Dialogue and Conflict Resolution in Education
A Philosophical Perspective

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Humans are living beings endowed with logos (language, speech, reason, rules, ...), capable of communicating, that is, sharing and making common what they think, feel and desire. Their nature has an intrinsic dialogical —linguistic and communicative— character. On the other hand, there is a general perception of contemporary social life as rife with conflict at all levels: families, local communities, nations, ... In fact, even though dialogue is a natural human attitude, there are many situations in which its seems difficult or even impossible to communicate, to understand the other or to reach an agreement with him/her. Dialogue can suffer from a pathology. However, disagreement and conflict have accompanied humanity since its origins, as also have agreement, understanding and concord. The intrinsic rational-linguistic characteristics of human nature are both the cause of the problem and the source of its solution. Dialogue is fundamental to education, as is education to dialogue. In this sense, Socratic dialogue can be of inspiration for a successful educative strategy.

♦ 1. Conflict in education: the broader view

We have a particular perception of the fact that our contemporary world is immersed in conflict, at all levels of life (familiar, communal, national, international). Society is polarised. Intolerance (cultural, racial, religious, economic) is growing. The world political equilibrium is broken. New national and international blocs are formed, confronting each other. World peace is in danger. The war in Ukraine is only a symptom or a manifestation of the present world climate. We are

returning to a fearsome "Cold War" era.

Like all social environments, schools and universities are not immune to polarisation and division. Conflict is present at all levels of educational contexts. At a structural level, in many countries there is a general perception that the educational system is in a deep crisis, unable to absolve its formative task and fulfil its role as a contributor to the social progress of the most disadvantaged. In many cases, the proportion of the budget that the states dedicate to education does not correspond to the real needs of the population. This is reflected in the lack of teaching aids and inadequate school facilities, and in the low salaries of teachers and support staff. In recent years, this has led to frequent teacher strikes and student unrest in different parts of the world. We are aware that these problems are caused by social and economic conditions that are not easy to fix.

From a pedagogical point of view, globalisation and the accelerated technological progress of recent years present a strong challenge to the educational practices and models that have traditionally been used. Internet access in everyday life and in educative environments is both a blessing and a curse. It is now possible to access information and media that were previously the privilege of the few. At the same time, social networks expose young people to previously unheard-of dangers: cyberbullying, pornography at their fingertips, abuse on networks by adults, etc. Young and old people alike find themselves anxious and unable to maintain attention, under the pressure of always being connected and up to date with what is posted on Facebook, Instagram, Tik-Tok, etc. In classrooms we see the anthropological consequences of this technological revolution. Faced with the perception of a decline in students' academic performance, the supposed ability of the new generations to follow a lesson while chatting on Whatsapp or looking at the latest post on a social network is met with general scepticism from educators. At the same time, the effectiveness of rhetorical and communicative techniques used on social networks to capture the attention of Internet users is a stimulus for updating pedagogical techniques and improving school teaching materials. On the one hand, young teachers have a greater ability to face the challenge, on the other, the feeling of disorientation and discouragement among more mature educators is not uncommon. Not surprisingly, differences in the perception of reality between parents, teachers and pupils create

inevitable tensions, which often lead to open conflict.

Therefore, it is no wonder that, in recent times negotiation expertise and conflict resolution capabilities have become also in education a much sought-after skill. Conflict resolution in education is indeed a hot topic. Schools of pedagogy and education at many universities offer specialised courses on this subject. The accumulated experience in this field is available also in a wide variety of publications: books, journal articles, websites, etc. However, the purpose of this paper is not to present technical solutions to reach agreements or eliminate conflicts in education, but to ponder on the anthropological context that fosters a healthy and conflict-free educational relationship.

While we may be well aware of it, however, conflict and discord are not a novelty of the present day. Since the dawn of time, conflict, division and war have been present throughout human history, in all cultures and civilisations, as have concord, goodwill and friendship. The causes of disagreement and conflict are inherent in human nature, and so are the means to resolve them. Thus, a close examination of some aspects of the free and rational nature of human beings can shed light on this problem, and help us understand the inevitability of disagreement and tensions between people, but also their positive role in human progress when they are managed and resolved wisely.

In these pages we want to delve deeper into the rational, and therefore linguistic —dialogical— nature of the human being. Our philosophical guides on this journey will be four thinkers: two ancient Greek philosophers (Plato and Aristotle) and two contemporary ones, the Germans Hans-Georg Gadamer and Jürgen Habermas.

♦ 2. Man, the animal that possesses logos

What does it mean to be homo sapiens? The Latin adjective sapiens qualifies the genus homo, signifying that our human species is naturally endowed with reason. That is: rationality and freedom distinguish humankind. In order to become what every human individual should be, he or she should make use of his/her rational faculties (intellect and will), to achieve freely the potentialities and goals (thelos) inherent to human nature. All human faculties are ordained to the attainment of the end of man's nature. Not only the spiritual ones, but also the animal ones, because man is a knowing-desiring-feeling being in which animality and rationality are intertwined. On the contrary, all other

living beings are driven only by tendencies, impulses and instincts, so they necessarily fulfil the purpose for which they were created by God.

Furthermore, the personal enterprise of living a meaningful life, which goes beyond the mere survival and reproduction of our species, cannot be achieved individualistically. Nobody living alone can achieve a full life. We need each other to achieve our goals in life. Our desires are greater than the our capacity to realize them. Indeed, human limitation, temporality and finiteness are part of everybody's life experience. This means for Aristotle that "every man, by nature, has an impulse toward a partnership with others" [Aristotle, Politics, Bk 1]. The communal life in the city (polis) is then the natural way of living for human beings. The awareness of this fact leads him to state that "man is by nature a political animal" [Aristotle, Politics, Bk 1]. This natural tendency to socialize must be supported by a way of being — the rational-linguistic nature— that helps to create and foster bonds between human individuals. In fact, man is the animal that possesses language (ζῷον λόγον ᾧχον) as a means of sharing and collaborating to achieve individual and collective aims. Speech reveals itself as an essential instrument in this process. That's why sociability is intrinsically linked to rationality:

For nature does nothing without purpose; and man alone of the animals possesses speech (λόγον δῷμόνον ὦνθρωπος ᾧχει τῶν ζῷων). The mere voice, it is true, can indicate pain and pleasure, and therefore is possessed by the other animals as well (for their nature has been developed so far as to have sensations of what is painful and pleasant and to signify those sensations to one another), but speech is designed to indicate the advantageous and the harmful, and therefore also the right and the wrong [Aristotle, Politics, Bk 1].

The Greek word λόγος has many related meanings: (1) Logos means human speech, language. (2) It also means reason, thought. And finally (3) it means law, rule and order. The polysemic character of this word makes it difficult to translate into other languages without losing its semantic richness. In fact, when the Aristotelian definition of man as the animal possessing logos was translated into Latin, the definition became "homo est animal rationale", emphasising his rational character, i.e. his capacity to think and know reality. Thus man is defined as an animal capable of knowing: homo sapiens. By contrast, in the Aristotelian quotation above the term logos has been translated into

contemporary English as speech or language, narrowing the semantic spectrum of the Greek term logos in an analogous way, by emphasising the human ability to communicate linguistically. However, although in English reason and language are distinct terms, their meanings are intimately linked, for language and reason are just two different aspects of the human logos. Indeed, Plato in the Sophist states that "thought (διάνοια) and speech (λόγος) are the same thing: except that the one is an internal dialogue of the soul with itself, which takes place without a voice (ᾧντῷς τῷς ψυχῷς πρῷς αῷτῷν διάλογος ῷνευ φωνῷς), and it is precisely this that we have called thought (διάνοια)." [Plato, Sophist 263 e]

♦ 3. Conversation as interplay of logos, pathos and ethos

Although rationality characterises human nature, it does not exhaust its richness. As has already been said, man is a knowing-desiring-feeling being. He relates to others with his whole being, including the volitional and emotional spheres. Human relationships are based on trust, and they cannot be built and maintained without creating bonds of affection. Our whole life and our actions are the basis of our trustworthiness. If we want to build solid social structures at all levels —family, community, nation— we must rely in strong personal bonds and relationships. This can happen only when we establish our relations on true foundations: sincere friendship and goodwill, loyalty, honesty, transparency... That is why, in the long run, the only way to heal divisions and resolve conflicts is to show by deeds and sincere dialogue a willingness to restore justice and fairness in relations. Personal credibility is the fundamental condition for a strong social partnership [Jiménez Cataño, The Role of Goodwill in Conflictive Communication].

That is why possessing logos is not enough to be a good communicator. Personal character and virtues are a component of the efficacy of speech. Indeed, for truth (logos) to be a solid foundation of social relations, it should be perceived as such: truth has to be plausible. Rhetoric —the art of persuasive speech— as conceived by Aristotle, is at the service of truthful speech, so that it is also credible. When we want to convince of the truth of what we say, we must touch the hearts of our listeners (pathos). A brilliant and moving speech does not have to be misleading or false. The utilitarian and manipulative use of language in disregard of truth is an abuse of rhetoric. On the other hand, a coherent personal lifestyle (ethos) is indispensable so that listeners have

confidence in the truth of the speaker's discourse. If the speaker says one thing but behaves contrary to what he teaches, his speech loses credibility. In fact, deceit and duplicity are the foundations of division and conflict. To be persuasive, as Aristotle puts it, a speaker "must not only try to make the argument of his speech demonstrative and worthy of belief (logos); he must also make his own character look right (ethos) and put his hearers (...) into the right frame of mind (pathos)" [Aristotle, Rhetoric, Bk II, 1].

In short, logos, pathos and ethos support each other, creating the common language that underpins agreement and concord in the task of building and strengthening social bonds in a community. On the contrary, the lack of a common language make impossible any understanding, and can become a cause of conflict. In fact, without it, it becomes impossible for humanity to share, collaborate and band together. The biblical episode of the Tower of Babel [See Genesis 11, 1-9] is a reminder of this fundamental fact. That's why speech is not only a vehicle of meanings (semantic aspect of language), but also an essential tool for making things happen in society (pragmatic aspect of language).

Hans-Georg Gadamer points out that we must accept that we may be wrong in order to engage in genuine dialogue with others, which means acknowledging the possibility that what we think about a subject may be somewhat flawed and therefore perfected. From the personal awareness of the impossibility for man to possess the truth absolutely emerge a positive condition and an unmistakable feature of successful conversations.

The positive condition is openness. This means always remaining open to the possible truth of the other's opinion, because we are convinced that the perspective and reasons of our interlocutor can enrich our original views or even make us change them completely. Openness in dialogue is possible when we pay attention and listen kindly to what the other person says —"the art of understanding is surely first and primarily the art of listening" [Gadamer, Europa und die Oikoumene (1993): 274]—, open to the truth of his or her opinions, applying the principle of hermeneutic charity: whoever is speaking to me is a rational being, so what he or she says should be logical [Davidson, Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation]. This does not mean that we should accept everything our interlocutor says as true, but that we should always listen with a benevolent attitude.

The unmistakable feature of a successful conversation is its transformative capacity: Genuine dialogue always leaves an imprint on us. Through conversation we discover something that we could never have found in our personal experience of the world alone. Indeed, after a good conversation, the interlocutors are not the same as they were before. Conversation transforms the participants in it [Gadamer, The Incapacity for Conversation (1972)].

♦ 3. Two pathologies of dialogue

Language is the medium that enables socialization and creation of culture and civilization. It lives in dialogue, in the exchange of ideas, opinions and feelings that takes place in conversation between people: it is the usual path to agreement and concord. In conversation, a relationship of reciprocal exchange is established in which each interlocutor gives of his or her own, but also receives from what the other gives, allowing his or her experience to be completed by the experience of the other. To converse is to be open to the otherness of the "you" who meets us, to want to learn from his or her experience. However, although the ability to engage in dialogue is a property of human nature, success in conversation is not guaranteed.

In fact, despite all our efforts to understand the other, there will always be something in the other, a residue that will be inaccessible to us and impossible to assimilate. Otherness —that is, that immovable individuality and particular identity of all that is "other" with respect to ourselves— cannot be reduced to a concept that we can understand, nor to an experience that we can simply assimilate to our own experience. This inability to fully understand the other and to adapt ourselves completely to his or her demands is an essential characteristic of human finitude. Otherness is a limit that it is possible to overcome. The acceptance of the otherness of our interlocutor is the starting point of any possible agreement. Nevertheless, even though it is a fact of common experience, people often react by denying it, in the face of the strictures that their living with others entail for the unfolding of their own activity, either by ignoring the other, or by trying to subject or subordinate him or her to the requirements of their own will [Fernández Labastida, Conversación, diálogo y lenguaje en el pensamiento de Hans-Georg Gadamer: 63-65].

This fact points to some pathologies and pathogens that corrupt the

conversation. Indeed, dialogue often breaks down or gets spoiled. I will briefly describe two of them. In doing so, the virtues that must be present in the conversation for it to fulfil its purpose will be indirectly highlighted.

1) The will to impose what we think or desire. Manipulation of the others using personal power or sophistry. For Habermas, discourse is a process in which speakers are able to reasonably ground their ideas, and their claims of validity underlying them. Indeed, for a linguistic act to be acceptable and lead to consensus, it must be considered valid by the interlocutors. Habermas claims that the only admissible force that can be used to convince others of the validity of our ideas is "the force of the best argument". Therefore, the ideal situation of discourse between individuals and in the public sphere implies the absence of coercion or manipulation of any kind. To attain this ideal condition, freedom and equality between interlocutors must reign, as well as openness to universality [Habermas, The Theory of Communicative Action].

2) The inability to listen. This problem is related to the fact that the risk of listening only to oneself is always present. Hans-Georg Gadamer underscores this human shortcoming:

The incapacity for listening is such a well known phenomenon that one doesn't need to provide illustrations to make it clear. One experiences it sufficiently in oneself when one ignores (überhört) or mishears (falsch hört). And isn't that really one of our basic human experiences, that we fail to perceive in time what is going on with the other, that our ear was not fine enough to "hear" the other's silence and stubbornness? Or also that one mishears? It is incredible what can happen. Once, thanks to an abuse of official authority in Leipzig (inconsequential in itself), I was put in jail. Throughout the whole day I kept hearing, called down the corridor, the names of those who were to be led off for interrogation. Almost every time a name was called, I thought at first I had heard my name—was my anxiety so severe? Ignoring and mishearing occur for the same obvious reason: one who ignores or mishears is one who constantly listens to himself, whose ears are so filled from the encouragement that he constantly gives to himself and with which he pursues his drives and interests, that he is unable to hear the Other. That is, I would insist, to some degree or other a character trait we all share [Gadamer, The Incapacity for Conversation (1972): 358].

However, in spite of all the possible obstacles to agreement and understanding that we may encounter, we must remain optimistic. Our quest for concord in society is not useless or futile, because we never entirely lose our capacity for genuine conversation, for we cannot destroy the logos —the rationality— that constitutes and structures our being homo sapiens. In the long run, a proper education for dialogue is the best strategy for reaching understanding and thus for resolving conflicts in educational contexts. The deep conviction in the ability to seek truth and to reach an understanding of it through dialogue was the driving force behind the teachings of the founder of Western philosophy: Socrates.

♦ 4. Socratic dialogue and contemporary education

Among the thinkers of the beginnings of philosophizing in Western culture stands out the figure of Socrates, known to many as "the wisest of the Athenians". His story is well known to all, especially thanks to the accounts left by his disciples Plato and Xenophon. His consistency in life will be the cause of his unjust death sentence. Socrates died so as not to betray the principles of his commitment to the search for truth. Socrates has therefore been regarded throughout history as a teacher of wisdom, but also as a martyr of truth.

In addition to his immediate disciples, many thinkers have learned after his life and philosophical doctrine, and have come to regard themselves as his disciples. However, "being Socrates' disciples does not mean learning certain theses in order to repeat them by heart; it does not mean accepting a certain philosophy, nor does it mean reducing the field of research to a certain field. To be a disciple of Socrates is to share a spirit, a way of doing philosophy, a way of living: living by philosophising" [Pérez de Laborda, El más sabio de los atenienses: 117]. In other words, he does not teach philosophy, but teaches how to philosophise. Indeed, Socrates was a different teacher from the sophists: he does not teach how to master language as a tool to convince his interlocutor, but as a means to investigate the truth together with his interlocutor through dialogue.

Socrates' aim in dialogue is to reason together in order to test the truth of common opinions, often uncritically held by his interlocutors. The first step, then, is the unmasking of false wisdom, that is, of the ignorance of those who "do not know, but think they know". However,

Socrates does not stop there, falling into scepticism or agnosticism. Recognition of one's own ignorance is a firm starting point for a reasoned search for the truth about the subject in question. Socrates helps his dialogue partners to learn to think critically, questioning the logos of their opinions. Dialogue thus has a twofold purpose for Socrates: to learn new things and to teach the other to philosophise, making him realise his ignorance and the need to open himself to true knowledge. Socrates compares his way of proceeding to maieutics (the art of midwives), because he aims to help his pupils "give birth" to their ideas [Gonzalez, Thinking as Conversation in Plato's Theaetetus'].

Socratic maieutics as a pedagogical method is not an art of teaching, but an art of helping pupils to arrive at the truth in a personal way. For Socrates, truth cannot be taught, because knowledge is already present in the soul, but it must be awakened by a process of remembrance (anamnesis). Each person must discover the truth ("give birth to it") for himself. Just as the midwife helps the parturient in labour pains, so the teacher must help the disciple to bring to light the truths that are already present in him [Plato, Theaetetus, 148e-151d]. That is why, instead of answering the questions put to him, Socrates often reworks the initial question, so that his interlocutor reasons personally in search of an answer.

The success of the Socratic method in education requires the active involvement of teachers and students. The teacher must create a relaxed environment in which students feel comfortable. They must say what they think frankly, without fear of being judged. Classroom discussion is in fact about the ideas expressed, not the people expressing them. In addition, the teacher must be a 'facilitator' of knowledge, not a mere instructor passing on notions to students. Usually, the teacher is right when he thinks he knows better. However, he should avoid the temptation of 'monological' teaching, i.e., explaining everything without asking students questions and probing what they think or understand about the subject. In turn, students should avoid the temptation of passivity, reducing their learning activity to mere listening and memorising, without making an effort to 'digest' and question what is being taught in order to understand it. Instead, the right attitude for learning in the classroom is a proactive one, each working with his or her own reason to tap into the truth. The will occupies a central place in this process: it is not enough to be intelligent;

one must want to know and not shy away from the effort to think [Nelson, The Socratic Method and Critical Philosophy].

Therefore, teachers must necessarily cultivate the following virtues or attitudes in order to be able, in turn, by exercising maieutic, to generate them in their pupils: 1) Openness to truth: not becoming entrenched in dogmatic attitudes. Indeed, in order to dialogue, as Hans-Georg Gadamer stresses, we must truly admit the possibility that we may be wrong. 2) Sympathy: we must look sympathetically at the opinions of others in order to make the effort to understand them by applying the principle of hermeneutic charity. Understanding them, however, is not the same as sharing them. 3) Patience: the search for truth is a complex undertaking, and learning takes time. The deeper and more fundamental the truth sought, the longer it will take to understand it. It is important to look positively on the knowledge gained, without pretending to exhaust the truth with our reason.

Nevertheless, Socratic dialogue is not the pedagogical resource par excellence, nor is it the "Swiss army knife" of learning. Its strengths are also its weaknesses and limitations. It cannot become the sole method of teaching. As we have pointed out, dialogue requires time and effort on the part of the interlocutors. Not all possible objects of knowledge must necessarily go through the dialogic process in order to be correctly grasped. In this sense, like Socrates, it is necessary to realise what is worth questioning. It is unreasonable to want to test all opinions. We do not have the time to do so: "ars lunga, vita brevis". Demonising the learning by heart has done a lot of damage to education. Moreover, we cannot be haughty about what those who have preceded us have thought in the past. The systematic rejection of authorities and tradition goes against the Socratic spirit itself.

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