Contemporary challenges to dialogicality

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ABSTRACT

In contrast to perspectives fragmenting individuals into elements and studying disengaged cognition, 'neutral' and 'objective' knowledge, the dialogical approach is holistic, focusing on interactions and interdependencies between the Self and Others (the Ego-Alter). It studies engaged action and experience, daily knowledge, and communication in ordinary life. Interactions involve learning about and acting upon objects. Thus from the Ego-Alter as an irreducible ethical and ontological unit we arrive at the Ego-Alter-Object as an irreducible unit of dialogical epistemology. In this article I discuss two challenges to dialogical epistemology. One concerns the different degrees of commitment within the Ego-Alter-Object relationship. The second challenge refers to the replacement of the epistemological triangle the Ego-Alter-Object of knowledge by the consumerist triangle the Ego-Alter-Thing of desire. I discuss the latter challenge with respect to contemporary bureaucratization of academic and education institutions.

Keywords*: Ego-Alter, Ego-Alter-Object, Ego-Alter-Thing, ethics, bureaucratization.*

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In his life-long search to answer the question what is 'social' and 'individual', Serge Moscovici turned attention to the irreducible unit the Self and Other(s) (or the Ego-Alter) generating sense and creating meanings of social phenomena and acting upon their social reality. If life is lived as activity, and if to live means to satisfy the Self 'and Others' needs and utilities as Giambattista Vico (1744/1944) stated, or one's desires as Hegel (1807/1977) expressed it, then human interactions, too, must be concerned with needs, utilities and desires. Humans interact by learning and acting upon objects, by creating, destroying and imagining objects, and desiring the objects of others. Thus it is from the Ego-Alter as an irreducible ethical and ontological unit that we arrive at the Ego-Alter-Object as an irreducible unit of dialogical epistemology (Moscovici, 1970; 1972/2000). This triangular relationship forms the basis of the theory of social representations and the theory of innovation. In this article I shall develop some features of this epistemological relationship in terms of the dialogical approach.

THE EGO-ALTER AS AN IRREDUCIBLE ETHICAL UNIT

In contrast to perspectives fragmenting individuals into elements and studying disengaged cognition and 'neutral' information processing, the dialogical approach is holistic, focusing on interactions and interdependencies between the Self and Others, and on their engaged action and experience, daily knowledge and communication in ordinary life. This approach assumes that communication is not 'neutral' but that it is ethical. Ethics permeates all daily thinking, communicating and acting. It is based on common sense and socially shared knowledge, on moral judgements and on what should and should not be done. It affirms what humans consider as a good, just and worthwhile life, even if what for some means 'good, just and worthwhile' may be judged by others as misery, injustice, worthless, and even terror. Whatever the meaning of 'good, just and worthwhile', ethics based on dialogical capacities of the mind and on dialogical action is about the fulfilment of living (Ricoeur, 1990/1992; Taylor, 2011).

In dialogical communication there is no possibility for the Self to escape from responding to the Other, or of remaining 'neutral', because even no response is a response. Humans evaluate one another by taking into account one's own and others' perspectives; they reflect on their images and they create images of Others; they anticipate Others' actions and they act on the basis of

these anticipations (Bakhtin, 1919/1990, pp. 15-16). It is from these dialogical features of thinking, acting and communicating that we can derive challenges to the triangual relations of the Ego-Alter-Object. One challenge follows from the fact that relations between the Ego-Alter Object are not equal, and that either the Ego or the Alter could be more committed to the Object than to each other. The second challenge to this triangularity arises from consumerism, changing the Object of knowledge into a Thing to be desired or consumed, and this transformation replaces the Ego-Alter-Object by the Ego-Alter-Thing.

COMMITMENT OF THE EGO TO THE OBJECT OF KNOLWEDGE VERSUS THE EGO'S COMMITMENT TO THE ALTER

The irreducible status of the dialogical triad does not imply that relations between the three components, Ego-Alter-Object are equal, e.g. that the Self is equally committed to Others and to the Object of knowledge. Humans have different motives, desires and intentions, and depending on these they may be committed sometimes more to Objects in their life-world and sometimes to Others. For example, the Self may be motivated to find out knowledge about the Object in the life-world despite the pressure from Others to compromise or to stick to a generally accepted 'truth'. In other cases the Self may be guided by trusting Others rather than by searching for evidence concerning the Object in question.

Figure 1 indicates the degree of the Self's commitment either to the Other or to the Object. A strong commitment is expressed by a full arrow while a weak commitment is represented by a dashed arrow. In the left hand side of Figure 1 we can see a schematic presentation of a weak commitment between the Ego and Alter and a strong commitment between the Ego and Object. The right hand side represents a weak commitment between the Ego and Object and a strong commitment between the Ego and Alter.

Strong commitment to

The Object of knowledge   The Alter
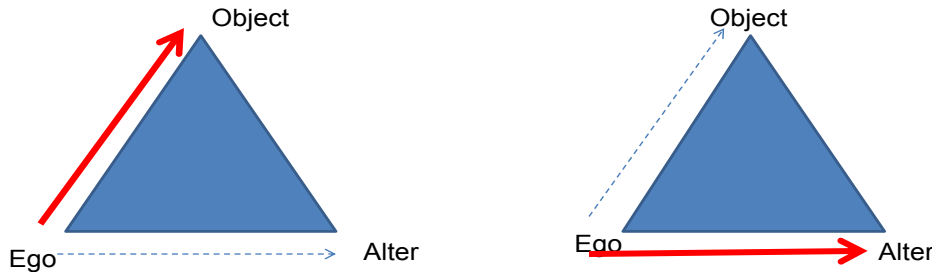

Figure 1: Different strengths of commitment between the Ego-Alter-Object

Consider some concrete examples to illustrate these different kinds of commitment. Concerning the strong commitment to the Object of knowledge, what first may come to mind, would be cases of scientists who during the course of European history pursued their ideas in societies in which the religious dogma dictated what was allowed to be the 'truth' and 'correct beliefs.' Moreover, scientists' own ideas went, in many cases, against their own religious convictions and so they struggled not only with the external pressure but also with their own religious beliefs (Marková, 2003). Fear of persecution drove the philosopher Roger Bacon in the 13th century to regret that his personal troubles and 14 years of imprisonment were caused by his 'love of science' (Brooks, 1933, p.155). In 1600, Giordano Bruno was burned to death for his cosmological beliefs that went far beyond Copernicus's heliocentric views. Thirty years later, Galileo Galilei submitted himself to the powerful Alter of the inquisition under the threat of torture and death at the stake like Bruno. At the same time during the scientific revolution of the 17th century, the mathematician and astronomer Johannes Kepler found it difficult to resolve the conflict between his personal knowledge (the Ego) and the religious dogma (the Alter) with respect to the movement of planets (the Object). He finally coped with the problem by upholding

his own discovery while accommodating a part of the religious dogma. Even in the 19th century Charles Darwin feared persecution for his discoveries and at the same time he experienced conflicts with his own religious beliefs.

Let us now consider a case where the commitment of the Ego towards the Alter is much stronger than that of the Ego towards the Object of knowledge. Such situation can be represented by the mystique and incontestable faith in the Communist Party in revolutionary Bolsheviks in the Soviet Union during the nineteen twenties and thirties. Numerous cases of the total faith in the Party have been shown in historical treatises of the Soviet Union as well as in novels. Among these revolutionaries we can remember Leon Trotsky who expressed his absolute faith in the Party: "None of us desires or is able to dispute the will of the Party. Clearly, the Party is always right ... We can only be right with and by the Party, for history has provided no other way of being in the right' (Souvarine, 1939, p. 362). Souvarine, who was a historian of the Soviet Union, commented that the old revolutionaries, working in the atmosphere of Stalinist purges and of total distrust, could cope only by giving assurances of loyalty. In a similar way Arthur Koestler (1940/2005), in his book *Darkness at Noon* encapsulates views of numerous persons of his acquaintance who had perished in Stalinist trials, states their faith in the Party: 'The Party can never be mistaken'... 'You and I can make a mistake. Not the Party. The Party, comrade, is more than you and I and a thousand others like you and I. The Party is the embodiment of the revolutionary idea in history' (Koestler, 1940/2005, p. 40). One could also refer to numerous examples of incontestable religious faith or the commitment to totalitarian regimes throughout history.

Studies of social representations of illnesses show that even if individuals have a good medical knowledge about the transmission of the HIV virus (Marková & Wilkie, 1987), their behaviour towards those infected by the virus may be, nevertheless, guided more strongly by their real or imagined Ego-Alter relations. Our research in the 1980s during the HIV/AIDS epidemic has shown that patients with haemophilia, and in particular those with severe haemophilia, had good knowledge of HIV/AIDS. By good knowledge we meant knowledge about the cause of HIV infection, spread of HIV, self- and other-protection and various medical issues that were known at the time (Marková, 1991). Nevertheless, our research has shown that patients' conduct was

guided by images of others' representations of haemophilia and HIV/AIDS – and these representations had a direct effect on their interactions with others. Many patients were very reluctant to tell other people, e.g. their employers or insurance companies, about their haemophilia for fear of being discriminated with respect to obtaining employment or drawing social benefits (Forbes et al., 1982).

These examples show that different kinds of knowing and imagining interact with one another, and that communication is never 'neutral' information processing, but is always evaluative and judgmental and is filled with tensions.

THE EGO-ALTER-OBJECT AND THE EGO-ALTER-THING

In the epistemological triangle, the Self and Other mutually construct, though asymmetrically, the Object of knowledge. Priorities given to the Object of knowledge or to social relationships rise and fall in relation to social, historical and personal circumstances. The anthropologist Louis Dumont (1977, 1986) explored the triangular relations between the Ego-Alter-Object in a different way. Dumont's point of departure was the study of the concept of the individual and of the phenomenon of individualism throughout history starting with Judeo-Christian heritage up to present days. He put forward an idea that there are two perspectives in societies, individualism and holism. Individualism that existed in traditional Christian societies was subordinated to holism. By this Dumont meant that relations between people were more valorised than relations between people and things. Although possessions had been always valued, it was the expanding market during the last three centuries that gave rise to a new discipline of economics in which money and possessions obtained a large-scale significance. Economics became associated with marketing, and it produced a modern kind of individualism, which is driven by the relations between the Self and the Thing. Desire for a Thing as a material or symbolic possession created a new kind of triangular relation, the Ego-Alter-Thing. And although the modern individual cannot get rid of his/her Ego-Alter interdependence, he/she is behaving as if that were possible, or at least, he/she is subordinating the Ego-Alter relations to those of the Ego-Thing. Dumont argues that a non-social individual, proclaiming his/her autonomy, liberty and the choice of personal values, is a feature of modern society, characterized by economic growth, technology

and greed. The epistemological triangle the Ego-Alter-Object has not disappeared, but it has often been replaced by the consumerist triangle Ego-Alter-Thing. A Thing is desired not because of its intrinsic value, but because it has a symbolic and social value.

Figure 2 represents a schema of the consumerist triangle in which the Object of knowledge is replaced by the Thing of desire. The strong commitment to the Thing of desire is represented by full arrows between the Self and the Thing of desire. Equally, there is a strong commitment between the Alter and the Thing of desire, indicating that the Thing of desire has a social and symbolic value. However, the relation between the Ego-Alter shows a weak commitment – or at least a weaker commitment than that between the Ego-Thing of desire - and is represented by a dashed arrow. Although humans probably always desired Objects of Others not only because of their material value but because of their symbolic value, the greed for Objects of desires facilitated by technological advancements has established consumerism as a new morality.
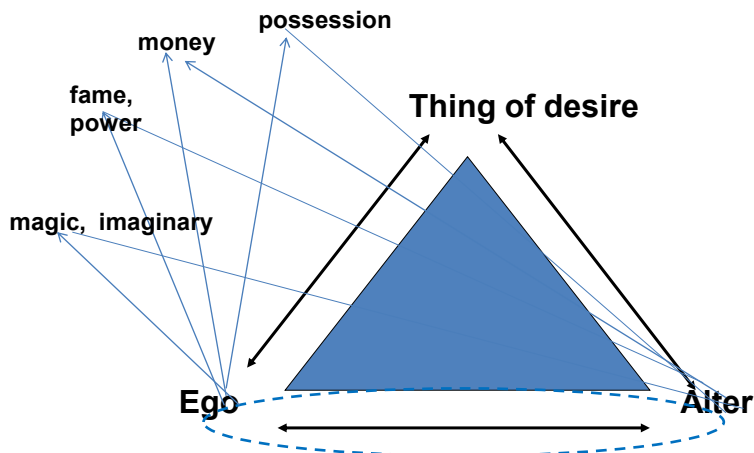
The consumerist triangle

Figure 2: The consumerist triangle

The Russian-American sociologist Pitirim Sorokin goes even further. In characterizing our age as the age of crisis (Sorokin, 1941/1992), he draws attention to the contemporary Western

sensate culture with its inner and irreconcilable contradictions and he condemns its numerous dualisms. For example, while this culture proclaims equality, in practice it generates inequalities of all kinds; it stimulates wishes and desires for a better life but at the same time it impedes its satisfaction; it emphasizes social security but in practice progressively destroys security for all: 'Our culture condemns egotisms of all kinds and boasts of the socialization and humanization of everything and everybody; in reality, it displays the unbridled greed, cruelty and egotism of individuals as well as of groups…' (Sorokin, 1941/1992, p. 197). This culture of sensate imagination is preoccupied with bodily pleasures whether sex, fashionable objects and visible symbols, which stand for the 'real world'. Sorokin refers to an enormous richness and heterogeneity of styles, all of which encourage relations of humans to objects, to the latest best-sellers and to fashions.

Although it is reasonable to argue that Sorokin's diagnosis does not apply to everybody, we may admit that the consumerist perspective has become a strong feature of modern culture, which we find in different domains of life, like health care, education, and research (on these issues see also Bauman, 1989; Minogue, 2010, among many other critics of modern culture). If in these domains the epistemic triangle the Ego-Alter-Object of knowledge and understanding is replaced by the consumerist triangle Ego-Alter –Thing of desire, then we are facing important challenges to dialogicality.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF ACADEMIC AND EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS INTO BUSINESSES

A philosopher and political scientist Leonidas Donskis (Bauman & Donskis, 2013, p. 136) notes that the saddest things for universities is that they have accepted to be modelled on business and that they have 'endorsed a logic of quick results and achievements' and attempt to react to changes in market, politics and public opinions'. He predicts that if this development continues, in a short time humanities, that have not already been deformed and demolished, will exist only in the few elite universities, because 'creators of academic junk food will sacrifice the humanities in favour of programmes (such as business, management, economics, law, political science, social work and nursing) that are in great demand (and valued precisely because they're

in great demand)' (ibid., p. 137). Donskis' prediction seems to be corroborated by the recent decision of AQA (Assessment and Qualification Alliance) Examination Board to axe anthropology A-level in England, apparently, due to lack of interests by students. In response to this decision the daily newspaper *The Observer* published an article entitled 'This is cultural barbarism' and the former director of the Royal Anthropological Institute commented that 'the reasons given …are largely those of market and costs' (Boffey, *The Observer,* 8.2. 2015).

Not surprisingly, economic and technological advancements in natural sciences have become powerful instruments of bureaucratization and technicization of social and human sciences. These technological advancements provide possibilities for easy measurements of variables and for quantifiable outcomes, which create an illusion of preciseness and serve as a means of arguments about efficiency of scientific work. In their attempts to be evaluated as scientific, social and human sciences, as well as health and education institutions, have adopted these means without raising questions about their appropriateness in specific domains. In order to be run as businesses, institutions separated themselves from individuals who form these institutions. In the UK, and more generally in many European countries, experts and academics have accepted to be directed by managers, whose training is in management, whether of supermarkets, banks, hospitals or schools, imposing upon experts bureaucratic procedures that are quantifiable and applicable to businesses in general. Results of 'scientific management' and 'evidence-based research' are applied without criticism and inner comprehension, and institutions, represented by bureaucrats punish experts for non-compliance or rebellion and so create anxiety. Anxiety has become a force in the fragmented world of bureaucratic institutions. Scientific journals compete for high 'impact factors' which, as everybody knows, are based on quoting of papers in which the scientific, moral or innovative value may play little role. The Internet bombards people with information they do not request, e.g. how many times someone looked at your papers, how many times your paper was quoted, and so on. These means of control and enforcement preclude innovation that is 'risky' and enforce professionals and researchers 'to follow the crowd' and to conform to the established ideas, however trivial they may be.

If academics are rewarded for bringing money to their departments and for publishing in journals with high 'impact factors', perhaps it is not surprising that the epistemic triangle Ego-Alter-

Object in such situations is being replaced by the consumerist triangle the Ego-Alter-Thing. If high 'impact factor' journals are those in the domains of natural sciences and neurosciences, and if research funds are primarily granted to these domains, should not human and social sciences get attached to them more closely to benefit?

The search for biological and physiological correlates of social behaviour goes back to the 19th and early 20th century (e.g. Marañon, 1924; Riddle, 1925) and contemporary technological expansions in computer simulation of the brain and techniques of neuroimaging have a tremendous impact on priorities of social research. Not surprisingly, highly prestigious journals including *Nature* and *Scientific American* bring forward sensational news that researchers have begun to uncover how the human brain determines changes in social phenomena like trust, justice, influence or generosity. Experimental studies of trust can serve as an example. Neuroeconomists like Paul Zak treat trust as a transparent phenomenon not requiring any further thought. Using an experimental task of 'the trust game' in a series of studies, Zak (see, for example, 2008) and his colleagues (Morhenn et al, 2008) have shown that oxytocin (the substance that is produced in the body of pregnant women), when administered through a nasal spray, plays a major role in increasing one's trust of others and cooperating with them. Zak's article in *Scientific American* (2008) is introduced with a persuasive claim: 'Our inclination to trust a stranger stems in large part from exposure to a small molecule known for an entirely different task: inducing labor'. Note that although Zak conducted his studies with an experimentally based 'trust game'; *Scientific American* turned this into a generalized claim about trusting strangers. In the same article a number of other papers are advertised, like 'Neuroendocrine perspectives on social attachment and love'; 'Oxytocin increases trust in humans'; 'Oxytocin is associated with human trustworthiness'; 'Oxytocin increases generosity in humans'. Bearing on this, masses of young people construct research projects requesting money from granting institutions like the British Academy in the search of trust. It does not worry these scientists that trust is a heterogeneous and a deeply cultural phenomenon and that an enormous amount of literature has explored trust in relation to spirituality, co-operation, solidarity, faith, beliefs and confidence, among other social capacities.

Equally, the use of techniques of neuroimaging makes high impact on social psychology, promising to contribute to the understanding of the brain functional behaviour as well as of complex social activities. The main aim of functional brain imaging is focused on the identification of specific regions in the brain and their temporal relationships with the performance of well-designed tasks. The end result is a detailed picture of the processing architecture of brain networks. Among topics of complex social phenomena that attract social psychologists to study brain activities is political behaviour. A special issue on social neuroscience and political psychology in the journal of *Political Psychology,* published in 2003, attempts to fulfil these aims. Social neuroscientists, Albertson and Brehm (2003, p.766) maintain that they are not searching for 'political *attitudes* in the brain so much as what kinds of political stimuli activate which *systems*' in people who are and who are not politically sophisticated. Yet despite significant technological advances in the brain research, neuroimaging does not differentiate between specific concerns of the self, that is, how people think about politics from how people think about health, economics or life and death. A celebrated American social psychologist Susan Fiske (2007) tries to localise complex social and cultural phenomena like prejudice in the brain. Yet the observation that certain regions in the brain may be associated with certain cognitive and emotional functions does not mean that by using the functional magnetic resonance imaging one can localise social constructs that are researchers' creations, such as prejudice, trust or political attitudes. Biological regions in the brain and concepts created by researchers belong to totally different kinds and cannot be mixed by some magic. But if 'big names' defend such 'findings', young students find it extremely difficult to avoid imitating them.

ON THE RESPONSIBILITY OF ACADEMICS

Thoughtless fashions in social psychology led recently a Nobel prize-winner Daniel Kahneman (2012) to issue an open letter to those who, over the last two decades have studied the phenomenon of social priming. Experiments on social priming have been trying to discover how subtle cues, linked by arbitrary assumptions, can unconsciously influence our thoughts or behaviour. For example, students are presented with words which characterize old age, like wrinkles, and following this, the researcher observed these students walking more slowly down the stairs. Students who were given descriptions of a famous professor afterwards performed

better on tests of intelligence. Such experiments have been endlessly imitated by young scholars using various kinds of arbitrary stimuli attempting to find associations between them yet, if repeated by someone else, such findings were hardly ever confirmed.

In his open letter Kahneman writes that there is a "train wreck looming" for the field, due to a "storm of doubt" about these results. These doubts were also related to the exposure of fraudulent social psychologists such as Stapel, Smeesters and Sanna, who used these priming techniques in their work. These studies are published in journals with high impact factors and students, anxious about their careers and promotions, fall into these traps. However, Kahneman does not tackle the main underlying problem: he does not raise the question that in these studies it is presupposed that humans are entities without culture and without attributing meaning – whether consciously or unconsciously. He does not question why humans in these experiments are treated like mindless objects.

From the ancient times humans have practiced a sacrifice. In ancient cultures and ancient religions humans, animals or artifacts were sacrificed in order to appease gods; the suffering of Jesus Christ has been represented as one of the fundamental sacrifices for the redemption of humanity. The Czech philosopher and dissident Jan Patočka, who died in 1977 as a consequence of long interrogation by the Communist police, wrote about a human sacrifice. He (Patočka, 1973a/1989) observed that a sacrifice in the true sense of the word presupposes a commitment to something of a higher order, whether a god, an idea, truth or self-integrity. Patočka argued that, in other words, a person makes a sacrifice for something where there is an order of being, like human versus object, or symbolic values versus matters of desire. In acting with conscience or by taking responsibility for one's action in the bureaucratized 'iron cage' institution, an academic or professional makes a sacrifice because he/she may be punished: bureaucracy prohibits free thinking, has power to prevent promotions, has power to grant promotions for compliance, and so on.

But here we have a paradox: by making a sacrifice by acting with conscience, one voluntarily gives something away (career, money), but by doing so, one gains: one enriches one's experience, preserves self-respect and integrity. In contrast, submitting oneself to bureaucratic

rules as instruments that only pretend to be scientific is not a sacrifice because the submission does not lead to any spiritual gain, only to material gains, which are usually transient and unsatisfactory in the long run. In these cases experts, researchers and teachers 'sacrifice' themselves to these practices by accepting or becoming instruments of bureaucracy themselves. This could have at least two implications. First, if individuals have not lost ethical values, then gaining material profits may be felt as a loss because they feel frustration, anger, self-disrespect, guilt or shame or they search for excuses. They are aware they are instruments of this escalation of external power and fully aware of internal conflict they create for themselves. Another possibility is that individuals have closed themselves to any spiritual values, and at least in a short-term enjoy material profit for which he betrayed their conscience. But following Patočka, if people submit themselves to power without protest, they do not make a sacrifice, but they are victims. As he notes, a sacrifice for no cause is not a sacrifice. Individuals are constantly faced with ethical dilemmas and aware of difficulties of finding solutions.

In his paper *On the principle of scientific conscience,* Patočka (1973b) reflects on the role of science in society and on the responsibility of the scientist. He emphasizes that in contrast to the past, even up to the 19th century, today science influences the life of everybody. As science and technology became vibrant productive forces, Patočka (1973a/1989, p.159) maintains, this development 'also generated an unheard-of assault on science from outside, also without a precedent in history'. The assault on sciences in the past was in principle based on the rejection of unorthodox and dangerous ideas by religions and by the moralistic ideologies of the time. In contrast, the contemporary assault that Patočka considered without a precedent is an external control of science which comes from politics and economics 'both of which are only served by ideology'. Patočka wrote his paper in the early 1970s and he recalled the situation where science in Communist Czechoslovakia was submitted to ideological control. Specifically, Lysenko's biology and Stalin's linguistics during the period of 'proletarian science' made scientists totally powerless and disposable. But, he notes, '[p]articularly treacherous is that form of external control which takes place in the name of and under the protective heading of 'scientific management' (Patočka, 1973b, p. 159). He explains that scientific management may produce either 'scientific bureaucrats' or 'practicing scientists'. Scientific bureaucrats, he notes, may be very talented and more successful than practicing scientists. They may enjoy the fruits of

benevolence from those whom they serve, but the manifest success does not guarantee the scientific conscience. Practicing scientists, who are aware of 'the *indivisibility* of the principle of scientific conscience', which is also 'the basis for scientific *individuality'* (Patočka 1973b, p. 160, his emphasis), establishes scientific solidarity. In order to get away from the bureaucratization of science in general, he advises: 'In order to demonstrate, protect, and develop scientific conscience, scientists have to associate' (Patočka, 1973b, 161). His call for scientific conscience and solidarity is call for epistemic responsibility which, as we know, is responsibility for the Self and Others in and through uniqueness of communication as *I - You.*

Totalitarian regimes as well as bureaucrats try to get rid of dialogicality in the name of neutrality, information processing and objectivity and efficiency – and so to reduce humans to mechanisms without ethics and responsibility. Dialogicality, however, is not just a theoretical and a social scientific position. It is particularly important in professional communication, in education, health studies and in therapeutic situation. By becoming aware of contemporary challenges to dialogicality we should become able to open up new ways of understanding human phenomena in social psychology.

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