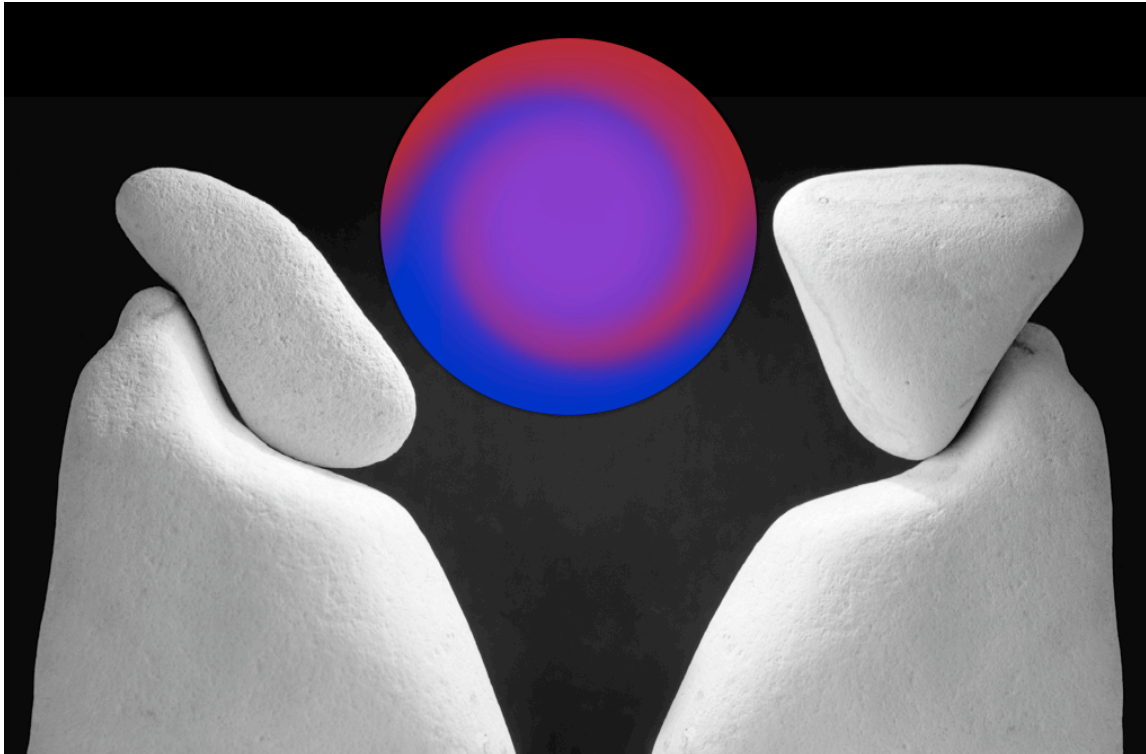


# Dialogue



## Consciousness in Community

Christian de Quincey

(from *Radical Knowing: Understanding Consciousness through Relationships*)

A group of about twenty people sits in a circle—some with eyes closed, some looking around at colleagues' faces, others apparently absent-mindedly staring at patterns on the floor. For hours they sit like this, often in silence. Then someone speaks, and it's as if she has opened her throat to let the universe flow into the room. A sense of deep meaning ripples through the participants, connecting them—they feel it in their bodies—and in this state of shared consciousness something both ordinary and extraordinary has been revealed: truth.

For years, I have been deeply impressed by the effectiveness of Bohmian dialogue as a method for exploring consciousness. In many of my classes at John F. Kennedy University, I include sessions devoted exclusively to this second-person approach to consciousness studies. Almost without exception, I'm moved and surprised each time at how deep people can go in shifting from our typical modes of thought to embodied, authentic self-expression, even in periods as short as a couple of hours. I'll summarize here some of the main introductory points I give to students about the dialogic process, including a thumbnail overview of David Bohm's life work to help set a cosmological and metaphysical context for dialogue.

Besides Bohm's contribution to consciousness studies through his method of dialogue, he has secured his place in the history of ideas and science as one of the twentieth century's geniuses in the field of quantum physics. Unlike most mainstream quantum theorists, and as mentioned earlier, Bohm did not accept that quantum events are purely random. In this, he agreed with Einstein that "God does not play dice with the universe." Like Einstein, he believed that behind the apparent randomness of quantum events there is a deeper, hidden pattern—he called this the "implicate order." Bohm's great contribution to quantum physics was to work out, in detail, an alternative mathematical expression for quantum events that accounted for all the observed, empirical data yet did not require us to believe that all the order and beauty we see in the world around us is the result of mere random quantum jumps.

Although other physicists acknowledge that Bohm's mathematical theory is as coherent as the standard "Copenhagen Interpretation," which describes quantum events as purely random, few physicists have followed his lead—presumably because of the profound cosmological and metaphysical implications of his model. Bohm's version includes mathematical expressions for what he called "pilot waves" that "guide" the apparently random quantum interactions—in other words, something very like *intelligence* is at work at the deepest levels of physical reality.

Bohm's cosmology is radical when viewed from the perspective of mainstream science: He believed that a complete theory of the cosmos must take account of consciousness. This must be so because clearly consciousness is an undeniable reality in the universe. Without it we

would know absolutely *nothing*. All knowledge of the universe—in science, in philosophy, in art, in religion, in mysticism, in ordinary daily life—exists only because consciousness is present to experience and register the existence of the physical world. A complete cosmology, then, must include the *knower* as well as what is known. We need a cosmological story that has a place for the *storyteller*.

According to quantum physics, all of reality is the result of an unimaginably vast number of tiny events—happening every single moment from the birth of the universe to this very moment *now*—where *actual* reality “collapses” out of a domain of quantum possibilities or probabilities. In the quantum wonderland, various potential states of reality coexist simultaneously (often referred to as “quantum superposition” or “quantum entanglement”) described in a set of mathematical equations called the “wave functions,” developed by Erwin Schrödinger, one of the founders of quantum physics.

Schrödinger immortalized a famous thought experiment (now called “Schrödinger’s Cat”) where it is possible for a “quantum” cat to be both dead and alive at the same time. He described a system consisting of a cat in a sealed box, with a vial of poison and a quantum device set up to crack open the vial and release the poison. Because the release mechanism is determined by a quantum event (for example, the emission of a radioactive particle from an atom), we would have no way of predicting when or if the device had been triggered, and so would have no way of knowing whether or not the cat is dead or alive. According to quantum theory, the only way to know would be to make an observation by looking in the box.

Nothing particularly strange there, you might think. However, what is bizarre is that quantum theory tells us that before we look inside the box, the quantum event that would trigger the device has *both happened and not happened!* This is because, in the quantum domain, all the probabilities exist simultaneously, as though “suspended” together. So, as strange as it sounds, the cat is both alive and dead *until someone looks*. Until that moment of observation, all the quantum possibilities exist simultaneously. Only when an observation is made is the set of probabilities “collapsed” into a single actual event—an event that would result in the cat being either dead or alive. The quantum wonderland is a “both/and” world.

In other words, what we experience as the “real” world is built up from countless quazillions of such collapses from quantum probabilities to actual reality—*happening every moment*. And such quantum collapses happen only when a quantum system is observed. In fact, quantum theory is telling us, the world comes into existence only because it is observed. *By whom?* It must be by some experiencing entity, an entity with consciousness—because no matter how ingeniously we may design our experimental instruments, the chain of events that culminates in an observation must involve an *experiencing* observer. An “observation” without consciousness would not be an observation.

Thus, physical reality requires innumerable moment-by-moment “collapses” (of the quantum wave function); each of these “collapses” requires an observer; each observation requires consciousness . . . so consciousness (in some highly mysterious way) collapses the quantum wave function. In short: *consciousness creates reality*.

Recognizing this, David Bohm reminds us that quantum theory compels us to accept that the scientist, as observer, is a *necessary part* of every quantum experiment. The quantum physicist is, therefore, a *participatory* observer. And this fact alone dissolves the assumed barrier that separates the object (the physical quantum system) from the subject (the scientist’s consciousness). Bohm concluded, therefore, that quantum theory’s recognition of inevitability of a *participatory observer* erodes the assumed separation between subject-object, knower-known, inner-outer.

Of course, if we accept the worldview of “panpsychism” or radical naturalism, where all matter is sentient, where consciousness “goes all the way down” to the smallest quantum of physical reality, then the “observer” that collapses the wave function need not be a human scientist. It could, in fact, be Schrödinger’s cat itself (or, indeed, it could be the fleas in the cat’s fur, or even the molecules in the glass vial, or one of the atoms in the poisonous chemical, or in the radioactive quantum device). Thus, panpsychism provides a solution to the mystery of how it could be that the universe evolved for billions of years before any human being (or even a single cell) was present to make observations that would collapse the quantum wave functions and create an actual world from the set of quantum probabilities.

Bohm, again like Einstein, believed that behind the domain of the quantum, and beyond relativity and the four forces of physics, reality is fundamentally a *unified field*. Furthermore, he said, the knower is an integral element in that field. In other words, *reality* (including energy, matter, space, time, and consciousness) is ultimately an *undivided whole*.

Underlying manifest physical and mental reality, he said, lies a deeper reality of an *unmanifest* matrix that gives rise to both matter and consciousness. Manifest reality (both matter and mind) is *enfolded* in the *unmanifest*. Manifest reality is the *explicate order*; unmanifest reality is the *implicate order*. Thus, something of the nature of mind or intelligence, a purposeful ordering, is embedded in the most fundamental fabric of reality. Deep down below the level of the quantum wonderland itself, the implicate order contains the “seeds” of all knowing and intelligence, and it is here that we find the purpose or aim enfolded in the pilot waves that guide the unfolding of quantum events. In short, according to Bohm, the implicate order is the source of manifest subject (consciousness) and manifest substance (matter-energy). Subject and substance arise from the pre-quantum implicate order.

Furthermore, said Bohm, the implicate order is inherently *dynamic*. And because it is also “whole”—a unified field he called the fundamental *holomovement*—at its deepest levels, reality is an inherently *purposeful process*. For Bohm, three terms characterize the essence of his cosmological philosophy: “whole,” “movement,” and “meaning.” All attempts to relate to the world, to others, through analysis or fragmentation, through fixed things or ideas, or explanations in terms of mere mechanisms, seriously distort reality, and result in epistemological, psychological, and social pathologies. We need to find ways of seeing and knowing the world from the perspective of wholes, process, and meaning—and not get stuck in attachment to our partial fixed beliefs, many of which are unconscious.

### **Bohm’s Cosmological Psychology**

Given this perspective, it was natural enough for Bohm to develop a form of psychology and philosophy that was rooted in, and deeply consistent with, his cosmological physics. He taught that all our thoughts and beliefs are static habits of mind—a kind of “fossilized consciousness”

operating within “the known.” Deep reality, the implicate order, by contrast, is *unknown* by thought. Thoughts, he said, cannot comprehend the unmanifest, implicate order. Thus, all thoughts inevitably distort reality.

This is a profound insight, with immense implications for science, philosophy, psychology, education, and social institutions. Our entire educational system—from kindergarten to graduate school—is founded on the assumption that progress in knowledge relies on our ability to continually refine our ability to hook our ideas, beliefs, and thoughts to things and events in the world in ever-more accurate ways. This is the *correspondence* theory of knowledge and truth: Our thoughts and ideas are “right,” true, and useful to the extent that they correspond with, or reflect, the way the world is put together. It’s almost commonsense in our society. How else could we learn to know the world and how we fit in?

But Bohm asks us to consider a different approach: Only the *process of thinking* (not static thoughts, ideas, concepts), experienced moment-to-moment, can participate in “knowing the unknown.” If we want to know reality, we must get beyond our static habits of mind. We must learn to focus less on how we hook our thoughts and ideas together, and instead pay increasing attention to where the thoughts come from, to *how* thinking arises in our bodies. (By “thinking,” Bohm meant what we would normally call “consciousness,” or “awareness” with all its multitude of experiences—he did not mean merely the process of cognition, which is what he meant by “thought.”)

Bohm was always pointing out that the process of *thinking* is very different from the forms of *thought*: Thinking is *experienced*, thought is *conceptualized* (or verbalized). Reality is (or can be) revealed through awareness of thinking itself. It’s not *what* we think, but *how* we think that matters. The separate, isolated “thinker of thoughts” is an illusion, he said. All there is really is the flow of the holomovement that manifests in thinking.

As one of Bohm’s students, Renée Weber, noted: Immense amounts of “cosmic energy” are invested in the illusions of “thinker” and “thoughts.” Diligent practice is needed to dissolve the illusion of “thinker” (psychological death), and when successful, vast “energy” is liberated.

But here we encounter a paradox: The more we talk or think about reality or “truth,”

the less it is revealed. According to Bohm, thinking *about* reality never gets us there; our thinking is reality. This is not to say all reality is thinking, but that one way reality shows up is in thinking. So next time you meet a friend on the street you might ask, not “How are you?” but “*How* are you thinking today?”

Here’s a little “koan” to help you grasp what Bohm is getting at: “Thoughts about thinking are not thinking; nor is thinking about thoughts thinking. Not even *thinking about* thinking is thinking. Thinking is thinking.”

It’s as if *you* are not thinking, but thinking is “*youing*”—the cosmic holomovement is thinking through you (or is “thinking you”). Therefore, as all the great spiritual traditions teach us, in order to “get at” reality, “you” (the ego) must get out of the way. The path to knowledge is through *emptiness* (or no-self). When “consciousness-as-knower” vanishes, “reality-as-known” (or “reality-as-is”) arises. Without the “I,” thinking (i.e. consciousness) functions in the deep structure of the implicate order and has access to information embedded in the whole. Thus pure thinking has access to the whole cosmos through the implicate order.

Ultimately, what matters to Bohm is whether and how “thinking our thinking” transforms us. His philosophical physics is a pragmatic ethics: Unless we can develop as moral beings, all thinking and dialogue are wasted—wasting the breath (spirit) of the cosmos. And since pure thinking is beyond concepts and words, *silence* is the optimum mode of “discourse” or “dialogue” for deep knowing.

### **Bohmian Dialogue**

“Bohmian dialogue” is a form of communication devised by David Bohm in partnership with spiritual teacher Krishnamurti. It is a way to explore the possibility of experiencing *group consciousness*. Unlike other forms of communication such as conversation, discussion, or debate, dialogue does not involve any agenda beyond the simple aim to explore consciousness collectively. It is designed to see if we can discover the sources of “fragmentation” in our thoughts and beliefs (reflected in various forms of fragmentation in society), and what we can do to restore wholeness. In essence, dialogue is a way for a group to “think and feel” together—

to collectively explore the spontaneous unfolding of meaning.

Dialogue honors the profound power of silence as the source of wisdom. We are encouraged to “feel our thinking”—to pay attention to the feelings in our bodies (what Bohm called “proprioception”) as messages that inform our thinking and our thoughts. In the previous chapter, “Embodied Meaning,” we emphasized the importance of grounding our thinking in the body, which is a constant source of meaning and messages from the world around us. Bohm’s dialogue and proprioception underscore the importance of learning how to feel these nonverbal messages pulsing through our bodies.

Bohmian dialogue always begins in silence, and from that moment on there is (typically) no group leader or facilitator. Whatever surfaces from the silence of the group and individual consciousness is the substance of dialogue. Each participant is responsible for the communication of the whole group until the end of the session. In training sessions, a facilitator may occasionally step in to draw attention to a learning opportunity or to call the group back into dialogue (if, for instance, it might be slipping off into some other form of communication such as conversation, debate, or discussion).

There are no rules in Bohmian dialogue, yet certain procedures seem to facilitate group communication. These include: Only one person speaks at any time. Anything can be spoken. Nothing is “off limits.” We do not speak to force a point, to win an argument, or to contradict what someone else has to say. We listen openly, suspending all evaluation and judgment and prior “expert knowledge.” We listen to what others say as a “revelation” from someone else’s viewpoint (which otherwise would forever remain unknown to us). We listen carefully (with our bodies as well as with our ears and minds) for meaning, and do not get caught up in analyzing words or ideas. We listen for, and acknowledge, assumptions (our own and those of others).

We speak (*if we have something to say*) because our viewpoint is also a valuable contribution. Our silence, too, can be a contribution. In dialogue, we pay attention to the group process or dynamics—to the movement or flow of consciousness through the group—so that when we speak we do not close somebody else down. *Nor do we suppress our own speaking.* And Bohm was clear that the purpose of dialogue is not to provide answers or solutions . . .



participants come together simply to openly explore consciousness, and how it arises and changes within the group. Perhaps most important of all, in dialogue we are invited to listen, not so much to the words, but for the *meaning* of every communication.

Bohmian dialogue is an opportunity to experience the subtle arising of consciousness through each of us individually and through the “organism” of the group as a whole. It is a way to deeply feel the source of our thinking, to learn to listen for meaning, and in doing so to transcend the limitations of our individual minds. It is about being in relationship in such a way that we discover new ways of knowing that draw on the potentially inexhaustible wisdom of collective consciousness.