceptual an archaeological site, a disclaimer is necessary. Although relation to the past may indeed foster a sense of belonging, von Balthasar warns us against the pitfalls of nostalgia and identity politics. Accordingly, the advancement of knowledge is hardly achieved by attempting to reinstate past grandeur – let alone for the fact its conditions were often contingent and difficult to plan. Rather, reference to the past is relevant when it comes to unveiling the mechanics of deeply rooted phenomena – such as the relevance of dialogue in Europe's current culture.

According to Weil, dialogue is a necessary, but not sufficient condition of a free society. That is, something else must be present for dialogue to occur, and not just a mere exchange of views. In a passage, Campagnolo offers a frame that gathers all the anticipatory virtues of dialogue under the same umbrella. He remarks that even if dialogue has its own internal rules and procedures, all of its background values need be uphold by means of personal attachment and it is not enough to follow them like uninterested bureaucrats. Engagement in earnest dialogue is surely grounded on the quest for knowledge and cooperation, but not because of them: rather, dialogue is entertained for the *sake* of them.

In order to clarify this, Campagnolo talks of an essential sentiment, which in his view is described as «religious». Here, he explains, the term «religion» does not narrowly denote specific religious dogmas; rather, it indicates the very phenomenon that presides over the creation of societal bonds – i.e. the development of shared practices of attachment, which are oriented to both objects and values. So how does such feeling unfold?

Schaff provides a tentative answer: first, people need to «feel» each other – that is, to develop «personal contacts», as it often happens when foreign powers opt for an armistice and exchange ambassadors. First contact relations may be cold, but they drive action away from the spectrum of violence. Of course, says von Balthasar,

it is mandatory conflict does not become endemic: in order for any culture to survive, communities need at least a certain degree of social justice and political stability. In fact, individuals, however creative, need the support of strong and lasting communities: they provide them with enough of a safety net, so that they can engage in inventive or artistic behavior.

For von Balthasar, economic security, personal safety, and widespread access to means of communication are equally important, yet they also need be prerogative of the interlocutors – not of some external power. In other words, participants should be independent agents with a fair degree of autonomy. This means democratic achievements and earnest dialogue are often inaccessible to those who, albeit safe and wealthy, dwell within a golden cage built by somebody else.

Furthermore, it is advisable dialogue enjoys a certain degree of institutionalization. Communication naturally occurs, but dialogue requires training, to the extent of becoming a full-time job. On a similar note, Banfi agrees that confrontation and practical action are always preferable to armchair speculation – that is, because human beings, though naturally sociable, are not permanently mindful of such quality; in this respect, institutions help fostering a culture of dialogue that can last longer than the motivation of its members, individually considered.

Institutionalization paves the way for professional intellectuals. According to Weil, they are not politicians, who represents others by mandate. Rather, intellectuals are citizens who speak their mind and whose thoughts are only occasionally embraced by broader social groups. This said, intellectuals are many things at once: they may be working as bureaucrats of sort, they may profit from their skills regardless of ethical concerns; moreover, they may even play the part of have-a-go heroes, who accomplish great tasks but without upsetting the *status quo*. Notwithstanding such ordinary existence, the professionals of culture stand exposed whenever their principles are threatened; in other words, they become relevant whenever they risk losing status because of

their beliefs in the role of reason and dialogue. By claiming this, Weil is on the same page as Campagnolo: it is the fideistic attitude towards rational discussion that makes the difference, and not the abidance by a certain procedure. For this reason, the latter believes that the relationship between scientific, political, and religious institutions, albeit tense, should not result in a triumph of one side over the other ones – instead, he wishes for further cooperation, where the realm of knowledge and logic meets that of emotionality and motivation.

Given the extension of certain terms, it is possible to confuse substantial features of dialogue with cosmetic ones. In order to avert blurring the semantic boundaries, two paradigmatic examples are proposed, both of them comprising ambiguous dyads. The first dyad opposes tolerance and inaction. Sometimes, failure to sanction abuses creates a *de facto* situation of acceptance, which erodes all democratic institutions. This is not tolerance, but a form of bystander effect. Moreover, a second example of dyad is the one that opposes authoritarianism and management: even if strong asymmetry of power is damaging for a democratic society, anarchy is not advisable at all – the negative myth being that of the fabled Babel, a city of misunderstandings. In fact, it is expected of democratic debate to favour the emergence of effective leaders, and not to make people interchangeable.

Most authors refer to dialogue in its purest form – i.e. when everyone is acting sincere and well meaning – but Schaff thinks otherwise: not all dialogue is lost when it comes to outright ideological antagonisms. There are indeed ways in which proper dialogue could be managed notwithstanding divergence. In fact, the very idea of co-existence dialogue relies upon presumes diverse beings and not mere expressions of the same system – be it economic, political, or both. Even if the impossibility of waging war shifts the struggle to the realm of language, there still might be room for further growth: in fact, once ideas are put on the table, they constitute a precedent everyone can refer to, when looking for discursive evidence. Similarly, von Balthasar stresses on the fact that culture, and the knowledge it is built upon, is always

present in all human contexts – even the most conflictual ones: «there was [a culture] even among the cruelties of [war]».

3. *Salvaging the best of European culture: dialogue as the timing of truth*

Cappelletti's account has the merit of outlining the historical and spatial coordinates within which the aforementioned virtues and practices have become the essential cornerstones of European culture. He shows that, from a European viewpoint, the milieu that constitutes the cradle of science is that of ancient Greece. It was the Greeks who fed on the myth of human creation as the moulding of a species whose substance is the same as reason and orderly thought. Such feature is so prominent it challenges the God themselves: according to the legend, it has the effect of dooming humans to a Promethean fate. When the Logos is expressed by a veritable dialogue, it has the benefit of presenting the truth and sharing it, thus stepping away from all the mysteries and initiations that would for a long time characterize the pan-European scene: thanks to the primacy of dialogue, truth is finally unveiled and not any more occult.

Logically speaking, truth may be conceived as a relation, which ties declarative statements to the worlds that saturate them. Indeed, heuristics and the search for new truths and justifications are efforts that require constant engagement with the world. When considering the link between dialogue and truth, the focus is not on individual truths, but rather on how the quest for truths extends over different times and places – thus regarding truth as a human function rather than a static relation. Said quest could be quasi-dualistically conceived as the approximation of an epistemic harmony between the mind, the world it addresses, and the practices that actualize the agency of either of the two upon the other – with particular attention to language as the most noteworthy of these practices.

It is by bearing in mind such process of harmonization that truth can be said to have a history of its own. Indeed, if bodies of truths expand and contract as the result of contingent interactions

by individuals, this means truth itself, when regarded as a universal concept, extends itself over time and space. The resulting mass of statements, though organized and multifaceted, is worthless unless it is shared, believed, and maintained by epistemic agents.

Since sharing requires communication, belief requires mental resources, and maintenance requires energy, the attitude of agents is paramount – on pain of losing the «epistemic» label at the slightest blunder, thus reducing themselves to thoughtless actors or even passive extras. Bodies of truths, as well as sets of beliefs, are extremely sensitive to the attitudes of agents; consequently, it is paramount they are subject to constant upkeep, as well as distributed over the population in a given environment.

Such train of thoughts, which was originally motivated by the Promethean concern for the transparency and spread of knowledge, leads back to the relevance of dialogue as means to share beliefs and discover new truths. As pointed out in an extract from *The Times Literary Supplement* (3 April 1953): truths that matter to us may vary over time, but what stands still is the attitude that is required for all dialogue to be effective. That is, talks of honesty, passion, and the love of knowledge shall not be relegated between the romanticized lines of a wistful novel; rather, they do constitute the bread and butter of all scientific Endeavour.

Variation of truths over time is what dialogue stands for. Accordingly, Cappelletti highlights that the Logos possesses the faculty of producing truth and preserving it throughout its multiple iterations. Hence, besides being a way of communicating, dialogue shines as the manifestation of subsequent states, all of them belonging to an intentional mind – i.e. a type of mind that is able to pay attention not just to the present tenses, but also to the past and future ones.

It is in this sense that Banfi talks of culture as something whose universality is the result of shared processes. Formerly, the universal character of truth was understood as reference to crystallized otherworldly beings – i.e. to a world that is beyond physics and

history, or to an élite that has removed itself from worldly events. To sum it up with Campagnolo's words: «truth consists precisely in a constant effort to overstep sure stances or established works». Here, «overstep» shall not be interpreted in the defeatist sense of post-truisms: going beyond certainty is not the same as countering, falsifying, or sidestepping the truths of the past; instead, it means to build upon them with a prospect of growing knowledge. Schaff agrees with Banfi: whenever language skills are used as weapons, truth is their first victim, but even the strongest ideologies reach a point beyond which it is impossible to deny the practical consequences of scientific discovery and the beauty of art.

Thus, truth-retention is at the core of dialogue and flags the relevance of dialectic within current society. Drawing on Banfi, dialectic appears as a dual process, which encompasses both an act of acknowledgment and one of overcoming; old statements are understood according to new frames of reference, whose creation is intertwined with social and institutional changes. The pillars of such dialectic system are economic, political independence, together with passionate confidence in the freedom of speech.