

## Response to Review of *Human Dialogue*

Michael H. Mitias

---

I shall begin my response with two acknowledgments. First, I would like to express my gratitude to Professor Annette Holba for inviting me to examine the present review of my book, *Human Dialogue*, and respond to it with the freedom to write a short or long rejoinder to the reviewer. This invitation is a notable feature of the dialogical nature of philosophy, which characterizes the growth and development of Hellenic, Hellenistic, medieval, and modern philosophy. It is, moreover, a vibrant expression of the dialogical nature of our humanity. It accentuates the fact that the truth of the meaning of existence in general, and human existence in particular, is attainable through dialogue. As far as I am aware, no major philosopher, since the rise of philosophy as a type of inquiry in the hands of the pre-Socratics, has contemplated the nature of the universe and human life independently of the insights, visions, and ideas of contemporary and past philosophers. The great achievements of human civilization have always been precious fruits of dialogue, not only between inquirers within the same academic discipline but also between inquirers in different academic disciplines. The various types of knowledge are interrelated because the reality they seek to understand or explain is organically interconnected.

Surprisingly, yet admirably, the expansion in breadth and depth of human knowledge during the past few decades has tended to make dialogue between the various types of inquiries, even within the same type, difficult and sometimes impossible. We can observe this development in the realm of philosophy, whose branches and sub-branches have proliferated in terms of quality and quantity. A large number of philosophers these days conduct their inquiries with minimal dialogical cooperation with other philosophers and philosophical points of view. One frequently encounters long bibliographies or notes at the end of a philosophical piece without a serious or clear indication of dialogue with other philosophical works or philosophers. I tend to think that philosophy comes to life as a living moment of insight, understanding, revelation, or inspiration in the context of dialogue. My gratitude to Professor Holba originates from my appreciation for her effort to create a dialogical *moment par excellence* with the author of the present review. It is a moment in which we stand before and with each other in the light of human presence.

Second, I would like to convey my gratitude to the reviewer of *Human Dialogue*. It is deeply gratifying to learn that one's philosophical achievement is analytically and thoughtfully evaluated. This is an instantiation of "rational conversation." Can we either ignore or underestimate the value of this interchange as a paradigmatic occasion not only for this but also for the possibility of a meaningful human encounter, one that not only cheers the heart but also inspires the mind to grow in understanding and appreciation of the human good? Vélez Ortiz has comprehended and articulated the essential features of my conception of human dialogue. She accomplished this task with a knowledge of the metaphysical and historical assumptions that underlie the background of the argument in this book. I value this orientation, especially in the current period of the development of human culture, because the more our life increases in complexity—a feature that seems obvious to any investigator of the development of human history—the less scholars and ordinary people have time to immerse themselves adequately in the fine accomplishments of the human spirit in the various domains of human experience.

My response to the review of *Human Dialogue* consists of one extended comment only because Vélez Ortiz did not raise objections to my argument. She spotlighted the need to explore the application of my conception of human dialogue to a most pressing problem we face in our democracy and the various democracies of the world, viz., the tendency of the government to suppress the possibility of peaceful demonstration or riot as a form of rational conversation in our attempt to solve problems or resolve controversies. Is social protest, or riot, a form of rational conversation? Does the government have a right, one founded in the constitution, to suppress the right to free expression of opinion or to place certain contentious questions at the table of public debate, i.e., rational conversation?

If I am to take the fundamental insight into the democratic ideal, spirit, and practice of pioneers such as Locke, Rousseau, Hegel, Mill, and Dewey into serious consideration, and I do, I can say that public protest and public riots are, when necessary, forms of rational conversation. I say "when necessary" because, following Hegel, all political, social, or religious change should be accomplished legally. I here assume that law is the highest expression of rational nature and because it is grounded in the constitution. I shall now explicate my response to Vélez Ortiz's review. This explication consists of two parts. The first is a brief discussion of the metaphysical assumptions that underlie the possibility of human dialogue, and the second is a discussion of the dynamics of political conversation. The first part is an implicit support of the validity of my response.

## Assumptions

If we grant that rational conversation is the essence of human nature, it follows that in all its modes of being, the basis of human communication between human beings individually and collectively is dialogue, mainly because the language human beings speak and the means of realizing their aims and projects is the

language of reason. If this distinctive feature of human nature prevails in human life, there will not be any violence. Rational behavior is essentially peaceful. But not surprisingly, human nature in general and the power of intellect in its capacity as a cognitive and evaluative faculty is given to the world not as a ready-made reality or as perfect in the way it exists but as a potentiality for realization in experience according to the ideal implicit in its structure.

As the highest manifestation of human nature, the human mind, or reason, can, to a reasonable extent, envision or discern the logic and dynamics of the primary impulses that point to aims or values inherent in the core or spark that gives rise to humanity. However, the material and spiritual conditions for the realization of these aims or values are not readily available to them. The universe, as we know it, is essentially a process—a creative advance in time. Rational nature is not an integral element of this process, though it is unique, acts according to laws implicit in its structure, and is anchored in and dependent on its continually emerging conditions and possibilities. Accordingly, the growth and development of human nature is an ever-present ideal and challenge. This claim is based on the assumption that the impulse to human life is the principal impulse in human nature. It underlies the rise and development of science, art, philosophy, religion, technology, and various kinds of social organization. We necessarily speak of human growth and development because the spiritual and material conditions of human life are constantly changing.

Nature is continually changing, and so are human beings. The question that hovers over the fringe of human consciousness is how we can grow and develop in the midst of this continual change. The laws of nature govern the existence and life of natural objects, but the existence and life of human beings are, to a large extent, governed by the laws that emanate from the dynamic structure of human nature. However, this nature is, as I have just indicated, given as a potentiality in need of realization in an imperfect human and natural environment. The givenness of this reality is the source of all types of conflict between human beings. Since the laws of nature do not directly govern human life, the question necessarily arises: How should human beings settle their conflicts, disagreements, and misunderstandings, given the fact that human beings are different from each other intellectually, affectionally, and volitionally? It would seem that reason is, or should be, the most appropriate means of meeting these and similar types of problems mainly because it is their essential nature. It is the power and the source of the light they indispensably need to meet their needs as human beings. If reason can be the source of their understanding of themselves and pursuing their life projects, it certainly can be the means of solving their problems and meeting their needs rationally. Resorting to any other kind of means in situations of conflict, misunderstanding, or discontent will necessarily lead to violence and harm. In principle, acting contrary to the principles of reason is tantamount to acting contrary to the laws inherent in human nature. It implies existing in a state of self-contradiction or self-diremption.

The rise and development of human civilization testify to the primacy and creative powers of reason. However, this development has never been and will never be clear, smooth, or perfect because members of the human species, which

exist as potentialities in need of realization, live under various geographical, cultural, religious, material, and spiritual conditions. Accordingly, the prevalence of the power of reason is necessarily variable. It is not always the power that governs their lives; on the contrary, the impulse to personal and communal survival prevails. We may attribute the causes of this to ignorance; to lack of moral, intellectual, social, artistic, and religious education; or to the overwhelming power of biological survival. In this context, we should recall Socrates' dictum that ignorance is the source of all evil. The wisdom implied in this dictum is that the source of the power underlying the emergence of the European Renaissance and the mosaic of different Renaissance movements worldwide during the past few centuries attests to the creative and constructive power of reason. One may reflect with wonder about the miraculous aspect of this power. If we assume a moral or metaphysical attitude, we can say that the gradual triumph of reason in history is founded on the inherent goodness of reason: human nature is intrinsically good. Why should the scientist, theologian, philosopher, technologist, artist, and enlightened citizen—the forces that propel history forward—continue their endeavors despite human adversities and failures if the essence of those endeavors is not fundamentally good and constructive? How can cosmologists, philosophers, scientists, and artists strive to create, and how can social reformers strive to improve human conditions, if reason is not a power of goodness? Is this power, or the language it speaks, not the language that has underpinned the progress of history over the past four millennia?

## **Discussion**

There is no need for me to belabor the gist of the preceding introductory remark. Suffice it to say that the only effective language we speak in our endeavor to grow and develop as human beings is the language of reason—the power by which we should conceive and seek to realize our life projects individually and communally. The language that undermines human wellbeing and progress is the language of violence in its political, religious, social, institutional, and individual forms, that is, selfishness, greed, prejudice, bigotry, lust for power, and naïve hedonism. I believe that the language spoken by various individuals and communities worldwide in their endeavor to flourish should be the language of reason, namely, dialogue. The means of learning and using this language is the cultivation of human character.

Accordingly, dialogue should be the means of resolving conflicts, interacting socially, and meeting our needs as individuals, groups, families, and institutions such as governments, religions, cultures, and any type of human association. In a world plagued by ignorance, poverty, selfishness, and crude survival, the rational impulse in human nature cannot help but wonder: under what constructive conditions is dialogue as the primary means of human communication throughout the world possible? How can we translate the logic and skill of rational conversation among people who differ in their individual, cultural, religious, political, economic, and social orientations into an effective

means of rational conversation? Philosophers have been exploring the extent, implications, feasible ways, and existential conditions under which this translation is possible. It is important to emphasize that rational conversation is lacking not only in the political domain of human life but also in the spheres of family, school, workplace, and religious institutions—in short, in every medium of human interaction. How can human beings transcend their subjectivities and interact with others rationally from the standpoint of their shared humanity?

The question of how the language of reason can be translated into a way of productive communication in all spheres of human life was perceptively and rightly spotlighted in Vélez Ortiz's review of *Human Dialogue*. She introduced into the realm of political and philosophical discourse a neglected yet important mode of rational conversation at the social and political level of communication, namely, whether political or social protest, or riot, can be a form of rational conversation. This question is not entirely theoretical or whimsical; it brings into relief one of the most important conditions necessary for the possibility of democracy as a way of life. It arises from the bosom of the democratic process as it unfolds in the ongoing process of the development of democracy in the contemporary world. It springs as a response to the tendency to suppress the right to peaceful demonstration, which is essential to the very being of democracy, along with the right to freedom of speech and belief. In her words, "As legacy media frets over the fascist future that awaits the nation with the likely re-election of Donald Trump in November, the Biden administration, the Supreme U.S. Court, and college campuses all over the nation continue to strangle the right to protest inside and outside college campuses all over the nation." This type of strangulation is a suppression of the voice of reason and the need for rational conversation. One cannot help but recall, as Vélez Ortiz did, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s argument that a riot is the language of the unheard: "If Dr. King is right, and a riot is the language of the unheard, then it stands to reason that a protest, and even a riot, are, in fact, a grave lack of listening, mutual understanding, and acknowledgment in the social conversation."

A public protest is an audible language, and so is a riot. The first is voiced directly, and the second indirectly. The first is communicated verbally and peacefully, and the second is communicated behaviorally as a form of praxis. The first is a peaceful and collective request for the restoration of a justifiable right, and the second is an aggressive demand for the restoration of a neglected or suppressed right. However, both originate from a situation in which the voice of reason is silenced. Although they are different types of conversation, both are morally justifiable. We should always remember that a law, principle, or any standard of action is justifiable on moral grounds. Thus, a peaceful demonstration or a riot is *justifiable inasmuch* as they are founded on a rational principle or moral concern. I say "inasmuch as" because not all riots or public demonstrations are morally or rationally justifiable. Sometimes, they are organized by manipulative powers that may serve selfish ideologies or the interests of politically motivated or ambitious individuals or groups. In order to be justifiable, the riot or peaceful demonstration should be justified by rational means. I say "rational" because they are peremptory demands of the human essence. Besides, in its capacity as intellect,

reason is the source and judge of the truth of any type of knowledge not only because it is essentially cognitive but also because it is capable of transcendence; it can act autonomously and objectively. The obvious alternative to reason is force. However, the application of force that is not justified by a rational or moral principle is either arbitrary or a form of violence. It is at least indifferent to human wellbeing.

Now, reason does not exist abstractly, generally, or in some metaphysical space but concretely in human beings. If it speaks, and it does, it speaks through the lips of a particular human individual. What it says originates from the heart and mind. Accordingly, it expresses individual feelings, ideas, values, and desires. The question that calls for an answer is, how, or in what sense, can a crowd or a conglomeration of unique and independent individuals speak with one voice—the voice of reason? My immediate answer to this question is that they can speak and act as a collective subject. The basis of this kind of subject is their belief in or commitment to a set of morally justifiable rights or demands. In a demonstration or a riot, they stand on the grounds of such rights or demands. The voice with which they speak issues from this ground. The fundamental assumption that underlies the possibility of a crowd as a collective subject is the unity of their humanity and the beliefs or values they uphold. Even when one person speaks on behalf of the crowd, she acts as a collective subject because her speech is an expression of the general will of the crowd as a community united by specific demands, concerns, or ideas. Does the president, king, prime minister of a country, or the highest official of any institution not act as a collective subject in her capacity as an executive or representative of her country or institution?

Whether in the form of a peaceful demonstration or a riot, the members of the crowd act as a collective subject. A riot differs from a peaceful demonstration in that it is a loud, decisive, and hopelessly neglected right. This type of expression is justified by the fact that (1) it arises from a demand of our humanity and (2) the conditions of its communication are necessary.