

CONFLICT RESOLUTION AS CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICE

Beyond the Apparent Dissociation between Thought and Action

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Introduction

In general, conflict resolution or mediation practices are informed by liberal views of social relations for which the individual is the brick of the social order, bound to the rest of society and/or community through the cement provided by interest-based exchanges.

The alternative to this liberal view is informed by a different conception of individuality and human sociability. Rather than conceiving of individuals as pre-existing beings, they are understood as emerging from the very social relations in which they are embodied.

From the point of view of Buddhist philosophy, this latter conception, which assumes the individual-society relationship dialectically, conforms to the basic understanding condensed in the notions of *Pratītyasamudpāda* and *Sūnyatā*. Neither individuals, nor the societies of which they are a part, exist inherently.

In this context, a conflict mediation practice, based on this relational vision, should aspire to transcend perspectives focused exclusively on the accommodation of conflicting interests, alternatively assuming a pedagogical perspective that addresses the root causes of conflicts, rather than focusing solely on the superficial evidence that is settled in each concrete case.

In this context, following the distinction once made by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess between shallow ecology and deep ecology, we can speak of two types of conflict resolution practices: a *shallow* practice, which assumes conflict resolution exclusively in terms of administrative management of competing interests and aspire to the accommodation of those competing interests; and a *deep* practice, which demands a philosophical understanding and a contemplative approach focused on the ultimate causes of conflict, based on the assumption that all conflict is informed by a distorted perception or representation of the real (that which is the case) and a self-perception of the agents as self-sustained individuals, that feeds attitudes and behaviors that deepen and perpetuate misunderstandings and promote violence.

Meditation as mediation practice

The starting point of our proposal is an analogical understanding of meditation and mediation or conflict resolution practice. If we understand meditation as a set of exercises whose ultimate goal is to reorient experience, transforming the perspectives, attitudes and behaviors of the agents involved, in order (1) to minimize or eliminate the causes and expressions of subjective suffering that emerge when agents are oriented towards objective evils, and (2) to enhance or even realize the causes and expressions of subjective happiness aligned with objective goods, the "deep practice" of mediation or conflict resolution can be understood as the resulting expression, in the intersubjective or interpersonal realm, of the vision informed by the meditative practices, in which, what is in conflict and

demands to be mediated or resolved are the conflicting and competing expressions in the agent aspiring to shape an integrally meaningful life in her concrete lived experience.

In the Tibetan tradition of Buddhism, in the presentations of the gradual path to enlightenment, we find references to the existence of individuals of different capacities:

- Those whose motivation is to secure a prosperous and uplifting future.
- Those who aspire to liberation from the causes and conditions of the suffering they cyclically undergo.
- And those who yearn to achieve a state of perfection that will enable them to be of maximum benefit to all beings.

Following this outline, and taking into consideration our previous distinction between shallow and deep versions of conflict resolution practice, we can establish two types of approaches to the problem of conflict:

The **shallow perspective** is focused on the immediate interests of those involved in the conflict. It aims to avoid the negative effects that the conflict may cause in the future through the articulation of a formula of accommodation. The agreement between the parties interrupts circumstantially the perpetuation and escalation of the conflict, at least during the time in which the terms of the agreement are respected by the parties, or the conditions under which the conflict took place remain in place. This is the basic level at which mediation takes place. Note that, without the willingness of the parties to reach an agreed solution, the practice of mediation cannot take place.

At this level, it is a matter of managing competing interests, accommodating them in formulas that allow for mutual compromise, in order to avoid future damage. It is understood, then, that the partial renunciation of the totality of goods to which one aspires, offers a superior good: the resolution of the conflict and the security that this resolution brings with it, which translates into the possibility of redirecting resources and efforts to more creative aspects, instead of leaving them confiscated in the conflict itself.

With regard to the **deep perspective**, we can speak of two levels. In both cases, the starting point requires an "epistemological turn". Conflict is no longer perceived as a phenomenon external or alien to the subjects, but is understood as constitutive of the very identity that they protect or defend through the specific conflict they are trying to resolve.

Conflict highlights the inherent vulnerability of the individuals who are part of the conflict. In the first case, the aim is to uncover these vulnerabilities, in order to remove them. In contrast to the first case, where the focus was on managing the conflict (i.e. managing a consensual solution in terms of competing interests through a formula of accommodation of them, analogous to the way in which pluralistic accommodation is achieved in liberal multicultural societies through tolerance), in this second level, the aim is to address the systemic problem underlying the specific case: the conflict itself as the driving force and underlying condition for the constitution of the

competing identities. Here, removing vulnerability implies removing the very terms of the relationship that is established through conflict.

At the third level of **deepening practice**, conflict is no longer perceived as an accident or circumstantial event in a concrete situation, but as a systemic phenomenon whose consequences affect all parties, in all conflicts, universally. Thus, the practice of conflict resolution becomes an opportunity to address the onto-phenomenological problem of conflict itself, in its diversity and multidimensionality.

Theory and practice

In the specific case of mediation or conflict resolution, as in other areas of the social and human sciences, there is an apparent dissociation between (1) the thinking or conceptual formulation of the problem, its understanding and the identification of a potential resolution; and (2) the action and implementation of this conceptual framework.

We refer to this dissociation as "apparent" because, from the epistemological perspective from which we formulate our model, the theory-practice distinction is inadequate in the action dimension, as are «representationalist» models of knowledge, which describe the process in inherent subject-object terms, creating an insurmountable chiasm between the two extremes of the equation that ultimately translates into various anti-realistic versions of knowledge.

In our case, the place where this supposed chiasmus dissolves is the promise or commitment of the agent to resolve the conflict. It is in the emblem of the «promise», as Paul Ricœur explained following Heidegger, that the «character of the given» (the conflict) begins its process of transmutation. Conflict is where we are thrown into, its resolution is what we project ourselves towards when we go beyond the superficial level of its description. The project of resolution, or the promise to remain subject to the commitment of that resolution, not only modifies the status quo (the given, the real of conflict), but also questions and redefines who we are and what we have become by being part of the conflict.

Conclusion

We propose a model of conflict resolution that transcends the prevailing superficial perspective, which defines the discipline exclusively in terms of the accommodation of competing interests.

This means redefining the objectives of the discipline itself, adding to its administrative or conflict management function, a pedagogical function or dimension, which will allow the parties involved to address those aspects that are at the root of the unresolved conflicts they face - the positions that define our circumstantial identities in the dialectics of our conflicting social relations.