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IDENTITY AND DIFFERENCE:
OVERCOMING THE MASTER SELF THROUGH
THE CULTIVATION OF A DIALOGICAL SELF-IDENTITY

ABSTRACT

This paper argues that the pluralist ethos of today's world requires dialogue, i.e., the construction of shared meaning through a plurality of perspectives. This, in turn, requires that partners in dialogue overcome the perspective of the "master self" who claims universal legislative authority in its quest for epistemic closure. Dialogue requires the cultivation and development of a dialogical self-identity that reflects the ability to co-construct shared meaning without the erasure or suppression of differences.

Keywords: dialogue; dialectics of identity and difference; master self; dialogical self; pluralism; monological rationality.

PROLEGOMENA TO DIALOGUE

The human condition is one of living in a shared and meaningful world. What we know or believe as real and true comes from both an element of personal experience and a shared way of interpreting or making sense of this experience. Making sense of the world is both a personal and a shared phenomenon that requires the construction of stable meanings and identities from a manifold of differences.[1] In the Greek tradition philosophy began with the construction of logos. For over two thousand years Western philosophy has mostly assumed a monistic interpretation of logos, i.e., a monological understanding of rationality. The result was that the enduring questions concerning truth, reality,

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[1] Brown, Ch. S. Forthcoming. "Intentionality, Life-World, and Language: Towards a Theory of Inter-Cultural Understanding and Dialogue." In: *Language and Communication.* Ed. K. Das. New Dehli: Northern Book Publishers.

and goodness were taken to be reducible to one correct view of the world, a final vocabulary describing a metaphysical absolute. While pluralism was always an alternative to this way of thinking, monism (metaphysical and ethical) has traditionally been considered to be either the point of departure or the end goal of serious thinking.

The great systems of Western thinking, viz., Thomism in the religious tradition, Newtonian mechanics, and the moral theories of the Enlightenment each seek a final explanation of things in one basic entity, law, or principle. Each of these monological systems claim a monopoly of truth, i.e., a single grand narrative centered on a metaphysical absolute whether that be God, man, or nature. Monistic systems seek epistemic closure in which all contingencies and uncertainties are finally settled.

In today's world the assumption of a monological rationality and with it a timeless guiding truth for all people has withered. Philosophy today is largely a post-foundational enterprise that rejects any and all systems of thought centered on a single and correct point of view. The point of departure for serious thinking today requires the recognition of diverse points of view. Post-foundational thinkers today need not reject the quest for unity or identity but must recognize that each unity and identity is constructed on a manifold of diversity, often through the suppression or elimination of diversity.

Serious thinking today about the enduring questions of truth, reality, and justice can only begin with a methodology that recognizes the on-going dialectic of identity and difference. This means that for questions of social justice as well as questions about the material constitution of the world top-down absolutes (abstractions masquerading as metaphysical discoveries) expressible in universal principles are no longer viable. Pluralism has emerged as the ethos of our times.[2] The recognition and respect for plurality means that monological interpretations of rationality along with monological systems of thought are now faded and worn out. Such a new ethos, today more than ever, requires dialogue and a commitment to dialogical forms of rationality.

Dialogue begins with the recognition and respect for multiple points of view and the desire to integrate rather than suppress difference, into stable, if not permanent, gestalts of shared meaning, i.e., meaning that has been co-constituted by partners in dialogue. Dialogue arises from the shared exercise of logos among a plurality of points of view. For much of human history (at least in the Western tradition) the promise of dialogue has been held captive to a monological rationality that seeks to construct meaning on a framework on monism.

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[2] Mohanty, J. N. 2000. *The Self and Its Other: Philosophical Essays.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 19.

Our various understandings of what is real, true, or good have never been the result of a single or pure form of thinking. Understandings of the real, the true, or the good have always been co-constituted by an endless variety of points of view. Sometimes these various points of view occur within a single person, sometimes within a single culture, sometimes within a single species. Often these diverse perspectives occur within a plurality of persons, cultures, and even species. Rachel Carson's simple but monumental book, *Silent Spring*, points to the possibility of a degraded future in which birds have ceased to share their joyous expression of life. In such a world the silence of the birds would alert us to a new and profoundly sad reality. Dialogue, rooted in the recognition of the dialectics of identity and difference, would continue to seek ever better formulations and understandings of goodness, justice, and truth. These formulations would not be considered as discoveries of atemporal certainties or incorruptible principles but as temporal approximations in an on-going quest for truth and understanding.

FOUR PRINCIPLES OF DIALOGUE

The ethos of pluralism dominating contemporary thought emerges from both the material and cultural state of an increasingly interconnected world in which previously silenced or marginalized voices demand to be heard and from the two hundred year history of critical philosophy within Western culture. The first principle of dialogue arises from this history of critical philosophy. Kant taught us to see that the world described by Newtonian physics is bound or structured by assumptions that lie outside that system. Hegel taught us that any and all systems of thought are bound or structured by historically developing principles that lie of outside those systems. Nietzsche similarly taught us that moral systems of thought express an underlying way of looking at the world rooted in the will to power. Feminist philosophers have taught us that calculative monological rationality silently presupposes a masculine bias. In each case these critiques of knowledge reveal that too much of our thinking is silently controlled by background assumptions that are taken for granted and mostly unquestioned. In different ways these philosophers teach us not to confuse our conceptual systems (maps) for the things themselves (territory). The recognition that our maps are not the territory, or that our conceptual systems are never mirrors of reality need not prevent us from recognizing that some maps are better and some are worse. Nor should it prevent us from recognizing that differing conceptual systems may each reveal and illuminate different but distinctive features of the world in important and insightful ways.

This first principle of dialogue, viz., not to confuse our theoretical systems for the things themselves, is closely related to the second principle of dialogue. This is the idea, independently formulated in many contexts that for each thing revealed something is also concealed. When I present the back of my hand to

you I conceal the front. Newtonian physics reveals the role of gravity in explaining and predicting motion while concealing other possible forces. The atomic theory of matter reveals the separate and discrete nature of material things while hiding their interconnectedness. Liberal theories of politics and economic reveal the individuality of persons while concealing their inherent and essential social nature. Likewise, socialist theories of politics and economics reveal the social nature of persons while concealing their inherent and essential individuality. The first two principles of dialogue are descriptive while the third and fourth principles are prescriptive.

The third principle of dialogue is the active application of the norm of ahimsa to dialogue. This means that when interpreting the standpoint of the other, one must do no harm, that is, one must not mischaracterize the perspective of the other.[3] Included here in the notion of ahimsa is the positive admonition to interpret the other as generously as one's sense of reason allows. Partners in dialogue must search for common ground and shared commitments and for any kernel of truth in the position of the other. Partners in dialogue must be open to the possibility that any point of view may be partly true, partly false, and partly indecidable.[4] Points of view that initially seem mutually exclusive and contradictory may later reveal themselves to be complementary while sharing overlapping content.

The fourth principle states that dialogue must be essentially revisionist discourse. This simply means that partners in dialogue must be open to revising their own beliefs and background assumptions. Partners in dialogue must adopt an attitude of openness to entertain, as much as possible, the perspective of the other. The willingness to entertain and possibly adopt some or all of the other's perspective is more than a merely academic exercise. The willingness to change or modify one's belief system is the willingness to change one's personal identity. This entails that such a willingness to entertain the perspective of the other involves the willingness to critically reflect on one's own core assumptions about self and world. Such willingness comes with a risk, the risk of losing one's self-identity, as personal identity is partially constituted from an internalization of and identification with culturally constructed points of view and sets of beliefs. Openness to dialogue opens this layer of self to revision and change.

These four principles of dialogue require a method that seeks consensus from multiple points of view. The goal is not to discover a final vocabulary but rather to maintain an on-going conversation tempered with the recognition that each insight may present something of importance while concealing other features. Recognition that the construction of shared meaning is ongoing and never final teaches us that our self-identities and worldviews are never complete. Just

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[3] Ibid., 24.

[4] Ibid.

as Socrates argued that the recognition of our ignorance motivates us to search for truth, the recognition that our knowledge and wisdom is never complete, i.e., a central lesson of critical philosophy, teaches us to be open to revisionist discourse.

Dialogue rooted in these four principles moves away from the focus on metaphysical, atemporal, or final concepts anchoring our worldviews and the resulting conceptions of self and world. This conception of dialogue rethinks the nature and structure of rationality from a monist to a pluralist framework.

BARRIERS TO DIALOGUE—THE MASTER SELF

The dialogue needed in today's world requires that the mutual exchange of ideas and perspectives must be unimpeded by power relations. It is further necessary that partners in dialogue accept the notion of truth as consensus with the caveat that no census is ever final and that any existing consensus must be challenged by ongoing reflection and openness toward the recognition of alternative points of view. Consensus is neither a license for the suppression of difference nor the imposition of epistemic closure.

The foundational monism of Western culture, and with it, its idealized final concepts, what Derrida has called "transcendental signifiers,"[5] such as "God," "man," and "nature," has impeded dialogue by its relentless suppression of differences. Within such a monistic framework differences can only be recognized as the absence of the essential. Discourse within a monistic framework thus must mark differences by their lack or their opposition of the essential. Discourse within monistic frameworks thus requires a dualistic conceptual system that continues to privilege metaphysical absolutes while marginalizing all differences. Theocentrism requires a God/world dichotomy, anthropocentricism requires a man/nature dichotomy, and naturalism requires a subject/object dichotomy. In each case the world is conceptualized by dividing differences into mutually exclusive dichotomies: what is God and what is not God, man and not-man, nature and not-nature, and then privileging one side of the dichotomy as essential while relegating the other side to the inessential.

Western thinking and Western concepts of rationality have been silently structured by a value-hierarchical and dualistic mode of thinking that makes sense of the world by interpreting important differences as mutually exclusive and opposing dichotomies in which one member of the pair possesses greater value than the other.[6] Some of the more philosophically, morally, and politically

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5 Derrida, J. 1974. *Of Grammatology.* Transl. Spivak, G. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 49.

6 Warren, K. 1990. "The Power and Promise of Ecological Feminism." *Environmental Ethics*, vol. 12, no. 2 (Summer), 125–46.

important pairs of these oppositional hierarchies include the reason/emotion, the mind/body, the human/animal, culture/nature, the masculine/feminine, and the self/other dichotomies. In each case a pair of concepts is defined in strict opposition to each other with one member of the pair being privileged over the other; reason is valued over emotion, humans are valued over animals, culture is valued over nature, the masculine is valued over the feminine, and self is valued over the other. These pairs of mutually reinforcing value hierarchies have served to justify not only dominant forms of oppression but the forceful imposition of a monistic and totalizing conceptual system and thereby the elimination of dialogue. Human domination and control of nature has been "justified," or made to seem natural, on the grounds that only humans are rational and thereby only humans possess intrinsic value. Male domination of women has been "justified" on the grounds that men are more rational than women and thus more fully human than women. Racist domination of whole cultures and people has been "justified" on the grounds that one group of people are more rational the other.

Racism, sexism, and colonialism each appeal to this value-hierarchical dualistic conceptual system as racist, sexist, and colonial elites argue that their perspective and ways of life more fully embody the unique essence of humanity than the other. This value-hierarchical dualist conceptual system and the logic of domination it creates embodies a set of assumptions that make sexism, racism, class superiority, and the domination of nature seem natural and justified. If we are to end any of these forms of domination we must remove the final ground of justification and learn to re-conceptualize these differences, now marked as value-hierarchical dichotomies, in new ways.[7]

The dominant narratives within the Western tradition have been silently structured by this value-hierarchical and dualistic mode of thinking that encourages the tendency to interpret the human self as an atomistic and rational ego separate from emotion, body, nature, and animality. The complete internalization of this conceptual framework results in a detached, impartial, and impersonal perspective that dismisses all other points of view as irrational. When this privileged perspective is claimed for one's self the result is the formation of what eco-feminist philosopher Val Plumwood[8] calls a "master self," a self that claims the capacity to make unbiased judgments rooted in what it judges to be the highest standards of rationality. Rationality is here correlated with the monological perspective of objectivity, universality, and emotional detachment. The subjectivity that internalizes this perspective has no need for dialogue, as it be-

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[7] Plumwood, V. 1991. "Nature, Self, and Gender, Feminism, Environmental Philosophy, and the Critique of Rationalism." *Hypathia,* vol. 6, no. 1 (Spring), 3–27.

[8] Plumwood, V. 1993. *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature.* London–New York: Routledge. See, especially, Chapter Six "Ethics and the Instrumentalising Self," 141–164.

comes the master self, the self that sees the world as conforming to its categories of thought.[9] This is the self who speaks with the voice of universal legislative authority, the self who claims, for itself, the authority to suppress or dismiss alternative points of view.

The master self constructs its identity as separate to and opposed to the other, finding its essential identity in a detached and impartial point of view, which it interprets as rational while the other is dismissed as irrational and inessential to its identity. There are many historical forms and variations of this master/narrative self, the Eurocentric self, the racist self, the patriarchal self, and more abstract forms of selfhood including the impartial ego of scientific inquiry and moral theory who constructs its self-identity by dismissing and disrespecting emotional and bodily ways of knowing as well as the atomistic self of liberal economic and political theory who dismisses and disrespects its relations with others. The master self, claiming the power of universal legislative authority, can only view dialogue, i.e., shared logos with the other, as a contradiction.

The master self claims universal legislative authority by interpreting its point of view as the "view from nowhere", i.e., an impartial, objective, and universal perspective. This point of view is, in fact, the particular point of view of the most powerful actors in human history. It is the point of view of elite men who typically make decisions in industry and government. The master self, in its arrogance, assumes its point of view is the only legitimate one. Among the many flaws of the value-hierarchical and dualistic perspective of the master self is its inability to recognize any worth in other points of view. Dialogue with the other, under these assumptions, becomes irrational. The master self masquerades as the point of view of a purely rational, universal, and impartial ego, but in actuality, it reflects a particular point of view best characterized as the point of view of elitist power.

This point allows us to see the deepest problems of the commitment to a monological understanding of rationality, i.e. its tendency to privilege the so-called purity of universal and abstract principle over the contingency and particularity of concrete life and to dismiss any dissenting perspective as irrational. The point of view of the master self can only regard plurality and difference as something to be reduced to its privileged point of view or eliminated altogether. The point of view of the master self justifies its own attempts to halt dialogue by the exercise of power. The master self that claims the power of universal legislative authority in its own quest for epistemic closure stands behind all attempts to arbitrarily bring dialogue to a halt.

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[9] Brown, Ch. S. 2000. "Defending the Indefensible: A Dialogical and Feminist Critique of Just War Theory." *Skepsis* XXI/i—2010, 92.

ORIGINS OF DIALOGUE

Dialogue is the historical telos of logos. It is the natural progression of the process of constructing a rational and intelligible world. To fulfill this historical possibility dialogue must overcome the monological rationality of the master self.

The origins of dialogue lie in the structure of intelligibility and sense making, i.e., in the form and structure of rationality. This is first experienced within the life of a solitary person. We make sense of the world by constructing identity and meaning from a manifold of differences. Different perspectives and profiles coalesce into particular things with stable identities. At one level of sense making, the construction of stable meanings occurs within a single person. An odd figure of shape and color in my visual horizon is relatively underdetermined. Further observations, second looks, multiple perspectives typically coalesce into some stable gestalt of meaning that presents some "thing" as a meaningful identity.[10] While identity construction typically attempts to extrapolate some unchanging core of sameness it is, nevertheless, an on-going conceptual process. As new perspectives emerge some are consistent with prior perspectives and are expected while some are inconsistent with prior perspectives and are unexpected. On occasion, new and radically inconsistent perspectives destroy a previously stable gestalt of meaning.[11]

Each meaningful perception refers beyond itself by anticipating new attributes that are either confirmed or disconfirmed in subsequent experience. When anticipated aspects of a thing do not reveal themselves or when unanticipated attributes show themselves the identities of things continue to evolve. Through the dialectics of empty and filled intentions, through the coherent progression of fulfilled anticipations and its constant correction a stable and coherent surrounding world emerges. As there is no guarantee that our anticipations will be satisfied, as new perspectives may reveal unexpected and puzzling attributes the final meanings of things are always postponed.[12]

The meaning inherent in our perceptual experiences requires continual reassessment in light of subsequent experience. To experience a thing as useful, as dangerous, or as good is not simply to impose the sense of utility, danger, or goodness upon it but also to expect to continually find those qualities in that object and to have such expectations fulfilled. The spectre of incompatible and inconsistent attributes of a thing revealed in future experience haunts the stabil-

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[10] Brown, Ch. S. Forthcoming. "Intentionality, Life-World, and Language: Towards a Theory of Inter-Cultural Understanding and Dialogue." In: *Language and Communication.* Ed. Kantital, D. New Delhi: Northern Book Publishers.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid.

ity of even seemingly stable objects and meanings. The meanings inherent in perceptual experiences are provisional and revisable in light of future experience. This self-correcting inner logic within ordinary experience rooted in the dialectics of empty and filled intentions,[13] is essential to the constitution of any sustainable and coherent surrounding world. The roots of dialogue lie in the rational and teleological structure (the logos) of meaningful experience.

Identity construction thus involves the negotiation of differences and differing perspectives. Such negotiation may be done internally, that is within the conscious life of a single individual, or it may be done among a multitude of subjects. In any case, the construction of the identity of things simultaneously involves the construction of a conceptual framework, a meaningful horizon, or surrounding world. This fundamental way of knowing the world is, from the beginning, inter-subjective. The things we see and touch, fear and hunger for, are there for everyone. What we take to be the real world is a shared world as the objectivity of a thing is its public character. Not only do my ongoing perceptual experiences tend to correct earlier mistakes I may have made in interpreting the world but also the perceptual experiences of those around me tend to confirm or disconfirm my perceptual interpretations of the world.

Even when the identity of a thing is fairly stable this unity of meaning calls for further understanding. How is this thing related to the rest of the world? How does this thing fit coherently into the surrounding world? To make sense of one perspective we need another and to make sense of an object or thing we need to place it in a still boarder context. In this way constructing the identity of a thing is at the same time constructing a meaningful surrounding world, i.e., constructing a context of interlocking beliefs that give coherence and meaning to experience, i.e., taken for granted background frames of reference and interpretation.

These broader background frames of reference are networks of meaning co-constituted by a community. As these background frames of reference take hold within a particular historical community specific cultures emerge, each by constructing networks of concepts and categories progressively making sense of the world, i.e., by constructing new layers of identity from a previously given manifold of differences. Today, the controlling identities structuring the thought and reflection within cultures, viz., God, Allah, Tao, and Brahman bump up against each other as do Confucian and liberal ideals of the good life.[14] Today, the variety and plurality of cultures shows itself with greater intensity. No longer is it

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[13] Brown, Ch. S. 2004. "The Real and the Good: Phenomenology and the Possibility of an Axiological Rationality." In: *Eco-Phenomenology: Back to the Earth Itself*. Albany: SUNY Press, 8.

[14] Brown, Ch. S. 2012. "Democracy in Dialogue: Chinese and Indonesian Responses to Western Ideologies of Democracy." *Skepsis* XXII/iii—2012, 24–37.

responsible to think about the world solely within the framework of a single tradition.

The diversity of cultures that reveals itself today calls for the construction of a shared inter-cultural identity. Just as the traditions of differences within each culture have been unified into a larger historical community and culture, the various cultures in today's world are busy constructing shared inter-cultural identities today. This process calls for a form of dialogue that constructs identity from differences without the elimination or suppression of those differences. This requires liberation from the master self model of personal identity and the cultivation of a dialogical self-identity. This possibility is rooted and prefigured in the rational and teleological structure of intentionality.

OPENING TO DIALOGUE—THE DIALOGICAL SELF

An era of pluralism requires the abandonment of the perspective of the master self and the cultivation of the dialogical self. The perspective of the dialogical self, a form of personal identity, develops from the internalization of a framework of seeing the world as a network of differences in which the identities of things are constructed through their interrelationships with other things. Such a perspective recognizes: 1) that the identities of things are never stand-alone essences, 2) that differences within the world need not be ordered as mutually exclusive oppositions arranged in value hierarchies, and 3) that the differences between varying perspectives, whether internal to oneself or found among other persons, cultures, or species, need not be silenced or suppressed. Cultivation of a dialogical self need not stop with the integration of various perspectives and points of view into its everyday subjectivity but must understand the dominant perspective of one's own self, not as a monolithic personal or cultural identity, but as a network of cultural differences, an intertwining of many stories, a sedimentation of differences. The resulting self-identity realizes that its personal story is intertwined with its cultural stories and that its cultural stories are intertwined with the stories of other cultures, which are, in turn, intertwined with and founded on a shared pre-linguistic life world.

The core identity of a dialogical self is not anchored by some single atemporal essence but arises from an ongoing flux that unites a prior manifold of differences including the varying and sometimes incompatible perspectives internal to a single subjectivity. As a result, the dialogical self is able to understand rational thought as a dialogue open to a variety of perspectives and differences rather than as a monologue that suppresses difference. The promise of dialogue will only be realized when we learn to adopt a perspective that is able to consistently rethink and re-contextualize the differences that we now mark as reason and emotion, mind and body, self and other, human and non-human, in ways that do not support logics of domination.

The promise of dialogue will never be realized until a monological and instrumental conception of rationality is overthrown in favor of a dialogical conception of contextualized rationality. As long as the current value-hierarchical dualist conceptual system is dominant, attempts at dialogue simply become a way of legitimating "our" perspective while de-legitimating the perspective of the "other." Escaping the boundaries and limitations of the master self requires constantly re-contextualizing the value-hierarchical categories of Western metaphysical dualism and its shadow, monism. This requires the conceptual space of a form of subjectivity, i.e., a self-identity defined in terms of the other, through its concrete relationships with others rather than in opposition to others.

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