



Persons as dialogical-hermeneutical-relational beings – New circumstances ‘call out’ new responses from us

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ABSTRACT

Shifting from a world of already-made-things to a world of things-continually-in-the-making changes everything. Psychology, like all other sciences, tries to proceed by *analysis*, by breaking down a living, unique, always developing organic whole into a set of general, already-existing, nameable elements. But as Bakhtin makes clear, in discussing how Dostoevsky portrays the inner dynamics of people worrying over how to act for the best in living their lives, such an itemization of merely observed behavioural characteristics leads to a degrading *reification* of a person's unfinalizability, of their still-developing nature. Below, I first examine the *Cartesianism* that still seems present in much of our thinking in social inquiry today. I then turn attention to the primacy of our living movements out in the world and their responsiveness to events occurring around us. While finally turning to the fact that, as living beings, what 'goes on inside us', is not so important as 'what we go on inside of'. Although Dostoevsky portrays this indivisible, flowing reality, in terms of a set of discontinuous fragments —because that is the nature of our experience in everyday life — as hermeneutical-dialogical-relational beings, we have a basic capability of *organizing* them into unitary wholes which sit in the background to everything we think and do.

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As a challenge to Psychology's, i.e., academic psychology's, attempt to *define* what it is to *be a person*, in Shotter (1975) I began by asking whether we remain a puzzle to ourselves because we have still not yet done enough research or amassed enough information about ourselves, "or is it, perhaps, because we have no real nature, no natural nature, because we are self-determining, self-defining animals?" (p.11). Rather than the former, I then suggested that the latter was the case. What it is to be a person, as I will argue again here, cannot be defined, conceptualized, or captured in a theoretical structure or framework of some kind. More recently, Tim Ingold (2013) has put the issue thus: we should "think of ourselves not as *beings* but as *becomings* — that is, not as discrete and pre-formed entities but as trajectories of movement and growth" (in Ingold, 2013, p.8). If this is the case (and everything now seems to be pointing in this direction), our *being human*, our *being a person*, is some 'thing' that we continually have to *aim at*, to *try to be*. For at each moment we face a uniquely new circumstance, with some similarities, but also with many differences from what we have experienced before. Thus for us, life is a task in which we have, perpetually, the never-ending responsibility to be,

collaboratively, along with the others around us, creating ourselves. However, in our simplistic search in a 'Scientific Psychology' for, we say, "objective" or "factual, timeless truths," it is only too easy to forget this.

Is there another way? I think there is. Currently, we tend to treat a circumstance which is bewildering or disorienting, that is strange and new to us, as posing a *problem* for us. We thus seek a *solution* to it, cognitively, by trying to *explain* it in terms of an *analytic framework* couched in terms of a set of *elements* we can think of, *theoretically*, as *corresponding* to features in the circumstance. This is the method adopted in our laboratory-based sciences that we now try to follow in our inquiries in Psychology. But as I hope is already clear, it depends upon putting a *selective way of thinking of our own devising* between ourselves and reality at large. There is, however, an altogether different way of responding to such circumstances.

To state it in a somewhat general manner, we can 'enter into' a dialogically-structured, hermeneutical relationship with our circumstances and, as we 'dwell *within* them, *with* them, and *on* them' for a while, we can gradually gain an *orientation towards* them, as their 'inner nature' becomes familiar to us. This process occurs in a way much like, say, as we get to know our 'way around' *inside* a particular city that is at first unfamiliar to us, by exploring its highways and byways motivated by the different projects we try to

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pursue within it. In becoming familiar with a uniquely new 'something' in our surroundings in this way, we can *come to know*, not just 'its' inert, objective nature, but to know 'it' in terms of a whole realm of possible responsive, living relations that we might adopt *in-relation-to* 'it'. We can orient toward 'it' both in terms of its yet-to-be-discovered *values* for us, or in terms of the 'demands' or 'calls' it might exert on us to 'go on' with it in one way rather than another. In short, we can come to know 'it' *in itself*. In providing a shared (and/or shareable) background of basic, taken-for-granted ways of thinking and reasoning, the development of these kinds of sensitivities *in relation to events and happenings in our surroundings*, as well as *to a particular person's activities*, is a necessary preliminary to our conducting any of our so-called problem-solving practices. And such developments can easily be impeded by proceeding too quickly to *analysis* and to a laboratory-based, theory-driven style of inquiry.

Someone who appreciated this process many years ago, was Dostoevsky. In discussing how Dostoevsky portrays the inner dynamics of people *worrying* over how best to proceed in the actual living of their lives in his novels, Bakhtin (1984) makes it clear that it cannot be done merely by itemizing past behavioural characteristics collected by external observers:

"Dostoevsky's hero always seeks to destroy that framework of *other people's* words about him that might finalize and deaden him... The truth about a man in the mouths of others, not directed to him dialogically and therefore a *secondhand* truth, becomes a *lie* degrading and deadening him, if it touches upon his 'holy of holies', that is, 'the man in man'" (p.59).

It is a lie in that it will inevitably fail to account for the 'something more' that all essentially *unfinalizable* persons might express on finding themselves in new, unexpected circumstances. This is why, as Bakhtin (1984) points out, Dostoevsky categorically denied that he was a psychologist, in the sense of what it was to be a psychologist as expressed in the scientific and artistic literature of the time, and practised then also in the law courts. For he saw *that kind of psychology* as "a degrading *reification* of a person's soul, a discounting of its freedom and its unfinalizability, and of that peculiar indeterminacy and indefiniteness" (p.61) that real people face in the actual living of their lives.

In the final section of this paper, I will return to Bakhtin's (1984) account of how Dostoevsky *portrays* people in his writing, his *compositional style* — the fact, as he himself put it, that there is "a fantastic element" in it, that provides "neither a narrative nor a collection of notes," but tells a story "in breaks and snatches [that] is disconnected in form," because "it is always like that in real life" (p.55). But in the body of the paper, I will first examine the *Cartesianism* and the primacy of the *calculational-geometrical* view of thinking that still seems to occupy a central role in much of our thinking in our social inquiries today. I will then turn attention to an alternative, namely, to the primacy of our living movements out in the world and their responsiveness to events occurring around us. Finally I will turn to the fact that, as living beings, what 'goes on' inside us, is not so important as 'what we go on inside of,' for what we can *become* is highly dependent upon the prevailing *social soil and weather*, so to speak, within which we, as merely *seed-like forms*, can grow and flourish, or not, as is the case.

1. Our cartesian heritage

What is it that is so special and unique to persons, to human beings? It is very easy to think, as Descartes did, that we need to begin our inquiries into our own human nature as the living individuals we are, by *thinking about* what should be the topic, the

subject matter, of our inquiries. Not to base our inquiries in *vague sensings* but, as he said, in "*clear and distinct ideas*" about what we already know about people. And what is special about people is that they have minds, don't they? That is what makes them so special. And indeed, in our everyday talk, we continuously talk of such mental *things* or *objects* as 'thoughts', ideas', 'memories', 'images', etc., of 'decisions', 'judgements', etc., and of 'knowledge', as if all such things or objects are already in existence, and we all already know exactly *what* we are talking about — for if we did not, how else could we use such words so easily if there is nothing, no 'thing' *within us*, that such words could 'stand for', that they could *represent*? In thinking like this, it is thus very easy for us to think that the *things we represent* by our words, although seemingly hidden from us, are of much greater importance than the mere words we *use* in trying to describe their nature to the others around us.

Thus our talk is shaped by our minds, and our minds are shaped by certain (scientifically discoverable) objects contained within them.¹ This, I will argue here, is one of our major mistakes in our current academic psychology.

It means that we see ourselves as being in a monological, one-way, causal relation to those around us, as simply *transmitting information* to them, rather than being, essentially, in two-way, *dialogical* (Bakhtin, 1984, 1986; Gadamer, 2000) relation to or with them. It also means that, although we may talk of our actions as resulting from 'thoughts', 'ideas', or 'knowledge', the fact is, such *entities* or *objects* can only be 'seen as' *having been at work* in our performances *after* they have been completed. Indeed, this seems to be the case with many of our named topics of study in psychological research: they can only be 'seen as' *outcomes* of a person's actions *after* those actions have been performed. In other words, we start our inquiries too late in the day. We need to start much earlier, to explore what it is that makes it possible for us to *think like this*.

Indeed, this suggests another mis-take: In thinking like this, we are *taking* for granted that the thinking that we as adult thinkers *do deliberately* and know of ourselves as doing, as simply *what thinking is*. Whereas, in fact, it is drawn from, and is an aspect of, the thinking that *just happens within us* as a result of our having grown up within a particular language group, with its own particular cultural history, and of our later going on to operate as scientists within a particular, professional "thought collective" with its own particular "thought style" (Fleck, 1979). It is this kind of *just-happening-'background'-socially shared-thinking* that goes on within us — both, seemingly, out of our awareness and out of our own self-control — that 'sets the scene' for how we make sense of events occurring in our surroundings, and for the rest of what we do and say, both in relation to those events, and in relation to the others around us. Yet it is this not-easy-to-change, socially-shared 'background', that we must change, if we are ever to conduct any truly *scientific* inquiries into our actual nature as living, social beings, and not just elaborate either (1) notions of our own invention or simply (2) what is already familiar to us. We need to look into its genesis.

As is well-known, we can find its beginnings in *Descartes'* (1968) account in 1637 of what is involved in, as he put it in his famous *Discourse on Method of Properly Conducting one's Reason and Seeking Truth in the Sciences*, and in his *Meditations* of 1641. I will mention here just three of his claims which seem to have set the scene for much of our thinking in recent times. The first has to do with him taking geometry as a paradigmatic example of what *proper thinking* is: "These long chains of reasoning, quite simple

¹ The "*palpable definitive*" objective 'things' imposed on Dmitry in his preliminary investigation and trial in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* — the "false psychology" that totally fails to capture the authentic Dmitry as the unique person he is.

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