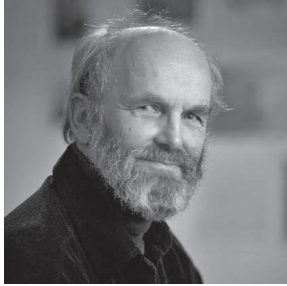


In Search of the Dia-logical Sense of the Encounter



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In attempting to understand the encounter from the perspective of dia-logical thinking (i.e. of philosophy stemming from “you are”), we must disregard both its common-sense understanding and its understanding based on the interpretation of either objective (stemming from “it is”) or subjective thinking (stemming from “I am”). In order to understand this *unprecedented encounter*¹ which determines the authenticity of our life,² we must define it while disregarding its other interpretations.

If I then “plan a meeting,” if I “arrange a meeting,” and “go to a meeting,” even if it is “a summit

¹ The original phrase in Polish is an untranslatable play on words, *niespotykane spotkanie*, lit.: “A seldom encountered encounter.”

² “Alles wirkliche Leben ist Begegnung” — “All real life is an encounter” — claimed Martin Buber (*I and Thou*, trans. W. Kaufmann, New York 1970). The “encounter,” which is our “real life,” is not part of everyday life for Buber, but a festive occasion, an experience which lets us keep our balance in daily life and which prevents us from losing ourselves in it.

126 meeting” it will never be a real encounter. Why? Because the encounter we are discussing here cannot be predicted in terms of its time, its place, or its content. Therefore, we cannot “arrange an encounter.” If you then say that you “have a meeting,” and that “you have been to a meeting,” then the significance of the meeting is not what we are looking for. We cannot “have an encounter,” mainly because we know nothing about the encounter before it takes place. We cannot “go to an encounter,” as we cannot go to something that is absolutely unpredictable and unique.

It is not correct to say “I have found a wife” (unless she got lost while married to me). You can find a mushroom in the forest, but you encounter another human being. You can find something you are looking for, something of which you know. We can encounter a man in real life only when we do not project our conception, our knowledge, onto what he might be like. Therefore, if I encounter someone — if it is to be “an encounter” in the sense we are discussing — he cannot be my “acquaintance,” he cannot be “familiar” to me. When I go out to meet someone, then — paradoxical as it may sound — I do not encounter them. When I have been meeting someone for a long time, I do not encounter them.

When I arrange a meeting, I prepare myself for it and I go to it with a purpose, with my own interests in mind. I meet someone to... At the same time, in the encounter we are trying to define here, I should not be motivated by a purpose or self-interest. When I arrange and go to a meeting, it is always a form of activity, it is an action from within the subject — I leave to go to a meeting, thus leaving myself. Yet, it is not about the action of the subject, the action of the I. The encounter whose meaning we are trying to capture here is not my initiative, nor my action. I do not encounter something, but “something” encounters “me.” The encounter is a sensation, I am passive in the encounter, I am “the accusative case” in the encounter.

We go to a meeting and suddenly “something” encounters us. And we no longer think about the meeting to which we were headed, we think about the “something” that encounters us unexpectedly. We say: “I met with something on the way,” “I met with something bad (or good)”; we are afraid of “meeting our punishment” or we are happy to “meet a certain privilege.” All these and like expressions expose the encounter as something that happens to us, as something that is, in most cases, unpredictable, something that surprises us, something for which we are completely unprepared. Not only does the phrase “meeting with something” clearly express my passivity in the encounter, implying that it is beyond my control, but it also expresses its “past” which still affects me. “The future” of the encounter (“I will meet with something”) is unique inasmuch as the encounter is unpredictable and — since it is not my action — impossible to plan. Yet, “the past” of the encounter (“I met with something”) is natural, because we can speak of it after it has taken place.

Moving from the active voice of the meeting to the passive voice of the encounter, we have imperceptibly replaced the person we meet with

“something.” However, it is not things that encounter us, or an impersonal something, but a person. A person encounters me — a person with whom “I do not have a meeting,” with whom I have not agreed to meet, with whom I have neither planned nor arranged a meeting. This encounter is in no sense my action, it is an experience that affects me and that makes me active (or more precisely: reactive) through my response. I become active through moving from “me” to “I.”

Only the unity of passivity and activity (reactivity) allows me to say that “we have encountered each other” — having sensed his eyes on me I did not avert my gaze and our eyes “met.” My presumptive initial action is limited to a certain readiness, an openness to the event of the encounter, and nothing more. I cannot go out to welcome the encounter and meet it half-way. I can know neither the place nor the time of the encounter; I cannot know and look for the face of the one I will encounter; I cannot know the words he will say to me. Only the space and its orientation are specified. The encounter (German: *Begegnung*) takes place within “opposite” and this “opposite” fills the whole horizon, leaving no space for anything else. The “rest” remains suspended and disregarded.

When we attempt to retain the last fort of the imperial army of our I, the encounter transforms into a game in which we start to calculate the gains and the possible losses. In the encounter we face a challenge, and when we take it up, we are prone to count on some benefits. In the encounter we can sacrifice ourselves, we have the chance to give, but we can also receive. From here it is not far to perceiving the encounter as a value which will enrich us.

Experienced as a value, the encounter can be “measured.” And so we can consider the depth of the trace it leaves in us. If it is only superficial, the encounter changes nothing in our lives. We are moved by it today, but tomorrow we will remember it no more. Yet, if it reaches deep enough, it can take us from the cosy rut in which we have safely placed ourselves. If the trace of the encounter has not only gone in deep, but has also become permanent, then we do not return to our settled daily life, but we are carried to another mode of being.

The encounter experienced as a value positions itself hierarchically with regard to its indirectness or directness. An encounter whose value would be instrumental and which would aid another value must be of secondary importance. Yet, if the encounter fills the whole horizon, then there is no more space for comparison or for reference to anything else. Thus, the value of the encounter would be fully autonomic. Is it also indivisible (*unteilbar*) in the sense of Max Scheler’s³ criterion? If one who encounters me fills the whole horizon, if the encounter demands absolute exclusivity, then how would I share its value with others?

The straightforward evaluation of the encounter which is crucial in our lives becomes less certain. The I, already resigned, would still like to

³ Cf. M. Scheler, *Formalism in Ethics and Non-formal Ethics of Values*, Northwestern University Press, 1973.

128 take advantage of its passivity, here understood as a state of receiving. This unprecedented encounter is meant to bring a certain kind of gift. However, Tischner would not hesitate to describe this type of truth as “bullshit.” The sense of the encounter we are looking for here cannot be conceived “in values.” I do not receive gifts, but the Other invites me to give. Thus, it is not the case that you encounter someone and thus you receive a gift. On the contrary — you encounter someone to whom you are meant to give. The encounter is a call for generosity. Therefore, we miss the actual sense of the encounter if we look for an existential benefit in it.

Thinking on the “I-It” horizon, on the subject-object horizon, the encounter must always be involved in its own existence strategy, in a certain act of evaluation with regards to its own existential interests. At the same time, the encounter demands we renounce all interests. Absolute disinterestedness is precisely the place where the encounter can happen. It is not the other that encounters me to save me, but I am called upon to save the other. And it happens without any promise, without any calculation assuming that, through saving the other, I can ultimately save myself.

“God exists, I have encountered Him,” claims André Frossard,⁴ but he is mistaken, or not telling the truth. We can only say: “He has encountered me.” Yet, God does not encounter us in person, but only through the Face of the Other, through the Face of the Poor. The Other possesses no identity documents. Therefore, we can send him to hell, as he is not able to prove his mission. If God does not exist, you can walk on by the face calling out to you, but you can also respond to the call. However, if you would like to prove your own faith, this is the place to do it.

In the beginning there was “the word,” and “the word” was with the Other. In his dialogical treatise Buber called this “word” “a primary word.” “The primary word” always *obliges*; it not only establishes a relationship between You and Me, it also *obliges* Me, in that it gives me an obligation to respond. The word belongs to the Other, who speaks to Me, lifting Me out of the undefined, out of my passivity; but through responding to it, it is I who speak. Responding to the primary word is not only responding to the Other; it is also an act of responsibility for the Other — it is a responsibility. What encounters us becomes our responsibility. It is not our death that is most utterly ours, that nobody can take away from us; it is our responsibility, as it constitutes our *principium individuationis*.

The encounter is an enacting relationship, which is a responsibility.

When I think that I must cease to be, do I not experience fear? Yet surely this fear concerns, or should concern, not managing to sacrifice myself. In the face of death, what is the point of accumulating riches, unless I seek to donate them? What, then, is the point of collecting something I do not intend to, or would not be able to donate?

⁴ Cf. A. Frossard: *I Have Met Him: God Exists*, New York 1971.