

Thinking in Dialogue



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It matters not in Christianity whether we chat with each other or not, but that the core of our faith is dialogical. Revelation is not a rain of concepts falling from heaven but an act of choice, through which love is expressed. This does not exclude the logic of concepts, but grounds it well. This shows that love is also in thinking.¹

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Tischner tackles the problem of dialogue on many occasions. It seems that if we are to find a single issue on which the philosopher set his heart, it is dialogue. However, finding a complete analysis dealing with the complexity of this term is no easy task. The word “dialogue” appears in speaking of solidarity, of the crisis of work, of what is essential in man’s life; it is present in sociological and metaphysical writings, even when we are to gain insight into the essence of reality through considering the inner relationships of the Holy Trinity. Dialogue appears as a star to follow. Tischner often writes about the beginnings of dialogue, and other concepts frequently become clearer or closer, and reveal their power of attraction when interpreted dialogically.

¹ J. Tischner, “Pewność i wierność” [Certainty and Faithfulness], in: *W krainie schorowanej wyobraźni* [In the Land of Diseased Imagination], Krakow 1998, p. 235.

This multifacetedness, or more precisely, depth of the word “dialogue” indicates various levels of meaning. It seems they are not totally distinct; “dialogue” is not a homonym. The meanings are on different levels, but if seen from the right perspective, they are concentric — drawing upon one source and pointing to one center. 159

These levels can be summed up as three: A conversation, or the entire event of an encounter is a dialogue. Yet, in order to enter a dialogue, a person should have an open dialogical structure. Finally, reality itself may allow for a dialogical approach, or for dialogue to come to existence within its bounds.

On all of these levels dialogue can be seen as a point to be reached, an ideal, a star. But this never means that dialogue simply concerns talking, a pure exchange of words with no consequences beyond the satisfaction of both parties.

My attempt is to concisely present Tischner’s intuitions and the insights spread throughout his writings. I do not endeavor to form a system, but to point out the main aspects of this slightly overused and threadbare word, which retains its meaning in Father Tischner’s work.

Greek Dialogue as Opposed to Biblical Dialogue

Juxtaposing the two traditions of understanding and practicing dialogue is a thread that reappears throughout Tischner’s writing. He acknowledges the force of the Greek understanding, but, with all due respect, he shows the greater specificity and depth of the Judeo-Christian approach to dialogue. Both are treated not as a kind of dialogue practiced by certain personages in antiquity, but rather as primal elements reappearing in our own lives, attitudes, and utterances.

His article “Certainty and Faithfulness” provides us with his late credo on dialogue and his manner of seeking meaningful sources of the term, which, at this stage of his philosophizing, focuses on the ultimate of all dialogues: the drama of God and man. Some see this as a break from what constituted the heart of his early thought: man encountering man. Yet how should we approach the ultimate? It can be seen merely as a separate reality in itself or, more adequately perhaps, as a principle, a condition that holds in all of reality.

In *Greek dialogue*, regardless of what people say, Fate triumphs: it is how it is, one cannot change anything, a fact which reminds us of Parmenidean being. Our conversations and encounters are only opinions about what is, they do not touch the heart of the matter, nor do they affect it. Of course, people strive for true knowledge identifiable with reality. But still, what we say is only our own approach to reality and, if anything, it alters only the content of our minds, certainly not the course of events. One may add that this helplessness and rebounding off the rock-hard reality

160 often affects our being in that we tend to become withered wraiths, liable to scare others and ourselves, but bereft of substance. This option is left for those who are incapable of resembling the inflexible reality in their heroic struggle with it.

In Tischner's opinion, on the plane of philosophy the cult of reason blossoms, mincing its arguments and inferences; the form of the dialogue is naturally superseded by the treatise. Although scholasticism continues traditional disputes, Tischner claims that: "in the end, whether one says *videtur, quod non...* [allows some space for the opposing arguments] or not, the stream of deductions will flow all the same."² These words clearly indicate that, while the Greek element often permeates our "dialogues," they do not qualify as dialogues at all, being superficial and governed by mechanics of logic, dialectics, instruction, and so on.

Was there no true dialogue in ancient Greece, then? Greek heroic tales indeed seem to tell stories of men petrifying into overbearing statues, more representing causes than people. Their loneliness represented as independence makes them resemble, in their statue-like being, an unbending reality that follows the course of Fate. Yet, the power needed to accomplish what should be accomplished remains a riddle — is it only ambition, pride perhaps, the desire for fame as the only path to immortality? Yet, these do not touch us and are not so close to our heart in the Greek tragedy. Zbigniew Herbert captures a different element in his memorable verses — faithfulness to values enacted in the lives of legendary heroes:

Go where those others went to the dark boundary
for the golden fleece of nothingness your last prize

...

go because only in this way you will be admitted to the company of cold
skulls

to the company of your ancestors: Gilgamesh Hector Roland
the defenders of the kingdom without limit and the city of ashes

Be faithful Go³

Being faithful on principle can be reduced to being faithful for the sake of oneself. But why care for oneself in this particular manner, and why choose "this proudly willed solitude"? Maurice Merleau-Ponty points out that the strength to do so comes from bonds with others.⁴ And the same intuition is confirmed by Herbert — it is not a prize that is at stake, after all: being ranked together with the legendary heroes in tales and textbooks. It is keeping faith in the same values to which they kept

² J. Tischner, "Pewność i wierność," op. cit., p. 233.

³ Z. Herbert, "Przesłanie Pana Cogito" [The Message of Mr. Cogito], in: *Wiersze zebrane* [Collected Poems], Krakow 2008, pp. 439–440. The quoted translation is by Czesław Miłosz and Peter Dale Scott.

⁴ Cf. M. Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. C. Smith, Routledge, London–New York 2005, p. 527: "What withstands pain is not, in short, a bare consciousness, but the prisoner with his comrades or with those he loves and under whose gaze he lives; or else the awareness of his proudly willed solitude, which again is a certain mode of the *Mit-Sein*."

their faith. And to keep faith in them. I do not believe in the power of exemplum, which evokes feelings of guilt or perverse resentment. Legendary heroes, or perhaps poets writing about them, are endowed with a different power, which seems to forge bonds and inspire hope. This power is not to be found merely in speaking about a reality as unmovable as the mountains. The assumption is that man triumphs over Fate even if his life is forsaken. But can this triumph be explained in Greek terms? 161

Biblical dialogue does not occur in terms of rational juxtapositions of concepts or arguments leading to a synthesis or conclusion. In his “Certainty and Faithfulness,” Tischner concentrates on the dialogue between God and man, though perhaps the same structure might be used to describe a different situation, that of human beings speaking to each other. Again let us concentrate on biblical dialogue as an element that occurs in our own lives.

Starting a dialogue means crossing an *abyss*: the good God stoops to speak with a sinful man. Tischner calls it a greater miracle than finding a synthesis for two contradictory opinions held by two parties. The miracle lies in the intersection of disparate ways that should never meet. There is no common ground for God and man.

The opposition of innocence and sinfulness can be substituted by others; perhaps it is not even the opposition that is essential, but the metaphor of the abyss. Despite having no reason to speak, someone extends his hand. Despite there being no benefit, someone expends his energy. The important thing is a breach of logic. Not only the logic of reasoning or exposition, but also the logic of dependence governing relationships, the logic of our fixed responses. Sometimes a dialogue is born in transcending the “what is that to me” attitude. Sometimes one needs to distance oneself from an involvement so strong that it does not allow one to differentiate from the other. In both situations we need distance (the Tischnerian abyss); and on the other hand, a gesture made in spite of the distance.

God calls man by *name*. Bearing in mind the meanings biblical authors attribute to the name, it should come as no surprise that this constitutes a whole and meaningful message. Tischner writes that revelation is, above all, choosing: what is revealed is God’s choice. This choice is manifested in a particular fashion: through naming. The chain of concepts is unexpectedly dynamic: revelation is not seen as a revelation of truth, but as a deed, a commitment. The choice is not made between alternatives, but directed solely toward an individual. This is a choice despite an abyss. A free choice.

Saying a name is the beginning of the speech through which dialogue transpires. We know⁵ that values underlie all that is spoken: dia-

⁵ Cf. J. Tischner, *Zarys filozofii dla duszpasterzy i artystów* [The Philosophy of Man for Priests and Artists], Krakow 1991. Reprinted as part of *Thinking in the Realm of Beauty*.

162 logue is “less an exchange of words than an exchange of things of value.”⁶ The first value is the value of the Other, which is recognized through choosing him and addressing him. Sometimes the name is not literally pronounced (because it might be unknown, e.g. when a stranger asks me for directions), but the context of the situation and the first word spoken or gesture made unambiguously indicate an individual. It is intriguing that the choice must be free for a dialogue to begin. This seems guaranteed by a distance that is crossed, but not annulled.

In *responding* to God’s choice, man can choose to be chosen, or he can escape. Both possibilities exist only when man has already been addressed. It is peculiar that Tischner claims that the first experience of freedom is the freedom of the Other, and not that of the self.⁷ Here, he explicitly states that God makes man’s freedom possible.

In encountering another man, my meaningful freedom — toward essential values — is born only when someone addresses me (choice, an experience of the Other’s freedom or even power) in an unpredictable manner (because there is an abyss between us). The essential is not arbitrarily established by the self, but revealed in a situation involving the Other and me. Facing the Other, I know the weight of choice, which is no longer a caprice, but a re-direction of myself: I face or I escape. When I answer, I do not conceal the abyss, I do not nullify the distance, and I will not be absorbed. My answer confirms that I recognize a value, that I accept the responsibility coming from being addressed, that I accept my particular role. The possibility of turning away is still there, adumbrated as betrayal. However, preserving freedom is not an obstacle in building intimacy. Here, intimacy does not mean merging into a whole.

Intimacy consists in trusting oneself to the Other: “He who chooses God has become *God’s confidant*.”⁸ It also entails keeping faith. Only the bond of faithfulness merits the name “dialogue.” This bond is formed through mutual recognition of the persons’ values, and of the values which are seen as those persons’ salvation, which play the ultimate role in their lives.⁹ Dia-logue holds a duality and nurtures it, though one order of values is founded. This recognition of the Other’s being in the right and his demands reorganizes those rights and demands that I could present as my own. This reorganizes, but does not subordinate. The Other’s world of values does not become my mine, in the sense of annulling my existing world. The Other’s world becomes mine, because it reshuffles emphasis and affects meanings in my world, which grows richer and, suddenly,

⁶ J. Tischner, “The Axiological-I in Dialogue,” in this volume.

⁷ “Freedom is, above all, the other’s freedom.” J. Tischner, *Spór o istnienie człowieka* [The Controversy over the Existence of Man], Krakow 1998, p. 299.

⁸ J. Tischner, “Pewność i wierność,” op. cit., p. 234.

⁹ Cf. A. Workowski, “The Embodied Encounter: The Apories of the Concept of the Encounter in Józef Tischner’s Philosophy,” in this volume.

gains in significance. It becomes ordered according to the hope seen from the perspective of good and evil.¹⁰ 163

The aim of the biblical dialogue does not lie in the realization of any value, save the value of a person seen from an agathological perspective. Its aim is to save man, to find his justification in the good that is born within him.

The Event

Can this metaphysical structure be related in any way to experience? Is it possible to translate the sentence “God entrusts Himself to man” into philosophy? Should it be accepted as part of a mystical vision, does it speak only of the other world, or of an element which can be found here? If it is to have a philosophical meaning, then this meaning has to be sought in our temporality, though without reducing the deeper dimension.

Christianity indicates that God’s revelation occurs, first and foremost, in man. Neither natural phenomena nor mysterious forces governing animal behavior (or their entrails inspected in haruspicy) give us a clear indication of who God is. The belief that God entrusts Himself to man through man seems the quintessential credo of believers in Christ.

Therefore, interhuman relationships should be recognized as the place where God entrusts Himself to man, of which Tischner wrote. This cannot, however, be reduced to the relationship between God and man, with another human being no more than a medium, a costume that the Almighty dons to grant us the opportunity to relate to Him. The relationship with God seems to lie deeper, to be the ultimate meaning of interpersonal relationships. Dialogue with God transpires in human language and in the human realm, though it has its significance in heaven.

Our question leads to another: Can dialogue happen, and how is it possible? Is it only a general structure which can define our relationships? Or can it take place in a concrete event? Presumably, dialogue is both a structure and an event. Yet, were it to be primarily the internal structure of a relationship, then it would lie beyond us, as it were: We would only experience its manifestations or symptoms, unable to capture its essence. Such “dialogue” would not be dialogical, but would rather resemble Fate, in governing our relationships without our clear consent. Wisława Szymborska writes about a peculiar pre-dialogue that precedes an encounter in her poem “Love at First Sight”¹¹; a similar thread might be found in one

¹⁰ Cf. the distinction between the agathological and axiological horizons in J. Tischner, “Phenomenology of the Encounter,” in this volume.

¹¹ Cf. W. Szymborska, “Miłość od pierwszego wejrzenia,” in: *Koniec i początek* [The End and the Beginning], Poznań 1996. In S. Barańczak and C. Cavanagh’s translation, we read that “They’re both convinced | that a sudden passion joined them. | Such certainty is beautiful, | but uncertainty is more beautiful still. (...) Every beginning | is only a sequel, after all, | and the book of events | is always open halfway through.”

164 of the myths in Plato's *Symposium*.¹² But then human reality appears to be in the (double) harness of its deterministic destiny, our choices being a subjective manifestation of Fate at work, our reality is woven by Moira and not by us, the people.

It seems dialogue must happen as an event in order to form its metaphysical structure. If man is to be a beginning, as Tischner echoes after Augustine and Hannah Arendt, then we need an *initium* happening in a particular place and at certain time. Such an initiation of dialogue, its recommencement and revival, is the encounter. I cannot enter it without giving my consent. And though I am hardly aware of it, while "I am encountering you," nothing happens behind my back.

The Human Being

How is it possible that man can encounter the Other? It is clear that encountering does not concern tangency, cognition of an object, exerting influence, or being part of a greater whole. To enter a dialogue, man needs an open dialogical constitution. Let us look at the list of concepts Tischner himself prepared to answer the question, "How does a person need to be built in order to act in the drama of good and evil?"¹³ These concepts are: soul, grace, and the metaphysics of the good (which I render here in one word: participation). Despite their theological significance, Tischner underscores our experiences of having a soul, of receiving an undeserved gift. I try to show what bearing these have on the encounter.

The soul. Tischner focuses not on a being, but on an experience, wherein having a soul means being able to express oneself, being a beginning. Expressing oneself is not translating something already existing in our depths into the medium of language. There are various levels, but they must be comprehended differently. One of these is the point of departure, which is the world, a situation, understood as the matter that an individual must process.¹⁴ On the other hand, there is participation; Tischner's brief statement that "there is no expression without participation" seems to imply man's access to the absolute. Finally, action: a word, gesture, or deed, which bears a stamp, which is characterized by a manner of being, which we may call an expression of oneself, a soul. The soul thus seems an

¹² In Aristophanes' speech, the concept of the primal whole, divided by gods into two bodies, explains why an individual always seeks the other half, striving to achieve the primal unity.

¹³ J. Tischner, "Zarys filozofii człowieka dla duszpasterzy i artystów" in: *Myślenie w żywiole piękna* [Thinking in the Realm of Beauty], Krakow 2004, p. 287. We need to recall that "an encounter is an opening up of the agathological horizon," the perspective of good and evil, cf. J. Tischner, "Phenomenology of the Encounter," in this volume.

¹⁴ Cf. J. Tischner, "Zarys filozofii...", op. cit., p. 288: "An expression differs from a simple manifestation in that, before it appears externally, it must be 'processed' within a man. Man is not a conveyor belt for external stimuli, but their creative 'interpreter'."

experience of directing oneself toward the good, and opposing the tempting anti-order of fixed mechanisms, the logic of revenge, inappropriate interestedness, etc. 165

The experience of having a soul is inexorably linked to the encounter: only in the Other's presence and facing him does one see why one's existing, seemingly well-ordered world is something that ought not to be. The self's expression is also perceptible by the self, but without the Other, his suffering and hope, the senses lose their grounding, the expression itself is arbitrary. Without the Other, whose presence is something like an Archimedean point, there is neither good nor evil. In the encounter absolute meanings are coined, and meanings pertaining to the self, who is then able to be expressive. From this new perspective, I find that the order of my world was once governed by forces with which I do not necessarily identify. Now I can find the correct places for their action, identifying their new significance. The encounter gives me the opportunity to have a soul, that is, to integrate my life without losing the grounding of my situation or access to the absolute. I become a beginning, once I relate to myself in the absolute perspective.

Grace. The good, the Other, being oneself, and the beginning return in the description of grace, magnanimity. It is a description of dialogue from another angle. Once again Tischner focuses on experience, and not on theology. Grace is an experience of undeserved goodness, a break in the cause-and-effect chain. A servant owing a debt should pay it or be sold, but the lord nullifies the debt (Mt 18:23-30). The admirable is inexplicable. Tischner writes that grace is like beauty: it attracts but does not enslave. Grace is a sign of the Other's soul; it allures the self to have a soul.

But it is not easy to see that one is capable of having a soul. The servant in the parable does not follow in his lord's footsteps, perhaps recognizing what has truly happened could change his world to such an extent that he turns away and forgets all about it, registering little. Perhaps he did not deem himself worthy of receiving grace, of being a partner in dialogue, perhaps he thought himself lucky, and his lord's act contingent, like the weather.

Grace is not blind chance. Therefore, it manifests itself primarily in human encounters, in all its otherworldliness and incomprehensibility. I have wronged someone and I am forgiven by a concrete person; I cannot return a favor, but I am helped by a friend or a stranger who has stopped to see my face. Perhaps not even my inability to repay, but somebody seeing my true poverty is especially decisive and disturbing: I cannot deny that I experience grace. Escaping disaster may or may not be seen as an act of grace; luck (or fate) is as equally powerful a concept here.

Tischner writes that "[t]hanks to grace, man discovers he is 'in the game'."¹⁵ In order to be a sign that goodness is possible, grace must be

¹⁵ J. Tischner, *ibid.*, p. 291.

166 noticed and freely accepted. This opens the self to his own good, awakens the soul or the self,¹⁶ but only if he chooses to do so.

Participation. The soul means integrating life through expressing oneself, absorbing reality and creating a beginning in relating to it. The good is the reason for new beginnings, unprecedented and inexplicable in the world of mechanisms. Grace is the way the good acts; I recognize it in the Other's gestures, and it manifests itself through me if I choose the good. Beyond merit and enacted values, on a deeper plane, we participate in the good, which wishes to exist, so it draws us to the concrete, to values.

Dialogue is anchored in the good. This is an absolute anchoring, though it does not force dialogue on anyone. Unlike fate, grace presupposes freedom, and grants the freedom to respond to people. Participation in the good forms common ground between us. Yet, it does not annul the abyss, the distance between us.

Participation in the good is not abstract. I am bound to another person "through the bonds of participation in the good."¹⁷ What are those bonds? From an agathological perspective, I see the everyday values that shape our lives. I see the Other endangered by evil, by waste, by throwing himself into pursuits that are meaningless to his salvation; I see the Other's hope to do good as he understands it. I bind myself to the Other's hope, that is, I hope for his salvation, I identify with his hope, taking it for my own. But all this does not deprive me of my own self. I do not take the Other's hope from him and put myself in his position, depriving him of freedom and power over his future. On the contrary, I see my own actions and pursuits as leading me toward perdition or salvation.

What does this binding mean in concrete terms? I nurture the Other's hope through recognizing his values and assigning them an essential place in my world. I recognize his value through entrusting him with my own essential hope. In the end, I hardly know what my own essential hope is before I entrust it to the Other. Therefore, I am bound to the Other, and deserting him — failing to recognize his goodness, his absolute value — would mean deserting my own self as confided to the Other.

The human encounter seems the first space for the good to happen, for participation to be effective. In the encounter one discovers the possibility of having soul, one learns what good is through its grace in the Other. It is through the encounter that I see the Other and myself from the perspective of good and evil, and this seeing is not pure observation; it entangles me, involves my innermost interest. The encounter seems to open the self to its most essential possibilities, which had been dormant, or in fact nonexistent. These possibilities are not only seen, they are fulfilled: through encountering, the self not only discovers the possibility of expression,

¹⁶ One of the philosophers Tischner most often cited was Kierkegaard. The analogy of the self/spirit awakening and choosing oneself is very clear here.

¹⁷ J Tischner, "Zarys filozofii...", op. cit., p. 291.

he expresses himself. In Tischner's description of the encounter,¹⁸ this moment can be seen as the self revealing his face in answer to seeing the Other's face. The encounter engenders bonds which are constituted not by dependence but by people engaging themselves freely. 167

Tischner writes: "The greatest fruit of grace on earth is the *faithful man*."¹⁹ Faithfulness starts in the encounter: the self can only bind himself to the Other's hopes upon seeing the Other's face, his individual truth endangered and striving to save itself. As encounters begin and end, dialogue commenced and revived in them lives through the faithful person.

Dialogical Reality

Entering a dialogue in the event of the encounter, discovering one's own soul and the recognition/decision to participate in the good change our perspective on reality itself. Can reality be seen as dialogical too? It seems that reality is surprisingly susceptible to the dialogical approach, and reveals an unexpected richness of meaning. Phenomena that are traditionally ascribed to man in his solitude show new, dynamic aspects: bonds with others and participation with others in ideas. Work, power, authority, freedom, truth, and thinking find their dialogical interpretations, surprising us with their meaningful closeness to us.

Tischner traces dialogue in the most unexpected moments of reality. The being of an inquisitor is possible through dialogue. A philosopher can think owing to dialogue. Tischner fulfills his postulate of the ethics of solidarity, which is to "accompany man on his life's road and to show him, in as unambiguous a way as possible, the values among which his destiny winds."²⁰ This is not a deontological ethics, but an ethics of dialogue, which demonstrates, allures, and can also be discarded by definition as dialogue itself. This thinking is not revolutionary in the sense of dismantling existing structures. It only shows that man and the world are immersed and participate in a deeper reality. Looking from this deeper perspective implies a change in meanings and roles. And this includes the role of thinking.

¹⁸ Cf. J. Tischner, "Phenomenology of the Encounter," in this volume.

¹⁹ J. Tischner, "Zarys filozofii...", op. cit., p. 294.

²⁰ J. Tischner, *Etyka solidarności* [The Ethics of Solidarity], Krakow 1981, p. 10.