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Crisis: Meeting the Other and the Philosophy of Dialogue

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Crisis is one of those terms which in popular use acquire blurred semantic boundaries. It is worth, therefore, to begin by asking for a definition which would serve us in the following discussion. Crisis is the point at which we recognize things have to be changed, turned around, discussed and solved in the sense that a new perspective is opened and decisions have to be taken. Crisis involves a possible development of a condition of instability or danger, whether in social, economic, political, or international affairs, usually leading to a radical change. Crisis may also concern a dramatic emotional or circumstantial upheaval in a person's life; it is then the time when a difficult or important decision must be made. In all those varied senses crisis has always accompanied our European cultures.

We may risk a statement that from an individual, subjective perspective, crisis, or rather different crises, continually mark our life making us face constant changes, re-orientations and new resolutions with which we react to critical moments that occur on various levels. The result is that our political, social and/or economic environment appears as a highly unreliable and unstable structure within which we have to deal with acceptable values as well as with negative and unwanted ones, opening up feelings of disharmony and doubts, if not of straightforward antipathy or hostility. Therefore, if the phenomenon of crisis is an inevitable condition of life, we have to learn to live with it and make the best of it. Very often people react to critical situations by developing adaptation skills which may lead to passive attitudes of abandonment and resignation, or even to indifference and exclusion. Such a negative position is dangerous because whatever the crisis, it always involves ethical decisions which

directly concern individual scales of values. Indifference and passivity, indeed, never help to solve crises. It is important to realize that crisis forces us to review the accepted values and ingrained habits, making us aware of their adequacy or inadequacy and pushing us to (re)define our moral stance. Passivity is no solution. We have to act.

On a small scale, but immensely important, the crisis we most often face in life is the crisis of meeting the Other: of meeting a human being whose physical looks, mental set-up, language and behaviour make us shrink and take a defensive position exactly because we recognize that person as 'not me'. It is a situation in which direct communication and, more, understanding, acceptance and tolerance which we know as positive values, are difficult or hardly possible to achieve.

The aim of this paper is to present some insights from philosophy of dialogue with the hope that it may offer us a chance to act positively and with good results in situations in which we face the Other directly and have to reach a resolution of that crisis.

Philosophy of Dialogue

If meeting the Other is to be discussed in terms of crisis as a turning point, we have to look for a way of communication, negotiation, dialogue. The proposition here is to discuss interpersonal crisis following philosophical ideas of Martin Buber, Emmanuel Levinas and Józef Tischner who have developed the branch of philosophy called 'philosophy of dialogue'. I would like to explore the idea of meeting a radically Other and how such event may turn into crisis, why the crisis takes place; how to diagnose and then heal, that is change the critical

course (point) into a new, more promising direction. How to construct a working relation with the other rather than stay in permanent enmity.

The philosophy of dialogue concentrates mainly on relations between people, though the early interest touched on the metaphysical relation with God. Eventually, though, the philosophers of dialogue concentrated their interest on the meeting of two human beings. Thus the term ‘dialogue’ suggests communication between I and You (Buber), The Self (*Ipseity*) and The Other (Levinas), or The Questioning and The Questioned (Tischner). The three philosophers represent different approaches and solutions concerning the problem of humans coming face to face. Buber and his followers treat this relation as an absolute key situation which defines and constitutes human life.

Martin Buber’s I-Thou Encounter

Martin Buber (1878-1965) is famous for his thesis of dialogical existence, as described in his book *I and Thou* (*Ich und Du*, 1923). “I-Thou” or “I-You” is a relationship of the mutual existence of two beings. It is a *concrete encounter*: it is important to understand that the I-Thou encounter is real and perceivable, that it is an authentic existence. In his conception it was open, free of judgement or objectification of one another. He used a variety of examples to illustrate *Ich-Du* relationships in daily life – two lovers, an observer and a cat, the author and a tree, or two strangers on a train. Simple, commonly used words describe the *Ich-Du* relationship: encounter, meeting, dialogue, mutuality, exchange.

It is important to understand that Buber did not consider the situation of crisis, but, we may risk to say, the opposite of crisis. The meeting of I-Thou in his perspective is a situation in which the two parties are not divided by ‘otherness’. However, rather than dismiss his concept as idealistic, it is worth considering it as a key to a successful *resolution* of crisis, with the stress on the mutuality of good will in the encounter. Without that mutuality the encounter will not take place. I and Thou will not get in dialogue. The crisis will take place.

Emanuel Levinas’ Concept of The Other

In his work *Totality and Infinity* (*Totalité et infini. Essai sur l’extériorité*, 1961) Emanuel Levinas (1906-1995) proposed a phenomenological description and a hermeneutics of lived experience in the world. The aspect of experience that concerns us most here is the encounter with the world, with the human other characterized by sensibility and affectivity. Levinas invites us to look at the encounter of two totally different human beings: The Other means a person essentially different and foreign for the ‘Self’ and irreducible to the ‘Self’. Levinas reads such situation as that of an ethical obligation.

Levinas’s ethics does not follow traditional philosophical analysis of morality. Ethics for him is the condition of the encounter with The Other; that encounter takes place in the ethical space which commands a positive response to The Other’s gaze. That response is the ethical obligation of ‘I’. Meeting The Other is an intersubjective experience which, as it comes to light, proves ‘ethical’ in the simple sense that an ‘I’ discovers its own particularity when it is singled out by the gaze of The Other. This gaze is interrogative and imperative. It says “do not kill me.” The Other is understood as an ethical Master Teacher. Meeting The Other means an opportunity to learn how to be in face of The Other. Levinas describes the true meeting

essentially as seeing a human being without a mask, without a protective screen; it is a case of standing *truly* face to face, confronting the truth of The Other which is the condition of confronting the truth of the Self. In that sense The Other is an ethical teacher. The resolution of the crisis of otherness means learning from and about The Other; it is the condition in which The Self is ready to accept The Other.

Another important aspect of Levinas's thinking is the idea of The Self's infinite responsibility for The Other. Levinas reads this situation as of utterly asymmetrical obligations: I owe the Other everything, the Other owes me nothing (in the sense that I must not expect anything from the Other). Levinas's philosophy has roots in religious faith: the trace of The Other is the shadow of God, the God who commands, "Thou shalt not kill!". The encounter with The Other is read as The Self's total acceptance of the commandment. To meet The Other is to gain the idea of Infinity. For Levinas "meeting The Other" takes place only on these conditions. One does not, however, need to follow Levinas in these transcendental, metaphysical aspects. In our confrontation with the crisis of acceptance, understanding and tolerance of The Other Levinas teaches us to overcome that crisis by looking up to The Other as a source of ethical obligation. The asymmetrical obligation in terms of Levinas' conception of the encounter must be understood from the position of the Self. But in the meeting of The Self and The Other we can take a look at both sides: The Other is at the same time the other Self, while we become The Other in that reverse relation. Thus to follow Levinas's ethical obligation we need to expect that obligation on both sides, otherwise the true meeting of face to face must change into a situation of oppression, one that is hardly ethical, but definitely

critical.¹ The expectation of ethical symmetry means that in the real encounter we have to make the effort to recognize the values of The Other expecting that our values will be equally considered. This in itself demands considerable effort on both sides. Otherwise the crisis will continue.

Józef Tischner's Philosophy of Drama

Józef Tischner (1931-2000) developed his ideas of 'meeting the Other' within the frame of philosophy of drama man enters into relations with the World which is the stage of action, and with the Other. The relation human being-to-human being introduces the situation of dialogue in which one asks questions and functions as The Questioning and thus puts The Other in the situation of The Questioned. The question makes The Questioned a participant in that situation, it is an invitation to dialogue. The question means one realizes the presence of The Other. On this analysis of the meeting the functions are interchangeable and that is why each party gains the conscious recognition of The Other which is the condition for the dialogue to take place and eliminate the situation of crisis. The situation of dialogic encounter for Tischner is also ethical, though in a different sense than in Levinas' analysis: it is a meeting of two sets of values. The success of the meeting (of resolving the critical situation which meeting the Other is) depends on the readiness to enter the dialogue and respond to the values of The Other on both sides. The negotiation is a condition without which no resolution can take place. Tischner follows the ethical ideas of Levinas, but expands the responsibility to both parties, expects the recognition of the meeting as facing the commandment "Thou shall not kill" from both the Questioning and the Questioned.

¹ See also Derrida's criticism of Levinas's ethical position and empathy in *The Gift of Death*, University of Chicago Press 2008, see particularly Chapter 4.

The way the three trends in the philosophy of dialogue define and treat the situation in which two human beings meet turns it into a highly ethical project, almost, in its metaphysical quality, a utopian Project. But that is exactly how we should try to internalize the idea, because it best discovers the commercial, utilitarian and egoistical approach which most of us follow without thinking; and therein the problem of the crisis of the lack of acceptance and understanding seems to be hidden

Derrida's Deconstruction of Hospitality and Hostility

To the reflection on meeting the Other in the philosophy of dialogue we should perhaps add at this point the ideas of Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) on the problem of the encounter with the Other. He looks at it from yet another angle and demonstrates the inherent *aporia* that is at the very core of the crisis of acceptance, understanding and tolerance.

Hospitality, according to Derrida,² is a word which carries its own contradiction incorporated into it, a Latin word which allows itself to be parasitized by its opposite, "hostility". The guest which hospitality harbors is a self-contradiction: the guest is a welcomed stranger treated as a friend or ally, but the guest may also be a stranger treated as an enemy. Thus the terms hospitality/hostility and friend/enemy seem to merge into one another, standing, paradoxically, in self-contradiction. Hospitality is grounded in the *law of the household* where it is precisely the *patron* of the house [the host or the hostess] who receives, who is master of his/her household (town, state, nation); he/she defines *the conditions of hospitality* or

² *On Hospitality*, 1998, English translation 2000.

welcome; consequently there can be no unconditional welcome, no unconditional passage through the door. The law of hospitality imposes a contradiction on the very concept of hospitality: hospitality is certainly and necessarily a right, a duty, an obligation of *greeting* the foreign other as a friend, but on the condition that the host maintains his/her own authority. In his/her own home the host looks after his/her own rights and comfort, and considers all that concerns him/her, thus limiting the gift of hospitality and making of this limitation the condition of the gift and of hospitality. This is the principle of *aporia* (crisis), of the very concept of hospitality. Hospitality is a self-contradictory concept and experience which may be expressed as *hostipitality*, the term encapsulating Derrida's *differance*.

The *aporia* of hospitality and the term of *differance* – *hostipitality* – make us aware of the yet new concern connected with meeting the Other: we hardly ever meet on neutral ground. The space of meeting, then, delineates our understanding/misunderstanding, acceptance/refusal and resulting tolerance/intolerance. Derrida draws us, as it were, down to dust from the heights of philosophical idealisations of Buber or Levinas; and yet, he also speaks of ethics, of human right, of the basic human right to hospitality. He begins his essay on *Hostipitality* by quoting Kant: “we are concerned here not with philanthropy, but with right”³ and comments: “it is a human right, this right to hospitality– and for us it already broaches an important question, that of the anthropological dimension of hospitality or the right to hospitality” (...) “Universal hospitality arises from an obligation, a right, and a duty all regulated by law” (...) In this context hospitality [*Hospitalität (Wirtbarkeit)*] means the right of a stranger [*bedeutet das Recht Fremdlings*] not to be treated with hostility when he arrives on someone else's

³ “Hostipitality”, p. 3.

territory.”⁴ For Derrida the basic human right is no more than what the host is ready to offer to his/her guest, and that depends on how he/she defines his/her own cultural and social space (his/her home and his/her threshold in Derrida’s language), and what conditions of hospitality he/she sets. It also depends on how the host treats the person s/he meets: whether as the Other in the sense of the Enemy/Stranger/Foreigner, or as the Other – Stranger/Friend/Human Being.

The recognition of the Enemy or the Foreigner in the Other does not relieve us from the law of hospitality, that is, it does not free us from the obligation of dialogue. It is a situation of crisis which demands change, which calls for an effort on both sides to believe that *I and Thou* will try to reach a state of mutual good will to talk, that *The Self and The Other* will accept ethical obligations to each other in order to ask questions and seek answers in acting against the crisis; finally, that the aporetic hospitality can be turned into some balance between the gift of hospitality and its acceptance. Otherwise, we shall be drawn into the ever-deepening crisis of intolerance and hatred.

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⁴ Ibid., p. 4