

*Charles Brown*

## THE DIALECTICS OF IDENTITY AND DIFFERENCE

### *ABSTRACT*

This paper traces the history of the International Society for Universal Dialogue by reflecting on the tension between universalism and pluralism and the underlying dialectics of identity and difference. This paper argues that this tension is the source of creativity and that dialogue, by its refusal to privilege one over the other, keeps this tension alive as it seeks ever better formulations and understandings of goodness, justice, and truth. This paper argues that philosophers are duty bound to honor their ideals and values through the sort of reflection and dialogue that features critique, clarification, and renewal of those ideals and values. Only through this process (critique, clarification, and renewal) do those values remain bright and vibrant.

**Keywords:** Critique, clarification, and renewal, pluralism, universalism, dialogue, identity, difference.

Welcome to the XI World Congress of the International Society for Universal Dialogue.

The International Society for Universal Dialogue was founded in Warsaw in November of 1989. Today we return to our birthplace. Our presence here is our homecoming and celebration. This is a moment to reflect on our past, to recall our guiding values, and to imagine and to re-imagine our future.

Among those guiding values is ISUD's commitment to promote philosophical discourse aimed at the realization of a decent, peaceful, and just world order. We wish to promote inter-cultural dialogue as a means to cultivate the highest and richest human values in all dimensions of life.

As ISUD members, and as philosophers, we are duty bound to honor these ideals and to infuse this homecoming and celebration with the spirit of philosophy. As philosophers we do not honor any ideals and values by an uncritical acceptance. As philosophers we honor these ideals and values through reflection and dialogue that features critique, clarification, and renewal of those ideals and

values. Only through this process (critique, clarification, and renewal) do those values remain bright and vibrant. Only through this process do they remain the source of creativity.

### HISTORY AND MYTHOLOGY OF ISUD

Please allow me to reflect on a small part of some of the history and perhaps some of the mythology of our society. In doing so, I will try to say something about the guiding telos of our society and a few words about the theme of our congress. I will speak from my own personal point of view.

In the spring of 1989 I was a young philosopher seeking to establish a research record—wanting to contribute to the great enterprise of philosophical thinking. I came across a Call for Papers—an invitation to present a paper at the “International Symposium of Universalism.” This was intriguing for both philosophical and political reasons. Poland was undergoing a dramatic transformation and political revitalization. The eyes of the world were on Poland.

This call for papers was also philosophically intriguing. The notion of “universalism” seemed (to me) contrary to the prevailing ethos of pluralism within contemporary philosophy. This ethos of pluralism sought to articulate and celebrate differences; differences that the voices of pluralism claimed were silenced by traditional universalist ideology.

Traditional universalism had been the target of widespread philosophical critique. It was common to hear that traditional universalism called for a single worldview for all that always ended in dogmatic views of truth, freedom, and justice—dogmatic views that were asserted to be final and complete. Traditional forms of universalism came to be seen as threats to swallow up all cultural differences, and if necessary, to do so by power or violence. Critics of such traditional forms of universalism argued that within such dogmatic worldviews rational discourse was reduced to a monologue among the voices of power. The result of such a monologue expressed itself as colonialism, Euro-centrism, and other justifications of elitist power.

As a remedy for such dogmatism the ethos of pluralism sought to articulate, defend, and celebrate long silenced differences—differences silenced by the hegemony of the cult of identity. And yet this call for papers seemed to suggest a new form of universalism—one that began and ended in dialogue—a new form of universalism that offered resistance to the temptation of premature epistemic closure and the corresponding attitude of universal legislative authority.

I arrived in Warsaw after an overnight train-ride from Berlin. I was anxious to experience the political transformation that had stunned and inspired much of the world. A spirit of renewal was in the air and in the streets—a spirit of energy, creativity, and hope—a sense of a historical moment too young and too fresh to be completely understood.

Over the course of the next week the International Symposium on Universalism concluded with the founding of the International Society for Universalism. The society was founded to promote philosophical research aimed not at the establishment of a final and rigid ideology—not a regime of final truth, but rather a cooperative search for meaning and shared values—meaning and values to be forged through the gentle and forgiving spirit of dialogue.

This admittedly idealist vision was tempered with a touch of realism, a sense of relevancy and admiration for the courage of the Polish people and their non-violent and indisputably world-historical and peaceful political transformation.

As you can imagine, this was a thrilling and philosophically challenging event for a young and idealist philosopher. Surrounded by an impressive cast of global scholars our deliberations had a sense of historical importance—a sense made more real on my return trip home that began with a 5 AM train ride back to Berlin.

On my arrival I quickly discovered that the gates of the Berlin wall had opened a few hours earlier. I was privileged to watch hundreds, perhaps thousands, of celebrating East Berliners stream through those infamous gates. They were greeted with flowers, chocolates, hugs, and smiles. It was a good day. It was the best of times. That day too was a homecoming.

Twenty-seven years later we return to Warsaw. This is our homecoming. This is our time for celebration and reflection. To walk through the streets of Warsaw today is to be reminded of both the power and the necessity of rebirth. The story of Warsaw is, among other things, a story of rebirth. This is an ancient story; rebirth and renewal are everyone's story, it is every culture's story. It is a universal story. I leave it to you to decide whether this story is best told through logos or mythos.

## IDENTITY AND DIFFERENCE

While we remain faithful to the original inspiration of our society we have not rigidly clung to the first formulation of our founding principles. By remaining faithful to the spirit and ethos of our founding ideals we have entered into an on-going great conversation among differing points of view with a vision toward developing richer and deeper understandings of freedom, justice, and human solidarity.

Along the way we have changed, our society has changed. The International Society for Universalism evolved into the International Society for Universal Dialogue. The resulting emphasis on dialogue alongside universality was not a rejection of our founding ideals but perhaps a dialectical movement toward working out the promise within that original vision.

And yet, as is always true, we must ask ourselves what has been gained and what has been lost? If philosophers are to be, as Edmund Husserl expressed it, “the functionaries of mankind” if we are to honor our commitment and our re-

sponsibility as philosophers we must constantly seek to critique and renew our most basic ways of thinking.

There has always been tension between the concepts of dialogue and universality. This tension is a reflection of a deeper tension at the heart of the dialectics between identity and difference. This is a tension we dare not resolve. This tension is the source of creativity. This tension is the source of renewal.

Those forms of universalism that place too much emphasis on our shared identities too often blind us to our significant differences. Those forms of pluralism that place too much emphasis on our differences too often blind us to our commonalities and shared identities. We want a universalism that does not sacrifice particularity for sameness. We want a pluralism that does not sacrifice universality for difference.

### IDEALS AND PRACTICE OF DIALOGUE

Dialogue works to keep the tension between identity and difference alive and vibrant as it seeks ever better formulations and understandings of goodness, justice, and truth. To best practice this ideal of dialogue, we must recognize the limitations of any absolute, single point of view. We must remember that any conceptual framework powerful enough to reveal something of importance will also conceal something of importance.

To best practice this ideal, we interpret the point of view of the other as generously as our sense of rationality will allow. We must be open to any kernel of truth that may be found in the standpoint of the other. Being open to finding some truth in the standpoint of the other and, perhaps more importantly, having the resolve to practice this ideal, seems to be a necessary condition for the sort of exchange of ideas that leads us not only towards peace and solidarity but also towards more encompassing and more stable forms of truth.

We must also recognize that the willingness to entertain and possibly adopt some or all of the other's perspective is more than a merely academic exercise. Critical reflection on one's own core assumptions about self and world comes with a risk; the risk of destabilizing not only one's worldview but also one's own sense of self-identity.

But with this risk comes the promise of critique, clarification, and renewal; the promise of a renewal of our worldviews and our sense of self-identity. Dialogue is not an adversarial debate that seeks to inform and set the other straight. Dialogue involves the willingness to work with and to learn from others. Dialogue is a cooperative attempt to reason together. And yet, in much of the everyday practice of our discipline, in much of the everyday practice of philosophy, we offer up argumentative discourse that quickly becomes competitive and confrontational. In the everyday language of popular American speech—"Dialogue Ain't Easy." And yet, we are here today to practice this ideal.

## **TROUBLE AHEAD—TROUBLE BEHIND**

The story of our society, whether mythos or logos, is a story in progress. The ending is not yet written. It may still end in tragedy. Although our society was founded in the spirit of renewal, in the optimism that one day we shall overcome, in the hope that the children of differences will one day walk side-by-side in the spirit of peace and intercultural cultural cooperation, we are not there yet.

The optimism and hope that a new era of globalization would lead to a global village has turned into skepticism and fear. We gather here today in the still lingering shadow of a great summit of military power. We gather here today in the face of rising temperatures, ubiquitous pollution, and the threat of mass extinction. We gather here today in the face of growing religious fanaticism, rising nationalism, and in the midst of a global culture stained by the cult of competition and greed. The result brings us rising economic inequality both within and between nations.

We gather here today in an era where violence has become not only a tool of statecraft but one more personal choice. We gather here today as the world grieves for these choices. We grieve with the world for those choices. And yet, we gather here today to renew our ideals and values in our moment of history. We gather here today for a Summit of Dialogue.

## **WE ARE ALL IN IT TOGETHER**

Each of you have contributed to, each of you have made this congress possible by offering to share your work and your ideas. This is a forum for your work and your ideas. What we accomplish here, over the next five days, will depend on our practices.

Our commitment to dialogue reflects a basic sentiment shared by nearly all—that in some big way we are all in it together—the traditional virtues of loyalty, compassion, honesty, generosity, fairness, all reflect a sense of solidarity with others—a sense of common purpose—a sense of a common good.

- Whatever else dialogue may be it must be rooted in a sense of shared purpose.
- It must aim to cultivate intellectual insight, imagination, social responsibility, and the struggle for justice.
- As philosophers we must not only promote responsible and enlightened public discourse on the defining issues of our times we must also practice and model such discourse to the public.
- Our moment in history demands this of us.

Dialogue is neither a spectator sport nor a solidary venture. I invite you to join with others in this project of mutual critique, clarification, and renewal.

I invite you to enjoy yourself, to meet old and new friends, to enjoy this wonderful city, this place, this time.

I invite you to open yourselves to the possibilities of dialogue—to the possibilities of a cooperative and rational renewal of our most basic ways of understanding world and self. We can only hope that we will demonstrate the required wisdom, courage, and leadership for our moment in history.

And with this in mind, I hereby declare the XI World Congress of the International Society for Universal Dialogue to be open.

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