

Human Dialogue (volume 5 of Towards a Universal Civilization series), Michael H. Mitias, Peter Lang, 2023, 202 pages, ebook/paperback \$56.95

Reviewed by Melba Vélez Ortiz

As I write this review, the American Civil Liberties Union reports that the US Supreme Court has declined a protestor's rights case that many describe as effectively abolishing the right to mass protest in three states: Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas. As legacy media frets over the fascist future that awaits the nation with the likely reelection of Donald Trump in November, the Biden administration, the US Supreme Court, and college campuses all over the nation continue to strangle the right to protest inside and outside campuses. For example, ABC News, the Associated Press, and Democracy Now! report that pro-Palestinian protests are sweeping US college campuses following mass arrests at Columbia, NYU, and Yale University. Even the *Chronicle of Higher Education* is posing the question: "When are appeals to campus safety an excuse to suppress speech?" (Hicks 2024). Amidst this clamping down on US citizens' First Amendment right to assembly, Michael H. Mitias's *Human Dialogue* in Peter Lang's *Towards a Universal Civilization* series provides a timely reminder that human dialogue is more than a fundamental feature of our humanity; it is its very ontic essence.

To be clear, Mitias does not address the question of whether mass protests can be considered a form a rational human dialogue, but the idea that human reality and human excellence is tied to our ability to anchor our humanity in conversation, to the author of this review, seems relevant to a critique of the current repressive environment that permeates US culture. If Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (1968) was right that a riot is the language of the unheard, then it stands to reason that protests and even riots are, in fact, evidence of a grave lack of listening, mutual understanding, and acknowledgement in the social conversation. Put differently, if we follow Mitias's argument in this book, such a coordinated and comprehensive suppression of speech is also an affront to our collective humanity.

Mass protests, in particular, signal a profound discontent that, rather than being addressed through human dialogue, becomes punishable by law. To protest, etymologically, means to assert publicly, and on this basis a protest can be

considered a collective utterance made by a collective subject that, when reciprocated and engaged, can be transformed into dialogue. Thus, while Mitias does not treat the subject of political and communicative repression in *Human Dialogue*, he presents the thesis that to be a human being is to participate in an ongoing, dynamic, unfolding, continuous conversation with other humans and the surrounding world. If this is the case, then any measure that restricts and prosecutes human dialogue (even in the form of a peaceful mass protest) becomes relevant to a discussion of the repercussions of his argument.

Mitias (2023) himself describes this book as an elucidation and defense of four main propositions: (a) that human nature is essentially rational; (b) that rational nature is a conversation; (c) that as the essential fabric of human nature, reason exists as a potentiality in the formal organization of the human body; and finally, (d) that at the individual and collective levels, humanity grows and develops in the medium of conversation (17). In many ways, *Human Dialogue* feels like a culmination of the meticulous and sustained work Mitias has done on universalism as a metaphilosophy since 2008. The philosophical project of this book is unequivocally normative and universalist in its locus, much like philosophical predecessors such as G. W. F. Hegel, Karl Marx, Socrates, and contemporary communication ethicists such as Clifford G. Christians. Universalism is often the target of unfair criticisms of rigidity, ahistoricity, and hegemony, but Mitias easily avoids these superficial criticisms by first searching for and then anchoring his ontology on a feature of human experience that is indeed common to us all: human conversation. In other words, Mitias locates the meaning of human existence in conversation because, in his analysis, it is this human event that is most comprehensive and fundamental to human nature, as all human cultures, institutions, and, importantly, ideals result from engaging it. Unlike Kant, who proposed that all human beings are rational, Mitias argues that rationality is the product of human conversation that comprises three distinct faculties or capacities: the intellect, affection, and volition. In this way, Mitias veers from Kant's formulation by positing that rational conversation, as the instantiation of the ideal of human rationality, results from active engagement with the three aforementioned faculties, not a human reality given a priori or before experience.

Mitias's thesis is that human essence (ontology) is a rational conversation. He premises this proposition first and foremost in the claim that human nature is essentially rational. Mitias does not mean "rational" in the formal, epistemologically rational way of continental philosophy but in a novel way that is interwoven with both the affective and the volitional. In other words, while Mitias's concept of rationality does align with formal epistemological rationalism insofar as he believes, in his first premise, that reality is knowable through reason and that reason should and does take precedence over intuition or sense perception, he breaks with formal rationalism conceptually by abandoning the certainty to which rationalism lays claim in favor of a version of rational dialogue that functions primarily as the individual and collective vehicle by which to discover a co-constructed reality. Thus, by offering a revised concept of human rationality, Mitias moves to defend his second premise: that rational nature is a conversation.

This second premise should not be confused with Aristotle's answer to human ontology. Aristotle describes human beings as speaking animals and consequently locates the nature of our humanity in our ability to speak. Mitias takes this idea a step further by asserting that to be human is to be in conversation, not just in speech. The implications of this shift are significant. Whatever specialness human beings have, for Mitias, is a result of their ability not just to express themselves symbolically, but to understand themselves as ever-changing and dynamic. To be in conversation, Mitias says, in any type of human dialogue or conversation means that "the dialogist should act as a human being and treat the other dialogist as a human being" (8). This aligns with Immanuel Kant's ([1797] 2017) Formula of Humanity (FoH), in which he theorizes that human beings' inherent rationality means that one should "[s]o act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means" (67, 4:429). In the FoH, Kant addresses all human interaction, while Mitias is laser-focused on dialogue (i.e., conversation), because he posits that the defining feature of our humanity is conversation, not rationality qua rationality.

In sum, the preceding is a nuanced point that must be appreciated as such. While Mitias aligns with formal rationalism in his attribution of reason as the ultimate arbiter of what is true and false, Mitias is equally insistent that truth is an ideal that is co-created in dialogue, rejecting the finality and certitude of continental rationalism (e.g., Spinoza). He defines dialogue as a conversation between two or more persons engaged in an ongoing process of discovery. Therefore, following Socrates, Mitias (2023) understands dialogue (and conversation) as art and a necessary feature for the advancement of human civilization (252).

Mitias's third premise is that reason, as the essential fabric of human nature, exists as a potentiality in the formal organization of the human body. Here Mitias is more or less in alignment with formal rationalism insofar as the human intellect, and morality as an extension of that intellect, takes precedence over sense perception. In this way, Mitias delves into the epistemological aspects of his thesis. To know is not to intuit or to perceive through our senses (all located in the body). To reduce reality to sense perception is to confine human reality to that of another species of animal. Animals operate by instinct; humans are pure potentiality. In other words, *what is* is not a given but a co-creation between cognizing, emotional, and willful beings who treat each other as inherently valuable co-creators or embodied minds.

Lastly, Mitias puts forth his fourth and final premise: that at the individual and collective levels, humanity grows and develops in the medium of conversation. This is, in my view, a hopeful apex to his postulation of universal civilization. He begins the book by positing dialogue as a human event that generates power. For, unquestionably, there is power in co-creating reality. Indeed, how else could we describe the achievements with which Mitias credits human conversation? In his own words, "since human nature is the unity of the capacities of intellect, which aims at the value of truth, goodness, which aims at the value of human love or happiness, and will, which aims at the value of

freedom" (8), then human freedom itself is also dependent in great measure on our freedom to dialogue individually and collectively. This brings us back to the recent legal and institutional curtailment and strangling of the First Amendment freedom of assembly.

While Mitias promotes negotiation instead of war when dealing with cultural and religious conflict, he makes clear that negotiation is not dialogue. In his view, negotiation is more of a compromise, a give-and-take that rarely leaves involved parties satisfied, even if a given conflict can be said to be resolved through it. As mentioned earlier, Mitias insists that the ideal of truth is co-created through dialogue, not just arbitrated. With this in mind, I think it is worth asking: What are we doing as a society when we forbid our college students' ability to co-create that reality through dialogue? If we treat human reality as a finite, wholly knowable, and static reality not to be questioned or condemned, are we not also denying the very essence of our humanity? What role should dialogicians play in the promotion and defense of our right to assemble and to converse as a collectivity? *Human Dialogue* offers a hopeful and empowering view of human rationality that invites the reader to revisit the essence of who we truly are as human beings, and it does so with depth and rigor. Moreover, to the author of this review, such a vital ontology, one with broad and current explanatory power, also invites reflection about the degree to which our most powerful social, pedagogical, legal, and political institutions value or hinder our individual and collective (even mass) ability to dialogue in these troubled times.

Melba Vélez Ortiz, PhD, studies in the areas of communication ethics and global environmental communication. Her work examines the ways in which the long-term success of conservation efforts depends on fundamental shifts in cultural values, aesthetic and moral communication, and shared understandings of how the individual fits into social and ecological communities. In addition, Vélez Ortiz has researched and published in the area of Latin-American/Caribbean/Latina-o philosophy and intellectual history. She has published numerous articles and book chapters in multiple disciplines, such as writing studies, environmental communication, Latin American philosophy, and communication ethics. In 2020, her book Maatian Ethics in a Communication Context was published by Routledge, and in 2021, Kendall-Hunt published Communication Ethics: Activities for Critical Thinking and Reflection, a book she co-authored with Spoma Jovanovic, Tammy Swenson Lepper, Leeanne McManus, Robert L Ballard, Michelle A. Leavitt, and Lori Charron. Currently she is working on a manuscript titled "On Kushte (Meroitic) Rhetoric," which examines the contributions of the ancient African Kingdom of Nubia to the history of rhetoric.

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