

Semioethics, Dialogue and Existential Semiotics

Roundtable

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Semiotics and Dialogue between Logic and Ethics

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AUGUSTO: Let's begin by asking Susan to read the abstract we originally proposed for this new "trialogue". It explains the sense and orientation of our research as we have been developing it together over the past twenty years...

SUSAN: Thanks Augusto, well here it is then: This three-voiced dialogue, this "trialogue", between Massimo Bonfantini, Susan Petrilli and Augusto Ponzio discusses the conditions of dialogical argumentation, continuing a tradition we began over ten years ago with our first "trialogue" on lying and truth (1996).

Beyond the question of the relation between dialogue and inference, our dialogue-presentation focuses on the conditions that make dialogical argumentation possible. Our problem concerns foundations and therefore involves a discussion that connects the study of *logic*, *dialogue* and *semiotics* from a "semiodialogic" and "semioethic" perspective.

In this context the expression "semioethics" underlines the relation between semiotics and axiology, signs and values, dialogical argumentation and otherness. And fundamental points of reference for the development of our discourse include Charles S. Peirce, Mikhail M. Bakhtin, Victoria Welby, Emmanuel Levinas, Charles Morris.

Our triologue develops a dialogue on dialogue which actually began in 1986 with publication of the monograph *Dialogo sui dialoghi*, co-authored by Massimo Bonfantini and Augusto Ponzio and which has now developed into a monograph published in 2006 under the title, *I dialoghi semiotici. Sul dialogo, sulla menzogna e la verità, sui nuovi mass-media, sulla retorica e l'argomentazione, sulla testualità e la discorsività, sull'ideologia e l'utopia*, with

Susan Petrilli as co-author.

Keeping account of the “dialogical nature of sign”, and of the structure of action, therefore, verbal action, a typology of dialogue is proposed relatedly to a typology of signs and of action. In dialogical argumentation signs respond dialogically to other signs in inferential processes, which develop according to different degrees of otherness ranging from low to high degrees of otherness and dialogicality, and which imply taking a stand, making choices, referring to values, habits, norms, stereotypes, and ideologies.

AUGUSTO: Susan, what a great summary! I’d like to start from our typology of dialogue. This was our first important invention or abduction concerning dialogues. It goes back to 1982...

MASSIMO: When Susan was still a child! But just let me describe our dialogue triad from a recent version by Susan, rather than from our original *Dialogo sui dialoghi*:

As a specific discourse genre dialogue is verbal action which similarly to any verbal action, is either an end in itself or instrumental to something else. If the latter, it is a means to an end, or – a third possibility – it can aim to determine and evaluate ends and means. Consequently, we may propose the following triadic typology of dialogue:

(1) *Dialogue as an end in itself*, that is, as *conversation or dialogue for entertainment*. This kind of dialogue involves speaking for the sake of speaking, that is, for the sheer pleasure of speaking. This is dialogue with a *phatic* function which can, in turn, be divided into:

(1.1) *conformative-repetitive dialogue*; and

(1.2) *di-verting dialogue*

(In Italian, the expression “di-vertente” evokes the idea of diversion, dialogue as *divertissement*, as pleasure and having fun).

An example of the variant (1.1) is offered by certain forms of television entertainment which tend to be repetitive and obey predetermined compositional-instructional rules. This type of entertainment works on the basis of predetermined decodification processes.

(2) *Dialogue functional to attainment, to achieving something*.

This can be divided into:

(2.1) *exchange dialogue*

(2.2) *competition dialogue*

(3) *Cooperative or reflective or investigative dialogue.*

With reference to the degree of “substantial dialogism” as the criterion for differentiation, this type of dialogue may be classified (on an increasing scale in degree of dialogism) as:

(3.1) *re-discovery and revelation dialogue,*

(3.2) *research and construction dialogue,*

(3.3) *exploration and problematization dialogue.*

SUSAN: With your dialogue of 1982 you propose a tripartition of dialogue on the basis of logical analysis, that is to say, applying the three categories proposed by Peirce. But I think that the axiological and ethical-.political orientation of your discourse also emerges...

MASSIMO: And in fact it is explicated immediately after in the dialogue with Augusto dedicated to the novel, *1984*, by Orwell.

AUGUSTO: Yes..., the praise of eroticism in life and writing, against the negative utopia of neo-language – an absurd and impossible attempt at eliminating dissense, innovation, discussion, the capacity for making projects in discourse and communication of the polis.

MASSIMO: Just as well language neither flourishes nor flows in the terms imagined by the theoreticians of what we have identified as “code semiotics”.

AUGUSTO: In a “commodified society” like our own, where attainment dialogue is dominant, where brutal competition and greedy exchange on the basis of self-interest are the rule, lying and deception have become so common that they don’t surprise us any more, they’re not a scandal any more!

SUSAN: This is the subject of your dialogue of 1992, *Il dialogo della menzogna (Dialogue*

on lying). In that dialogue you maintained that lying belongs to the “second type of dialogue”.

AUGUSTO: If we distinguish lying from similar behaviours such as simulation, pretence, falseness, ideology, lying belongs to dialogue of the second type in our classification, attainment dialogue, that is, dialogue with a practical aim – to attain or achieve something. Instead, pretence (an ambiguous term because it can also signify deception and lying in the artistic sphere, for example, the literary) belongs to dialogue of the first type, that is, entertainment dialogue. And “simulation” belongs to dialogue of the third type, that is, research dialogue, when of course simulation is not used for deception and lying, but as modelling with a cognitive function. The aim of simulation understood as belonging to research dialogue, is truth. As to the relation between lying and ideology understood as false consciousness, today at table we mentioned how lying is “extroverted” deception, while instead ideology is “introverted”.

MASSIMO: Lying, extroverted deception, introverted deception, the will to deceive and the will to delude oneself subtend publicity and propaganda, indeed all rhetorical discourse. Rhetoric is the enemy of logic and dialectic. It is the vile and opportunistic enemy of truth, as the three of us agreed in a “trialogue” of 1997.

SUSAN: “Rhetoric versus argumentation”. The three of us agree that rhetoric and argumentation can be juxtaposed. Negativity of rhetoric and positivity of argumentation. This seems to be a classical standpoint: very much *à la* Plato. But I do agree. Indeed, it’s sound common sense to accuse discourse of being *rhetorical* when it is not sincere, when it is confused on a logical level, when it is self-seeking, opportunistic, and when in the face of all this it still expects to persuade. Rhetoric is something one hears in the texture of discourse, a trick or a trap one perceives before actually identifying it. But, Massimo, how do we trace the signs of rhetoric?

MASSIMO: Ah, yes, an example comes to mind: it goes back to a few years ago when Craxi was still around and publicity was favouring his political party during the administrative elections in Capitalia-Italia. At the time a poster was withdrawn because of furious protests by feminists and democrats. It pictured a bare chested girl who says in a balloon, “I vote PSI,

and you?”, while coolly sipping coca-coca from a bottle with a straw – a great example of the tricks of rhetoric, of ideological and deceptive discourse. In this case the trick consisted in combining the psychologic impression of the example (the bare chested girl) with quick and allusive mental associations. This strategy provokes suggestive and efficient reasoning that resists *so long as it is not called to issue*.

PONZIO: What do you mean by that? Don't you think that the logic of rhetorical or deceptive discourse is different from the logic of efficient reasoning? Or are you implying that in the context of logic we can make improper, uncontrolled discursive transformations with the power to seduce thanks to the charm and desirability of the conclusion perspected?

MASSIMO: Hmmm! The bare chested girl communicates by showing, therefore by offering herself, even if immaterially. She appeals to the imagination and arouses appetites, at once formulating a question that is obviously rhetorical: “I vote PSI, and you?”. She communicates through an associative-argumentative chain that runs something like this: “I want you to vote PSI, like me, so we can be friends, or better still, *companions*; if you are my *companion* (that is, companion insofar as we belong to the same political party), you're also my *partner*, and I'm attractive, desirable and uninhibited; therefore if you want me and want to stay with me, even if only in your day-dreams, symbolically (which these days everyone seems to think is more real than reality), etc., etc., then vote me, I mean, vote with me, vote PSI”. This kind of reasoning is fun and efficient until dialectics analyzes and ridicules it. But rhetoric maintains its charm, even after it has been unmasked.

PONZIO: Well good friend, my impression is that you're making things sound simpler than they really are. What I mean is that rhetorical discourse understood as encomiastic and eulogistic discourse is not simply transgressive, fake and deceptive discourse similarly to commercial publicity. On the contrary, this kind of rhetoric is an essential part of the rhetoric of institutions, the rhetoric of keeping a good and clean conscience and of defending certain values. This kind of rhetorical discourse safeguards the conscience through alibis. A conscience with alibis justifies itself by appealing to axiomatic foundations, that is, by appealing to identity, to association with some sort of community, by appealing to roles, the nation, *esprit de corps*, by appealing to duties established by contract, civil convention. All

this serves to tranquillize us, to keep us in our places, protected by our reassuring guarantees and responsibilities. Rhetoric is pleasant and reassuring because it defends the “fixing of beliefs and habits”, as your Peirce says in his famous essay.

MASSIMO: Ah, yes, you’re right Augusto. But we need to add that since Peirce’s time, other media have hit the scene. With hypnotic and authoritative rhetoric, as presented by TV, we have the owner’s voice and the dream machine together, in one package. The continuous flux of mass media doesn’t leave space for reflection. You can’t talk to mass media, discuss things. Yet people are deceived into thinking they’re participating in the discussions and dialogues that are represented.

SUSAN: ... as you already highlighted in your early analyses of 1984 in *Semiotica ai media*. But now let’s return to your typology of dialogicality, which I think fits in well with our discussion.

If we focus on communicative channels with special reference to television media, we can immediately identify three different modalities in the dialogic relation:

(1) *Interpersonal dialogicality*, (1.1) in praesentia, or (1.2) in absentia, the latter in the form of written, telephonic communication.

(2) *Dialogicality with replica*, as in *television dialogicality between emitter and spectator*, therefore not one-to-one, but one-to-many, (2.1) foreseen as part of the communicative game, or tolerated, or conceded, or (2.2) indirect or unforeseen.

(3) *Metatextual dialogicality*, involving small groups in praesentia, with respect to the basis-text at disposal.

MASSIMO: Yes, the basis-text is there available to us, it doesn’t disappear as do instead programs on television channels. The basis-text defines which is a characteristic of texts, and as such the basis-text is an object characterized by persistence and incisiveness bearing countless signs, printed and recorded, which can be read, heard and/or seen an indefinite number of times. The basis-text can be analysed socially and discussed by a group of people sitting in a room somewhere, it can be a parable from the *Gospel* or Marx’s *Manifesto*, but also a documentary film by Spike Lee or Michael Moore, or anything that can act as a text or stimulus for discussion or political action, or something found somewhere on internet.

SUSAN: Massimo, you mention the potential relevance of communication and discussion of new docufilms or “committed” documentaries, or as you also like to call them, “videoessays”, to action. This opens our conversation to the problem of dialogue between text and discourse, textuality and discursivity, which is the subject of one of our most recent *dialoghi semiotici*. But while you were speaking of films by Spike Lee and Michael Moore, Ermanno Olmi’s latest film came to mind *Cento chiodi*. Here the thesis is that more important than all the sacred texts in the world, of all possible basis-texts for action, as you would say, are words, gestures, the caresses of love and friendship in a dialogue where contact and proximity are constitutive of sense. Therefore, in the spirit of the title of today’s dialogue we praise corporeity and sentiment by contrast with logic, and ethics by contrast with politics.

These days communication with the other, especially on a sentimental level, is largely thought to be based on having something in common, on sharing common tastes, interests, on affinities, to the very point of believing that encounter with the other is reached in fusion. And communities too are conceived in terms of communion, unity, identity. But the truth is that without alterity, without estrangement, without absence in presence, communication cannot take place because dialogue is lacking.

Communication is also clash, conflict, opposition, while dialogue is involvement with the other, not on the basis of respect that one has decided to observe towards the other, but in many cases in spite of all the efforts made to ignore the other, eliminate the other. People generally believe that they must encounter each other on the basis of a third term, a term that is external to them and that unites them, makes them similar, a term in which they find a common identity. This search for a third – ethnic group, religion, language, territory – is widespread these days and particularly ill-fated, evil, as testified by presentday events in history. In amorous relations, Catullo’s “I hate and love him/her” has been replaced by the idea of love as total and totalizing understanding, without clash, without suspicion, without search, without distance, without absence, without alterity. In his paper “The Other in Proust” (in *Noms Propres*) referring to the characters from *A la recherche du temps perdu*, Levinas, observes that Marcel did not love Albertine if love is fusion with the other, extasis of a being in front of the perfection of the other, absence of conflict, security in the presence of the other, peace of possession. But the point is that this non-love is true love; solitude is communication; struggle with the elusive is movement towards the other; absence of the other

is its presence as other.

MASSIMO: Brava Susan, good girl Susan, well said! Joking aside, it is important to remember that contradiction is necessarily an a priori for us, contradiction of desire and non-desire: between the the instinct of life and the instinct of death, between eros and aggressiveness, between the pleasure principle and the principle of reality.

We sometimes think computers can simulate human thought processes, or even go further. For example, by correcting iniquities or conciliating human conflicts and contradictions in the light of some superior design, as in the suggestive science fiction novel by our friend Giampaolo Proni: *Il caso del Computer Asia*.

But thinking is contradictory in itself. And not even love is synthesis or elimination of contradictions, rather love too accepts and even welcomes contradictions. Computers don't feel, don't think, don't hate or love. They don't reason dialogically. They don't think. They calculate. This is the point. We all know this.

In reality, whoever claims that computers simulate human beings is really thinking that human beings simulate computers, by becoming cold, still, static, free of problems, monodirectional.

To think means to be capable of lying and deceit, of dialectics and of diairetics. One divides into two and two conjugate and/or oppose each other and/or devour each other. They don't melt or fuse into each other. Through exercises of displacement, struggle and problematic conjugation of contradictory perspectives, we work towards moments of increasing harmony.

But, Augusto, let me ask you a question. How can dialectics in the plural escape what would seem to be the recurrent destiny of hierarchies and totalitarianisms?

AUGUSTO: This problem brings us back to the question of the centrality of dialogue in argumentative reasoning, that is, reasoning that has not stiffened into defending and reproducing identity, that does not serve identity but is open to the other.

Bakhtin evidenced how rectilinear and unilateral dialectics produces ossified discourse and derives from sclerotized dialogue. Monological, unilinear and totalizing dialectics is necessarily orientated towards a synthesis and a conclusion. As such it calls for a *critique of dialogical reason*. From this point of view Bakhtin is an important point of reference. All his

research (including his most recent paper of 1974 on the methodology of the human sciences) focuses on the same problem faced by Sartre in *Critique de la raison dialectique* – whether knowledge and understanding of humans by humans not only implies specific methods but *New reason*. However, new reason does not imply a new relation between *thought* and its *object*, as Sartre believed. And, in fact, Sartre’s dialectics remains closed in the limits of monological dialectics, for he reduces the relation of otherness to a relation of identity and of reciprocal objectification: dialectics between being-*for-self* and being-*for-others* continues to be the dialectics of totalizing consciousnesses, where the tendency is to reaffirm one’s own objectifying view of the subject, of self.

The critique of dialogical reason is the critique of the category of Identity which dominates Western thought and praxis. From the perspective of identity, where sense converges with partial and limited interests, mystification alone is possible: this is true whether a question of the identity of a single individual, or of a group, nation, language, cultural system or even a larger community such as the European Union, the United Nations or the entire Western world.

The category of Identity dominates today not only because of the *concrete abstractions* constructed upon it, but even more radically because the global system of social reproduction today is grounded in the logic of identity.

Concrete abstractions form *reality* as we experience it: Individual, Society, State, Nation, Truth, Knowledge, Equality, Justice, Freedom, limited Responsibility, Need, Equal exchange, etc. These are ‘internal’ to the general system of social reproduction. But, as just stated, the system itself in its globality is grounded in the category of Identity. Identity tends to assert itself structurally and constitutively as Universal in relation to a production, exchange and consumption circuit that is now worldwide. And the logic of concrete abstractions in social reproduction today is the logic of Identity: the categories of Individual with its rights, obligations, responsibilities; of Society with its self-interests; of State with its Politics converging as far as possible with Reality; of Equal exchange with its needs, all obey the logic of Identity.

The places of argumentation internal to the order of discourse are the places of the logic of identity. Reason includes the reason of war, even if in the form of *extrema ratio*, presenting war as legitimate, just, legal; Reason that includes the reason of exclusion – from emargination and segregation to extermination – of the other, is the Reason of Identity. The

logic of identity is asserted by barricading, isolating, expelling or exterminating the other, through recourse to the concrete abstractions which are founded on such logic. And as anticipated, concrete abstractions include the single Individual who must firstly sacrifice its own otherness to itself in order to assert itself as identity.

The critique of Reason and argumentation thus described requires *a point of view that is other*. This requires preliminary *recognition of the other*, or, rather, recognition of the fact that recognition of the other cannot be avoided. Therefore, recognition of the other is not a concession, a free choice made by the Individual, the Subject, the Same, but a necessity. In other words, the subject is forced to recognize the other, as an imposition. Such recognition is imposed by a situation of alienation, loss of sense, in the last analysis by the situation of *homo homini lupus*. However, the situation of *homo homini lupus* does not precede concrete abstractions such as State, Politics, Law, which is a real myth, a mystification – Hobbes' fallacy! This situation which involves a situation of fear of the other, is a consequence of the logic of identity and the concrete abstractions constructed upon it.

SUSAN: It seems to me that we must aim at overcoming specialized separations that give rise to deception in the form of omitting to say something, which is an indirect form of lying and concealing. No doubt all discourse has a provisional conclusion, a conclusion that can never be definitive or exhaustive.

MASSIMO: I remember being struck several years ago by Aldo Capitini's critique of the specialism and antidemocratic formalism of institutions, his critique of corporations and their closed reasoning, and of those who capitalize on knowledge and power.

He was referring to those socially oriented centres which teach the art of discussion and administration, of eliminating and putting all presuppositions out of play. And everyone participating in the discussion does so without prohibitions and self-limitations, therefore without keeping silent and lying.

However, in situations like these decisions are put into parentheses. Instead, to make or at least propose a decision implies being able to count on a reliable procedure, ensuring a conclusion, a provisional and not a totalizing conclusion, but perentory.

SUSAN: So what do we do, Massimo? Deal with everything? If specialisms, separations, self-

limitations are forms of lying and deceit, on the one hand, isn't the claim to dealing with everything a form of (vain) pretence, typical of totalizing and systematizing knowledge, on the other?

MASSIMO: Argumentation and/or dialogic procedure should evidence what is relevant in communication, even resort to exaggeration, and aim at effective local action: this is communication understood as a way of acting on the spot.

The criterion that must dominate is expressed in the word 'now'. I know there's a lot to be done, so much evil in the world, decisions to make, discussing them first. The task is overwhelming, but I also know that I must struggle now and do my best to address those evils I think most need to be addressed.

No doubt the Kantian maxim concerning the universal validity of the principle regulating action is still valid. But it needs to be turned upside down and set into pragmatic terms. Nor can we begin with fixed principles. The starting point is the moment we make a choice, exemplary possible action. We must ask ourselves: what are the consequences if nobody intervenes in a given situation?, if everybody follows my inertia?, or instead, if the style of my decision and my action is repeated?

Therefore, to proclaim and apply the motto 'the end justifies the means' is hypocritical (an idea wrongly attributed to Machiavelli), a deferral destructive of both the present and the future.

In reality, 'the means justifies the end'. To focus on the fleeting moment reinforces the habit of industriousness and legitimizes the utopia of the future polis without ossifying it or transforming it into a consolatory and ideological end of (hi)story.