

Book Review

David Bohm (1996), *On Dialogue*. New York: Routledge

David Bohm's text "On Dialogue" (1996) represents his latter career focus and a keen interest in Eastern philosophy and culture. The text does not necessarily represent his scholarly work or training in the fields of quantum and holographic theory. Nonetheless, his tangential beginnings to an "end-of-career" treatise on the nature and implications of dialogue are initially interesting for this very reason; he is not from a communication, rhetoric or argumentation background. This fact begs the question; what insights about the nature of dialogue one might glean from a background such as his?

On dialogue proposes a new attitude toward communication that attempts to suspend the base assumptions that keep people from understanding each other. Bohm views real dialogue as a coming-together of individuals and groups so that speakers might maximize the connectedness and reduce the divisions between them. The text proposes a type of win-win worldview and communicative practice to help heal social and personal problems.

While the book is not an argumentation text, it is a text that proposes a loosely conceptualized model of dialogue that promotes creative thinking toward dealing constructively with personal, corporate, and social problems. Bohm's model proposes a way of presenting and listening to ideas so that they can exist without judgment. Bohm suggests that the very process of "fixing" thought and defending standpoints, opinions, and the "self" leads to both personal and social incoherence.

The text does address argumentation on a few levels though. Most chapters address the notion of conflict in some fashion but more as a procedural necessity that is the subject of a rational worldview and its practical applications. In this sense, Bohm briefly addresses a major vein of contemporary argumentation theory. But his treatment of argument is primarily in contrast to the overall thesis of the text. For Bohm, dialogue is not dialectic. Ultimately, the notion of judging and defending standpoints are things to transcend to achieve a Bohmian conception dialogue. Much like Plato's dialectic aimed toward providing a method for transcending rhetorical "truths," Bohm's dialogue presents a way to transcend the limitations of dialectic and the fixed positions inherent within it.

Chapter 4, The Problem and the Paradox, most closely addresses the notion of argumentation. In short, Bohm claims that our continual treatment of life's difficulties as problems is problematic. He sees

“problems” and our attempts to find solutions to them, as infinite regresses that proliferate into new and more complex problems. While certain problems are the subject and goal of many technical and practical concerns in daily life, Bohm feels this attitude presents a less than sufficient escape from the larger issues facing “psychological problems and problems of human relationship.” His notion of paradox is concerned particularly with those psychological and relational problems. A paradox is viewed as incompatible competing needs. In the paradox, one need is in conflict with the other(s) which for Bohm, are ultimately irresolvable. Yet, Bohm’s solution is that once you make available the underlying needs operant in the paradox, the paradox dissipates to produce a larger collective understanding.

This impracticality aside, the text does present argumentation studies with an idea to consider. Argumentation generally views its subject as a linguistic endeavor aimed toward understanding how the pieces and parts are intentionally structured in dialogue. In a standard analysis, assumptions are generally positioned as a premise or warrant that justifies some line of thought or speech. These might take the form of starting points, presumptions, presuppositions, or even virtual standpoints. The difference between Bohm’s dialogue and argumentation’s dialectic is not necessarily in how one analyzes argumentation. The difference is in how one approaches dealing with the assumptions that bring argumentation about. Where people strategically maneuver in order to win ascendance of their standpoints in an argument, Bohm’s idea challenges us to transcend the assumptions that people and groups hold so dearly in their interactions. This challenge might be to avoid the necessity of strategically maneuvering in one’s favor altogether. Instead, the idea is that the “collective” maneuver collectively toward a collective understanding. This, theoretically, reduces (or even sidesteps) conflict. It’s an airing of needs and wants without the filter of judgment. Throughout the text Bohm envisions a form of dialogue that goes beyond what he sees as the blocking points and roots of our incoherence and stresses the active participation of all parties in a larger collective understanding.

Argumentation studies might consider, then, the notion of what argument looks like when one suspends, or transcends their assumptions. Argumentation might also ask what happens when unfixed positions, loosely held assumptions and tentative attitudes prevail in and about the discourse. And if we do that, we also must ask what our goals are in this whole process. Are our theories of argumentation aimed toward simply figuring out how argumentation occurs or are we genuinely concerned with prescribing a better way to do it? If our goal is the latter then these ideas may be worthy of investigation. The likely first question should be what might argumentation look like if it were

not bound in our assumptions? The second is whether argumentation would exist at all without assumptions?

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