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Giuseppe Galli

## On the Dynamics of Multi-Disciplinary Working Groups

### Introduction

My observations are based on many years of experience with a multi-disciplinary research group which I first established in 1979 at the faculty of philosophy and human sciences of Macerata University. The aim of this group from the outset has been to throw some light on the interpretation processes of texts according to the different methods applied in human sciences. Among the participants are bible exegetes, lawyers, linguists, philosophers, psychologists, psychotherapists, literary scientists and historians. This small group of experts, approximately 12 people, meets for two days each year during a so-called "colloquium on interpretation", which consists of a few presentations and a series of very intensive discussions. Reports of these meetings are published by me annually.<sup>1</sup> Looking at the reports of these colloquia we can distinguish two types:

The first type consists of seven colloquia where the interpretation is carried out from the point of view of context, structure, values, dialogue, symbol, change and epistemology. Main questions in this group are: How do we understand and recognise a text? How do we give sense or meaning to the text?

The second type consists of eleven colloquia where interpretation refers to issues like: forgiveness, thankfulness, wonder, promise, truthfulness, commitment, etc. The main question in this context is no longer: How do we recognise a text? but rather how do we recognise ourselves in a text? In the first case the analysis of texts and their contents serves the purpose of bringing to light the actual processes of interpretation, while the latter group of colloquia places increasing emphasis on the link between the contents of a text and the phenomenon "I" of the interpreter.

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<sup>1</sup> GALLI, G. (Editor) (1980-1997): *Atti dei colloqui villa interpretazione*, Vol. I-XVII, Pisa: Giardini

## Contributing Factors for Successful Group Work

I have often wondered what it takes to make a multi-disciplinary group come about and for it to continue successfully over the years.

### 1. The Factor Similarity

Undoubtedly, one of the main factors is a common interest in text interpretation shared by all participants. Indeed, the interpretation process can trigger very strong motivation where it reveals entirely new meanings beyond the familiar old ones, and where these new meanings are met by wonder and surprise. It is a process inexhaustible by nature, as each change of context and co-text produces an ever wider range of meanings.

A second factor of co-operation in the colloquia is implied by the theoretical approaches common to all the participants: One of these is what I would like to call the *interaction between text and interpreter*: no text is vested with a pre-existing meaning readily available but rather the meaning is created by the interaction between text and interpreter, i.e. between the phonologic, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic aspects of text on the one hand and the variables of the interpreter on the other hand (values, expectations, etc.).

A second approach in this context is the *overall situation*: the interaction between text and interpreter is embedded in a comprehensive whole, which along with the variables of text and interpreter includes those of the situation and its structure (purpose, standard, time, etc.).

### 2. The Factor Difference

All the interpreters, the philologists, linguists, lawyers, psychologists, etc. are rooted in their very specific background which reflects on the individual interpretation processes. Any given situation can be perceived and differentiated from a number of different points of view.

To distinguish between the different situations I have chosen several terms coined by M. Bachtin in his treatise on the philosophical foundation of human sciences:

The exact sciences constitute a monologic form of knowledge: the intellect contemplates a thing and expounds upon it. There is only one subject here - cognizing and speaking (expounding). In opposition to the subject there is only a voiceless thing. Any object of knowledge (including man) can be perceived and cognized as a thing. But a subject as such cannot be perceived and studied as a thing, for as a subject it cannot, while remaining a subject, become voiceless, and consequently, cognition of it can only be dialogic. [...] Various ways of being active in cognitive activity. The activity of the one who acknowledges a voiceless thing and the activity of one who acknowledges another subject, that

is, the dialogic activity of the acknowledger. The dialogic activity of the acknowledged subject, and the degrees of this activity. The thing and the personality (subject) as limits of cognition. Degrees of thingness and personalityness. The event-potential of dialogic cognition. Meeting.

We can locate the different situations of text interpretation within this range demarcated by Bachtin's two poles. Thus we distinguish between monologue and dialogue situations. Dialogue situations are those where text interpretation takes place in an interpersonal context with the aim of caring: caring in the sense of mental, educational or psychotherapeutic care.

Monologue situations come about where the interpreter faces the text alone: philologists, linguists, translators about to set to work on a text such as a poem, historians when faced with a document. In the absence of a dialogue partner interpretation is carried out as a monologue. Here, time is not an issue. We can interpret, rethink and reinterpret indefinitely. Unlike the dialogue situation where care and responsibility for the partner are a priority, the results of this type of interpretation have no direct and immediate influence on the person opposite. It is used primarily as a tool for scientific research. The interpreter is part of a network of social relations which demands a sense of responsibility towards the reader and faithfulness towards the text.

I am fully aware that in considering the latter a monologue situation I act in contradiction to Gadamer. Gadamer, as we know, assimilated the hermeneutic situation to that developed between two dialogue partners (though not fully). He perceives the "hermeneutic task as entering into conversation" with the text.<sup>3</sup> This metaphor may emphasise the reciprocity of interpreter and text, however, it is not a dialogue but a monologue reciprocity where the text is anthropomorphised and becomes the dialogue partner.

The participants of our working group split up into the two types of situations described above, e.g. philologists into one and psychotherapists into the other. Different interpreters complement and compensate each other, without disputing or becoming estranged. I do remember one philologist who preferred an empirical analysis of texts and thought that the philosophers were too abstract in their approach. He attended the first colloquia but left the group very soon thereafter. Most participants, however, have stayed with the group and have continued their co-operation. Their difference became a factor of unity. Or, to speak with Thomas Mann who said: "difference brings forth comparison, comparison brings forth restless-

<sup>2</sup> BACHTIN, M. (1986): *K filosofskim osnovam gumanitarnych nauk* (Philosophische Grundlage der Geisteswissenschaften), in BACHTIN, M. (1979): *Die Ästhetik des Wortes*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 149-167.

<sup>3</sup> GADAMER, G. (1960): *Wahrheit and Methode*. Tübingen, 290 ff

ness, restlessness brings forth wonder, wonder brings forth admiration, yet admiration requires exchange and unification."<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, we are given the impression that those interpreters, who use dialogue interpretation for practical purposes, admire the so-called "theoreticians", who practice monologue interpretation for the purpose of research, and they in turn admire the so-called "practicians". One might say that in the course of a colloquium the three separate aspects of interpretation — under the old definition of pietism these are: *subtilitas intelligendi* (understanding), *subtilitas explicandi* (explanation) and *subtilitas applicandi* (applying) — come together and regain their lost unity.

In the second type of colloquia, difference also contributed significantly towards cohesion. As mentioned before, the emphasis in the latter eleven colloquia was no longer placed on the methodology of interpretation but rather on the contents of texts, on "recognising oneself in a text".

Thus, the balance within the group was shifted: those who preferred the analysis of text architecture were somewhat disappointed while others received new stimuli. The topics of the colloquia — forgiveness, thankfulness, wonder, etc. — refer to interpersonal relations, which are important in everyday life but are not given high priority from the point of view of psychology. Depth psychology again has neglected these positive attitudes in favour of the so-called dark side of man. This has led to the widespread opinion that "light, explained from the dark side, no longer exists. This is a regrettable mistake which Freud himself fell prey to. Light needs shadow, good needs evil and vice versa."<sup>5</sup>, as C. G. Jung writes.

In recognition of the optimistic attitude of the first Gestalt psychologists, who we might refer to as "teachers of respect" I chose the above mentioned topics to create a more balanced image of man than that given to us by depth psychologists or "teachers of suspicion". The participants of our colloquia, psychoanalysts in particular, were more than happy to accept such topics. One therapist said: "when I first started thinking of forgiveness I felt I was staring at a black hole. The term forgiveness is so tainted by ethical and religious meanings, it seemed strange to locate it in an environment of psychotherapy. In therapy forgiveness hardly ever gets a mention." Another analyst said: "the term wonder added a new perspective to my work, I found that very stimulating."

We can say that the main factor contributing towards co-operation in this type of colloquium, along with a common interest for new topics, is the ability to create a holistic image of man made up of different perspectives. In the face of this "whole", scientists need to become aware of their own, individual limitations. Multi-disciplinary co-operation can help to promote

that awareness in the sense of the Latin "con-scientia", where scientists temporarily leave their own perspective aside to assume that of others. The aim of this exercise is to arrive at a position which Nikolaus von Kues refers to as "docta ignorantia": that of the research scientist, who has recognised the hidden and inapproachable side of his discoveries.<sup>6</sup>

Certain steps are required to arrive at such a position, which Max Wertheimer studied in detail in his analysis of productive thinking: Operations of recentering: transition from a one-sided view to the centering required by the objective structure of the situation:

A change of meaning of the parts — and of the vectors — in accordance with their structural place, role and function;

A trend to go straight to fundamentals, to face the issue honestly, and to draw the consequences.

I want to remark that the feature of straightness, honesty, sincerity, does not seem peripheral in such a process ... even seemingly more intellectual processes involve a human attitude — the willingness to face issues, to deal with them frankly, honestly and sincerely.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, I want to place special emphasis on the terms "nature of the subject" and "objective requirements" coined by Wertheimer. Given the diversity of human nature, each one of us must renounce "autocracy" of our own discipline in order to accept multi-disciplinary contacts. The aim of multi-disciplinarity is not to create an anthropological mega-discipline or "eclecticism". We have outlived the times of one great synthesis established by a single thinker. Real anthropology that wants to take into account the nature of the subject is not created by one "solo voice" but a "choir" of different, monologue and dialogue situations. This best reflects the spirit of our meeting.

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<sup>4</sup> MANN, Th. *Die vertauschten Köpfe*. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, Bd. VIII, 713.

<sup>5</sup> JUNG, C.G.. *Die Probleme der modernen Psychotherapie*, G.W. Bd. XVI, 69.

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<sup>6</sup> NIKOLAUS VON KUES, *Apologia doctae ignorantiae*: §6: "[...] id reperire, quod inventum absconditur et remanet occultum et inaccessibile [...] aliud non esse quam docta ignorantia."

<sup>7</sup> WERTHEIMER, M. (1945): *Productive Thinking*, New York, 179.