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### In search of the Other – Vilém Flusser and dialogical life

“Dialogical life is not that in which you have to deal with people a lot  
but that in which you really have to deal with people,  
with whom you are dealing”.  
Martin Buber (1992: 227)

#### Introductory remarks

Jean Tarrou, one of the main characters of the *Plague* of Albert Camus, concludes his famous conversation with doctor Bernard Rieux, in which he portrays the story of his life, with the words: “It comes to this, what interests me is learning how to become a saint”. Astonished Rieux notices, however, that his interlocutor does not believe in God. Tarrou replies: “Exactly! Can one be a saint without God?—that’s the problem, in fact the only problem, I’m up against today” (Camus 1991). I believe the philosophical commitment of Vilém Flusser, his writing attempts, centre around this problem. Formulating this question a bit differently, more generally: is it possible to find a fixed point of reference, an invincible ontology, for our practical and theoretical actions? In the world of “liquid modernity” (Bauman 2006), can we even have a slight hope of seeing the mainland?

These are, of course, fundamental questions about values, questions that philosophers have been asking since the very beginning of the systematic cogitation on reality. However, at least from the second half of the twentieth century, they begin to sound paradoxically. Because, if we accept – in accordance with postmodernism, poststructuralism, constructivism, which are dominant narratives of postmodernity – that the object independent from the subject does not exist, then we will look in vain for absolute and universal values that might be signposts for us. Flusser was aware of this fundamental problem of contemporary times. He did not run away from contradictions in his philosophy – he even emphasized them, claiming that they were an inseparable part of human reality. However, he had to at least try to remove them when he referred them to a specific existence, that is, to his own life.

I think Flusser is trying to face these problems by using the category “dialogue,” and even more importantly, by philosophizing and living dialogically. His philosophy and life, inseparably connected with philosophy, have their dialogical dimension. He always theorizes in a dialogue with the recipient. Not only does he write his texts thinking of a conscious reader, leaving him

a lot of interpretive freedom, but he also philosophizes in letters to acquaintances, friends, publishers, editors, or in conversations with his students and colleagues. A dialogue also had a theoretical dimension for Flusser. His philosophy of dialogue, on which he relied heavily, gave him an interesting and in some ways a new look at the phenomena of contemporary media culture, dominated by technology.

For Flusser, the dialogue category is somehow the basic element of most of his concepts: the subject is nothing else than a “relationship bond”. A good policy is one based on an open and lively public sphere and our entire culture is basically one great communication project, of which a dialogue, as the source of creativity, is the core. I will discuss these issues - Flusser's general understanding of a dialogue and the place of this concept in the most important theoretical constructs of the philosopher – in the second part of this text. In the third component, I will try to extract from Flusser's thoughts who the Other is and what, exactly, the dialogical relationship with the Other is. In the fourth and last part, I will cover issues of broader contexts (religion, eschatology) in which these considerations are immersed. All these reflections will be preceded by a few words about the cultural horizon from which the problems that interest me arise.

All these considerations will be accompanied by the conviction that the concept of a dialogue was one of Flusser's attempts to get out of the post-Nietzschean nihilism and the nothingness of the postmodern world. This path has certainly not been indicated directly, but in the case of his philosophy, we should not be particularly surprised.

## **Postmodernity – the cultural horizon of contemporary times**

The philosophers who accept that we are meant to live in the new times, in the “post-“ world, have stated above all that we should give up the ambition of reaching objective, universal and unchanging knowledge. Jean-François Lyotard writes, for example, that in the new conditions, the result of our intellectual actions will be “science smiling into its beard”<sup>1</sup>. This will, admittedly, give us a “harsh austerity of realism”, but only in relation to all other beliefs (Lyotard 1984: 41). Another philosopher associated with postmodernism, the American Richard Rorty, speaks about irony, i.e. a peculiar distance, which we should keep towards the world around us and our knowledge about it. An ironist – in contrast to a metaphysician – is, to put it plainly, someone aware of her own randomness: she does not take herself seriously because she knows that she

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<sup>1</sup> The phrase “science smiling into its beard” comes from Robert Musil's book *A Man Without Qualities* (1996: 325) being one of the most significant literary inspirations for Flusser. I write about it elsewhere (Wiatr 2018: 102-103, 327, 357).

does not have a “final vocabulary” of terms she could use to describe herself once and for all (Rorty 1993: 73). And an ironist does not think anyone has ever had this kind of vocabulary or will be ever able to possess it. An ironist wants to “experiment with the vocabularies”. She tries to describe herself again and again as she hopes to create the best possible ego for herself (Rorty 1993: 79-80).

To make it simple, it may be said that in the field of classical philosophy problems, postmodernism – or at least some of its respected representatives – is satisfied with Socratic scepticism, that is, with an awareness of ignorance coming from human limitations. Referring, for example, to Kant's famous questions from the *Critique of Pure Reason* – What can I know? What should I do? What may I hope? – postmodern thinkers generally answer unequivocally to the first of them: I can know only that which I and my companions have created – languages, discourses, stories. Ethical or religious-eschatological<sup>2</sup> issues are even more problematic in the times of liquid modernity. This is related to the fact that they refer to human existence directly, to our being-in-the-world: relations with another man and the end of this being – death. Classically – in antiquity, the Middle Ages, modern times – these problems were related to some kind of transcendence – an idea, God, natural law (reason) – which by its definition was absolute and universal. The postmodern “disintegration” of the world has changed this state of affairs. And on the basis of ethics, it has even more serious consequences. The point is that epistemological scepticism, which in my example refers to the first question, “What can I know?”, has long been considered an attitude that can be held more or less consistently. It is difficult to be consistent in scepticism about moral values, however, especially as far as practice is concerned, i.e. in those life situations to which the theory, in this case an ethical one, refers. This is because these matters concern the most basic human life issues: we may not be philosophers, but we are not able not to live in the society with other people without thinking, at least from time to time, about the meaning of our lives.

The philosophy of Vilém Flusser is certainly reflecting the attitudes of the postmodern world. His criticism of positivistically understood science or classical metaphysics, as well as his way of philosophising – full of metaphors, language games and irony – leaves no illusions in this regard. We can say that the spirit of postmodern scepticism and ironic distance are undermining Flusser's philosophy<sup>3</sup>. However, I believe that finally he not only was discontent with these kinds

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<sup>2</sup> The problems of the functioning of religion in the postmodern world are discussed by such philosophers as John D. Caputo (2001) or Peter Sloterdijk (2009).

<sup>3</sup> “Like in so many different ways, I am full of doubts, and short of formed opinions” Flusser wrote. Rodrigo Maltez Novaes, a translator and commentator of his work, chose this quotation for the motto of two books he translated and edited, probably recognising that these words reflect the spirit of Flusser's philosophy and his attitude as a theoretician (Flusser 2016b, 2017).

of conclusions, but also that he tried to overcome such scepticism. He sometimes did it directly – for example, when in the mid-1980s he was creating his utopia of the telematic society. At other times he did it by hiding some intuitions behind the veil of metaphors and understatements. I believe that the positive part of Flusser's philosophy has at least two dimensions. The first one refers to the problems of ontology – and it should be added, non-classical, “non-metaphysical” ontology. The question in this context is: how to reassemble a world that has broken up into pieces? Flusser answers: by creating alternative worlds. For this purpose, properly programmed devices producing technical images should be used, implementing the competence of the Man of the Future: techno-imagination<sup>4</sup>. Jan P. Hudzik writes about it extensively in his text. This problem is not my concern, however. I am interested in another issue – mentioned earlier, namely the second dimension of the positive part of Flusser's philosophy. It deals with ethics, in this context, generally speaking, the area of the relationship between a man and a man.

Flusser was not, of course, an ethicist in the classic sense of the term (probably he was not “classic” in any sense). Nevertheless, almost all his philosophy is steeped in a kind of moral, and sometimes even religious spirit. His philosophy “comes up” from two sources. First, from his life contexts: Jewish origin, the experience of the Holocaust and forced emigration. Flusser grew up in a city and home of many cultures (and thus: many ethics), he had to rely on the help of others in the tragic moments of his life, and, reaching the coast of Brazil he came across those who were “completely different”<sup>5</sup> to him at the time. All of this made him ponder over values and valuing, also in the ethical context. The second source is, of course, philosophical inspirations, and in this context, above all, the philosophy of dialogue. I think this is a fundamental inspiration, perhaps even from a certain perspective the most important for the entire philosophy of Vilém Flusser.

Hence, we have to start with the question: What is a dialogue for Flusser in general and where is this approach located in the tradition of the philosophy of dialogue, on which he draws?

## **A dialogue as ...**

For anyone who even briefly familiarised themselves with Flusser's thought, it is obvious that he uses his sources in a highly individual way. This is also the case with tradition, which in the

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<sup>4</sup> Techno-imagination or new imagination (in German texts *Einbildungskraft*) is a term that Flusser uses to define a new type of consciousness and related to it intellectual competences to create and decipher a culture of which basic element is a technical image and the main tool an apparatus.

<sup>5</sup> In his autobiography, entitled *Groundless*, he even writes that initially Brazil appeared to him as something unreal (Flusser 2017).

context that interests us is the starting point: the philosophy of dialogue. The material is sparse and dispersed. However, there is an idea, a keystone at its very centre, namely a conviction that the relationship between one man and another man (I with Thou) has a fundamental meaning for human person. Representatives of the philosophy of dialogue are not consistent about terminology even in this basic context, however. While the first generation of dialogists (the aughts and twenties of the twentieth century) such as Martin Buber or Franz Rosenzweig (1971) use the concept of a dialogue, Emmanuel Levinas, the most influential representative of the second generation, hardly ever uses this category. In his best-known work, *Totality and Infinity*, he speaks of experiencing epiphany of the face of the Other. It does not change the fact that the basic experience described by the dialogists is the one of meeting, a dialogue, the relationship of man with man, I with Thou.

Flusser uses this tradition in a selective way. When he mentions one of the dialogue philosophers by their names – or when he employs the term in a way, which can be attributed to a specific name, it is usually Martin Buber<sup>6</sup>. Perhaps Buber was the closest to Flusser not only because of the parallels in their thinking, but also because of a kind of parallelism between their biographies: both of them were forced migrants (although in different periods of life and in other circumstances), polyglots<sup>7</sup>, Jews whose cultural identity was a contentious question even for them. However, even in this most obvious case, we cannot treat it as “copying” Buber. Admittedly, Flusser borrows the idea of a dialogue and dialogical life. But he uses them in the way, which is right for himself. So how does he use it?

The most general “definition” appears in Flusser’s writing in the context of reflections on communication. A dialogue is one of two communication structures, discourse is the other one. Flusser clearly states (2016b: 70) that neither structure can exist without the other, and therefore that the distinction is theoretical to some extent. However, as such it serves heuristic goals, because this opposition is helpful in understanding what Flusser means by dialogue.

Discourse is a linear, unidirectional structure in which the message flows from the sender to the recipient. Its aim is to preserve existing information and to protect it from entropy (Flusser 2016b: 71). In the nature, entropy means physical annihilation, death, in relation to human existence – oblivion. A dialogue, on the other hand, allows the circulation of information from the recipient to the sender within one “meeting” of two subjects. Flusser calls this attribute

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<sup>6</sup> Flusser had the opportunity to listen to Buber's lectures in Prague in 1937 (Zielinski et al. 2015: 456).

<sup>7</sup> Buber spoke several languages, including Polish. He spent his childhood and youth in the Austro-Hungarian Annexation, but in ethnically and culturally Polish Lviv. He also attended Polish middle school there. Not only did he speak Polish fluently, but he also wrote his first texts in that language (Buber 1992: 8-9).

“responsibility” (2016b: 82). Even here, it can be observed how this play with words and their meanings, which is something he mastered perfectly, directs the reader's attention to the “right” context – the moral one.

Defined in this way, dialogue would apply particularly well to philosophical anthropology, shedding light on the question about the source of human subjectivity. This is one of the main themes of the philosophy of dialogue. Buber writes about it like this: “Through the *Thou* a man becomes *I*. That which confronts him comes and disappears, relational events condense, then are scattered, and in the change consciousness of the unchanging partner, of the *I*, grows clear, and each time stronger. To be sure, it is still caught in the web of relation with the *Thou*, as the increasingly distinguishable feature of that which reaches out to and yet is not the *Thou*. But it continually breaks through with more power, till a time comes when it bursts its bonds, and the *I* confronts itself for a moment, separated as though it were a *Thou*; as quickly to take possession of itself and from then on to enter into relations in consciousness of itself” (Buber 1937: 28-29).

Flusser accepts the general sense of these words. Human, individual subjectivity is born in relation to another subjectivity. “I is the one called by someone ‘You’” (Flusser 2011: 93). In this dialogical interpretation it is assumed that in order to become themselves, people need to be somehow awakened from their mere biological existence and become conscious in a different sense. This shock comes from outside, by being addressed. Untouched, we would stay only animals. Thanks to *Thou* we become human beings. This process, when transferred to the ground of experience, can be called – simplifying – socialisation. The fact is that the biological information given to human beings at the moment of birth does not make them social beings yet. It creates only a certain ground for the acquisition of cultural information. In other words: there is a biologically conditioned potentiality of becoming a person, a subject.

This is, of course, an anthropological vision that has a long tradition, reaching back at least as far as Aristotle and his *zoon politikon* concept. It should be noted here that the formation of human subjectivity and the process of socialisation are not identical phenomena. However, the second one cannot exist without the first and both, in a dialogical interpretation, proceed in a similar way – through a dialogue. The initial phase of the shaping of subjectivity takes place spontaneously. “I” comes into being unconsciously, being inseparably connected to an addressing *Thou*. Later, however, when “bonds burst”, “I” is able to stand up in front of itself, but only “to take possession of itself and from then on to enter into relations in consciousness of itself”. This second stage we could call the process of socialisation.

In this context, one more thing is important, namely, the responsibility mentioned by Flusser, the possibility of answering as the essential feature of a dialogue. The dialogical building

of the subject's identity assumes openness. Therefore, the address should be focused on hearing, on allowing an answer, on admitting a free response to the addressing. As we can guess, the authenticity of a dialogue is based on it – the real existence of a human is co-existence with others. It is difficult to speak about this kind of freedom of response in the case of subjectivity just being formed, when consciousness is not fully awakened – as for example in an infant. However, Flusser is interested in the continuation of this story, the part the philosophers of dialogue develop rarely, if at all. That is the social dimension of a dialogue. We will come back to this again.

A man as a “hook for relations” (Flusser TS I: 1) is the first, most basic thesis that results from Flusser's understanding of a dialogue. Interestingly, in this context, the figure of Edmund Husserl often appears – directly or not. Phenomenology, Flusser writes, has allowed us to see that a human being is nothing without phenomena coming through them, that a human being is only a stream of experiences. Husserl, naturally, did not go down in the history of philosophy as a philosopher of dialogue – quite the contrary: his epistemology supposes, at least apparently, that the cognitive subject is a “hard” substance. Nevertheless, there is a tradition of placing Husserl in the context of reflections on the dialogical approach to consciousness. None other than Emmanuel Levinas saw in Husserl's phenomenology a crack that allowed the subject to be conceived in a dialogical way<sup>8</sup>. The transcendental reduction (*epoché*) shows how the removal of another phenomenon from consciousness makes the subject appear not in its being, but rather in its emptiness. Intentionality of psychic acts – the great discovery by Franz Brentano, which was later taken over and used by Husserl – exposes the fact that it is difficult to deal with something that in phenomenology is called “pure” or “transcendental consciousness” (Husserl 2014: 56-58). The “hard”, specific subject becomes “soft”, liquid, after all it is a stream (of experiences, consciousness), a term used by Husserl (Husserl 2014: 159-161, *passim*). It is a kind of irony: the German philosopher, trying to find the unwavering foundation of human cognition, shook not only the edifice of knowledge, but also convictions of the substantiality of the subject dating back to the philosophy of Descartes. The failure of the phenomenological project brought other consequences that would have been difficult to predict. Husserl's concepts began to live their own lives after his death, constituting building blocks for concepts ground in the humanities and social sciences and obstruct efforts to find the basis of certain objective knowledge. The term *Lebenswelt* can serve as an example: its heuristic potential is used – whether directly or as a “hidden” assumption – in contemporary constructivism.

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<sup>8</sup> Levinas uses (1979) Husserl's phenomenology extensively, reinterpreting it and adapting to his philosophy of the Other.

Flusser, however, refers to Husserl in the context of the dialogical, relational character of human life, especially in the context of knowledge. The philosopher from Prague remained a consistent critic of the positivist treatment of science and, generally speaking, any view of knowledge as objective. He was sure that every kind of knowledge – including science – is a product of culture, with its history, tradition, languages and the people who create them. Hence, because culture is a human creation, it cannot be objective. This does not mean, however, that a radical subjectivism should be accepted. Flusser proposes a model of knowledge which he considers to be Husserl's idea – namely, the intersubjective model. Nonetheless, he uses this concept in a particular way. For Husserl, intersubjectivity is a kind of a knowledge test: if the constitution of a given object relies on two or more subjects, then we are talking about a “unity of a higher-order” (Husserl 2014: 303), and therefore – as you can guess – it commands greater certainty. Whereas Flusser writes for example as follows: “Now this is in fact what phenomenology, this reformulation of Western science, is all about. It is the abandon[ment] of the search of objective knowledge in favor of an ever more intersubjective knowledge. But to understand this more fully, one has to switch one's attention to the object of knowledge. Phenomena are the aims of epistemological intentions. They will become objects of knowledge. In themselves, they are nothing. But as objects of knowledge they have an infinity of aspects: they can be approached from an infinity of angles by an infinity of subjects. This is what characterizes the objective world: it has an infinity of aspects. Those aspects can never be exhausted: there is no such thing as a complete objective knowledge. Intersubjective knowledge is the attempt to approach phenomena from a maximum of points of view, to come to know a maximum of aspects. Thus the purpose of science reformulated is not, as it is in classical science, to advance from object to object, but it is to reveal ever new aspects in the objects intended. *A totally new concept of "progress"*” (Flusser TS II: 5-6).

As we can see, Flusser understands intersubjectivity specifically. It is not a knowledge test, a validity check, but a constitutive feature of knowledge itself. In this context, knowledge is the sum of phenomenological views, which grows together with subsequent perspectives. It should be said that these perspectives are priceless, because no two people can look at one object in exactly the same way. Of course, a serious doubt appears here: what if some of these perspectives are simply wrong? Flusser does not answer this question, though.

Dialogue is also fundamental to considerations about politics and society. Flusser, in a sense, identifies a dialogue with politics as he understands it, that is, as an exchange of information with regard to governing the community. This is of course the Greek ideal of *polis* and its “command centre”, i.e. the agora. Therefore, politics is closely related to the exchange of information. As

Flusser notices (2016b: 83-85), “cybernetics” (the science of information processing in order to control systems) and “government” have a common origin: Greek *kubernáo* (“control”, “manage”, “govern”). Basically, there is no (good) politics without a dialogue. We can talk about discursive politics, but this one is heading towards totalitarianism. However, Flusser maintains the principle of a golden mean in this case. The omnipresent discourse is as dangerous as a ubiquitous dialogue – in the first situation we deal with the disappearance of a public space, in the second with the loss of private space (Flusser 2002: 19-20).

This identification of politics with a dialogue, i.e. drawing attention to the public sphere as a necessary factor of the political community, may recall the perspective of Jürgen Habermas. The similarity, however, is only superficial in this case – it has already been investigated<sup>9</sup>. Nevertheless, another interesting issue appears here, namely, the possible charge against Flusser that he quite naively treats dialogue as a condition of possibility for existence of technologically mediated, common direct democracy (Flusser 2011: 123-130) – for example in his utopia of telematic society. However, I believe that when you read Flusser’s texts a little more precisely, you can see a kind of “post-Nietzschean” “cultural elitism” (Flusser 2002: 60-62). In the context of a dialogue, the philosopher writes about it quite unequivocally in one of his letters: “If I observe the tendency toward discursive manipulation of men through apparatus media, and the shift of values from objects to symbols, (the tendency toward post-industrial imperialism), I cannot but take note that the only means to resist that tendency is to try and establish elitist small circles of dialogue, like the one our correspondence is trying to establish. It is like in the early Middle ages, when reflection about what life is about took refuge in monasteries. This is what I mistrust in people like [Fred] Fores and [Antoni] Muntadas, that they want to establish “open dialogues”, (which to me is a “*petitio principii*” since dialogue is elitist by its very structure). You may have noticed in the short paper I have sent you that I am all in favor of hermetic codes which are aimed at those who have taken the trouble to learn how to decipher them” (Flusser COR I: 14).

Here Flusser leaves no doubt what a cultural dialogue is for him, a dialogue that is supposed to lead us to the future. It is, certainly, universal and open, but only for those who will want to make an effort to learn complicated languages that allow to understand the principles of operation of new technologies behind apparatus. This is, after all, one of the messages of Flusser's philosophy of culture: the (super)man of the future will be a programmer (*ergo*: an expert

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<sup>9</sup> See the untitled introduction by Phil Gochenour to his translation of Flusser's essay: *The City as Wave-Trough in the Image-Flood* (Flusser 2005: 321-322).

of codes), an artist of apparatus. This person will be responsible for art, science, politics, which will all be unified again.

Another context in which the category of a dialogue appears, and even more clearly, is the theory of the text. Flusser devoted a lot of space in his work to the subject of writing and language, as well as the creativity resulting from their application. *Habent [sua] fata libelli* – books have their destiny, as the philosopher notes (Flusser 2012: 37-38). And even more: books are destiny<sup>10</sup>. It means that the sense of a work does not appear together with the end of writing it – an unread work is a meaningless sequence of insignificant lines. The meaning of the text depends both on the sender and the recipient. This idea, known from works of semiologists such as Roland Barthes's *The Death of the Author* or Umberto Eco's *The Open Work*, is raised to a general cultural principle by Flusser. Culture is a communication, and everything that appears in the culture arises thanks to a dialogue, i.e. a synthesis of existing information (Flusser 2011: 88-89).

From the abovementioned brief summary of some of Flusser's conceptions, I think at least two general conclusions can be drawn. First of all, the philosopher uses the dialogue category not only in many places, but, above all, in relation to matters fundamental to him, such as the question of culture as such. It reinforces his earlier attribution of meaning as such to the relational understanding of human beings and their environment. Secondly, it is not difficult to notice that he makes use of the ambiguity of the dialogue category (a dialogue with regard to I-Thou relation, a dialogue in the sphere of politics, dialogical understanding of a text, of culture). In some cases, even the application of the concept of a dialogue may raise doubts. It happens, for example in the context of knowledge. Flusser's view of intersubjectivity not only deflects from Husserl's original, but also raises questions about the possibility of identifying intersubjectivity with a dialogue. If the whole of knowledge consists of a multitude of perspectives, this does not necessarily mean its “dialogicality”. For example, Flusser does not say a word about the openness of knowledge to criticism. Nevertheless, he links Husserl with his vision of a dialogue directly and even with the concept of dialogical life in the future telematic society (Flusser 2011a: 237-238).

### **Why is there somebody rather than nobody?**

Edmund Husserl's concepts appearing in certain threads of the philosophy of dialogue – this is not a completely “exotic” thesis. As I have already mentioned, no one else but Emmanuel Levinas, one of the most important figures in the philosophy of dialogue of the second

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<sup>10</sup> In full, this sentence – its author is Terentius Maurus – reads: *Pro captu lectoris habent sua fata libelli*, which can be translated as: “The fate of books depends on the ability of a reader”. It is easy to notice that this sentence also has an “elitist” assumption: the greater reader's abilities, the more meanings he will be able to extract from the book – also those the author did not think about.

generation and one of the more influential philosophers of the second half of the twentieth century, perceives phenomenology as an appropriate tool to conduct his reflections (Levinas 1979), reflections that are strictly ethical and which are placed in the tradition of a philosophy of dialogue. Of course he does not take over Husserl's method entirely. He cannot do it, because there is a serious problem in it when you observe it from the perspective of ethics. Husserl argued (2014: 296-305) that during the phenomenological examination, the phenomenon undergoes a process in which it is presented in such a way and not differently. He called it the constitution of things<sup>11</sup>. In this interpretation of phenomenology, the world is the correlate of pure consciousness which somehow conditions reality. This thesis must raise doubts among philosophers such as Levinas, who not only consider ethical issues, but see the foundation of all ontologies in the relationship between one man and another. As Levinas writes (1979: 43): “metaphysics precedes ontology” – metaphysics understood as ethics.

The problem of the relationship I-Thou and even the very existence of another person makes its presence felt also on the basis of Flusser's philosophy. The question is how, in a world that is the product of our cultural practices (primarily linguistic), is it possible to find a “real” person? On what basis can we state – and we must assert this, if we want to talk about any ethics – that the reality that surrounds us is a linguistic construct, while the other person is something “real”, something extralinguistic? What kind of experience allows us to conclude that we are dealing exactly with a human being and how is this experience different from phenomenological, objectifying discernment? In other words, paraphrasing the famous question of Leibniz: why is there someone rather than nobody? Flusser may not give a particularly revealing answer here, but his argument deserves attention.

He uses a well-known argument *per analogiam*. In short: I am able to identify, recognize (not – to know) another person because I can see myself in them. How does this recognition happen? Of course, *via* communication. The difference between people and not-people is that we are able to “translate ourselves” into the perspective of the other person, which we cannot do in the case of objects, plants or animals. I cannot – says Flusser – accept the amoeba's point of view. In this sense, it is another thing among things to me, virtuality that I extract from nothingness thanks to a language – thus the amoeba is not “real”, it is only possible (to be realized). The other person, however, even culturally strange to me, is a reality, because I can not only get to know him, but also, in the act of conversation preceded, if necessary, with a translation – recognize myself in this man (Flusser 2016a: 26-27).

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<sup>11</sup> In the context of phenomenological experience of foreign subjects, see Husserl 1982: 89-131.

Such reflections (how dialogical!) – appear in this particular case on the basis of the philosophy of a language – Flusser also puts his thoughts in the context of specifically understood phenomenology and the category of intersubjectivity. In the essay *Phenomenology: a meeting of West and East?* we read: “[M]an is always at the center of the world. Each man. Because he is the point where all the relations flow from. Where I stand there is the center of the world. But I am never alone: there are always others with me in the world. They are excentric in relation to me, and I am excentric in their relation. We live in the center of different worlds. But those worlds overlap: the others are in my world, and I am in theirs. It is possible to “recognize” the other’s point of view, because it is possible to “recognize myself” in the other. Recognition is not knowledge. It is a different sort of relation. Because in knowledge there is an object, whilst in recognition there are only subjects. *Recognition is intersubjective*“ (Flusser TS II: 5).

We read here that “the recognition is intersubjective”, although we already know that knowledge is as well. However, this is a different kind of intersubjectivity. It is not based on an objectivistic and objectifying theory, but on a “responsible” and an empowering dialogue. It can be said that in relation with the Other I do not look, I do not search for him (a *theōria* means, among others, “looking/glancing”). Rather, I listen.

Combining these various threads and traditions – the philosophy of dialogue with phenomenology, philosophy of language and communication with ethics, and even with a religion (I return to this in the last part), Flusser develops an interesting perspective, which additionally placed in the context of media and technology gives thought-provoking results. Moreover, the philosophy of dialogue as a certain philosophical perspective assuming the ontological precedence of the relationship between a man and a man directs its attention to communication and the medium. (Though not in each of its versions. Buber, for example, sometimes speaks (1937: 11-12) about a direct dialogue). In his *Pneumatological Fragments* – published in the same year as the Wittgenstein’s *Treatise* (1921) – Ferdinand Ebner writes (2006: 102-103), for example, that the problem of speech and a word, so far neglected, should be in the very centre of philosophical reflection. Could we not treat this thought as a kind of appeal for a “linguistic turn”?

Let us return to the question of ethics and look at how some postmodernist philosophers deal with the new condition of a person in relation to morality from the bird's eye view. Generally speaking, we can say that postmodernity has brought scepticism or even aversion towards universalist ethics. This was connected, firstly, with the slow disappearance of faith in objective and transcendental source of values, already affirmed in the nineteenth century and earlier with the “death of God”. It was, secondly, connected with the experiences of generations

living in the twentieth century: two world wars and, above all, with the Holocaust. To these generations – to which also Flusser belonged – axiological universalism and absolutism were associated with forced homogenization, blurring of differences, and ultimately with totalitarianism. Zygmunt Bauman, for example, writes that in the world in which we have to live – in the postmodern world – we cannot expect clear guidelines for our behaviour. The reality that surrounds us is too complex and disordered (“liquid”), to be pushed into one, absolute and universal ethics. We are therefore condemned to “morality without ethics” (Bauman 1994). However, it does not necessarily mean, according to Bauman, immorality. Instead of trying to establish a universal set of ethical rules, we should focus on the Other, on the meeting with him and on our responsibility, which results from the “closeness” of this meeting. In this context, Bauman, at any rate, refers (Bauman 1998) to Levinas as to one of the founders of “postmodern ethics”. In Richard Rorty's work, we find the idea of solidarity. The American philosopher, however, emphasizes that it should not be treated as a reference to all humanity; such attempts, indeed, may seem noble, but ultimately turn out to be a “handy bit of rhetoric” once submitted to a closer analysis, that is, when we ask: what is humanity? Rorty's solidarity applies to historically conditioned, contingent communities – ethnic, national, neighbourly, institutional, occupational and all others. It means: we apply this idea in practice to such communities; when we say “we”, we mean a specific group with certain “features” in common. This does not mean that solidarity is to be a “closed” category. In this ethical vision, moral progress is precisely the constant increase in the number of “designates” of the concept “we”, i.e. the search for “common features” in groups of people who have appeared as strangers until now (Rorty 1993: 189-198). In both cases – Bauman and Rorty's – we are dealing with an ethics that does not seek its sources in transcendence, in something that would be a source of universal and absolute values, but in historically conditioned human experience, in the practice of social life.

At this point, a question should be posed: does Flusser formulate any positive ethical theses? And does he find any “unusual” – for postmodernity – sources and contexts for ethics? So far, we only know that the Other is a basic reality, which does not depend on my phenomenological constitution or linguistic construction. We also know that the right attitude towards another person is a dialogue that assumes “responsibility,” understood as openness, as waiting for an answer.

In Flusser's essays we will not find specifics in the form of certain ethical norms. This is also one of the characteristics of his texts: interpretive openness (“dialogicality”). Nevertheless, we can find some “negative definitions” in relation to specific matters of morality. And this most often in correspondence, in which Flusser seems to be more willing to discuss this type of issue.

For example, in one of his letters to his childhood friend from Prague, Honzo J. Steiner, who managed to emigrate to the United States, he writes (Flusser COR III: 20) simply that he does not know what good is, because the world is just too complicated for him. However, when we read Flusser's utopia of the telematic society, it is difficult not to get the impression that it has a certain moral imperative – after all, we can say that an ethics (a normative one), like a utopia, is a disagreement with the existing state of affairs, a certain alternative to reality. What is the imperative? We could call it humanism if we recall the idea of a universal dialogue, the creation of a global, technologically managed *polis* in which human freedom and creativity will form a happy society. As it usually happens with Flusser, it is not so simple. Let us refer again to one of his letters: "Humanism is not enough, because man is not only human, but also inhuman. Humanism represses inhumanism, and the result is well known: after Lessing and Goethe come Stalin and Hitler. Therefore I cannot see any "beauty" in humanism: I only see the danger of it. I cannot see any "alternative": we have both to eat the apple and keep it. Adorno, whom I believe to be Jewish, would call this "negative dialectics". Please do not think I am being "advocatus diaboli". If you read carefully what I wrote so hesitantly, you will find we stand on the same side of the trench. *Against* evil. The difference is that you know what you stand *for*. I don't" (Flusser COR II: 8).

Again, uncertainty shines through the words of Flusser. To be against evil without knowing at the same time what good is. However, Flusser does not stop at these reflections, because he is aware that scepticism, especially in relation to moral values, can lead to disastrous nihilism. Referring to the aphorism of Henryk Elzenberg, a Polish philosopher-axiologist, it can be said that "ethical scepticism is a pure thing when, firstly, its source is mental reliability, and secondly, when a sceptic is worried and frets about his scepticism. Because in the moral sphere, scepticism is not a pleasant matter" (Elzenberg 1994: 147). Flusser was pretty aware of it and was looking for ways out of this situation. One of the them was a dialogue with the Other, the second – parallel, sometimes crossing the first – religion. And between these paths, quite unexpectedly, but still necessarily, there stood media.

## **Death and media theology**

In his autobiographical essay – *In Search of Meaning (Philosophical Self-portrait)* – Flusser writes: "[I]f to live is to have found one's way, I did not even begin to live, that is, to have committed myself. I spent my life in availability, and I am still available. Is this a confession of failure? Is it a confession in that I failed to find myself in Brazil and Brazil within myself, and therefore that I failed to even assume myself? But what does "Brazil" mean in this context? It means the scene

into which I was thrown. If I did not find myself in Brazil and did not find Brazil within myself, it means that I did not find the ground of my being in the world. Taken thus, my failure has a religious taste to it. Mine was a life without religion and in search of religion, and is this not, after all, a definition of philosophy?" (Flusser 2002: 198).

Elsewhere in this essay, Flusser asks: "How to have values without religiosity?" (Flusser 2002: 205). This question sounds like the echo of Jean Tarrow's words quoted at the beginning. By transferring this problem to postmodernity, we could ask: how is it possible to live in the world after the "death of God" – that is, in a reality in which we are deprived of objective and universal values? Although Flusser seems to accept this thread of postmodern narratives, he does not avoid writing about faith, religion or God. And in spite of the fact that he often refers to them ironically or as if they were only theoretical constructs, it seems that he sometimes treats them – even if it may sound peculiar – seriously. In this context, a rather unexpected thread appears, a specific combination of a particular religious tradition – or rather its individual interpretation – with the media, something that can be called media theology<sup>12</sup>. It talks around two themes: death and, of course, a dialogue.

Let us refer once more to one of Flusser's letters in which we can read what religion means for him, or rather: what its existential justification is. It is death. He mentions it in a letter to one of his acquaintances, a rabbi whose son had died tragically (Flusser COR II: 7). The main justification for the existence of religious faith is the awareness of human finitude, he writes, the awareness of death. A human being is a being-towards-death. He knows it, and he cannot avert this knowledge. And it overshadows his whole life. However, according to Flusser, religious faith is not the only way to "escape" from death. Communication is another one. This is connected with Flusser's concept of communication, or culture as a whole (which is also communication), opposed to entropy, i.e. the natural tendency of the universe to break down. Human communication is something that stands in opposition to the natural world. Symbols (words, images) refer us to something beyond themselves, something beyond our sensuality – to a concept, an idea. And although these ideas need material carriers, they are not material, they can wander from one memory to another. A dialogue as a creative communication process can greatly help us to preserve the memory of ourselves. It does not matter if we are talking about individual memories (conversations between our relatives) or about culture as such. According to

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<sup>12</sup> The term in the context of Flusser's media theory is used, among others, by Elizabeth Neswald (1998) and Jan P. Hudzik (2017).

Flusser (2016b: 29-32), our dignity rests in it – in an attempt to oppose the absurdity of natural life, in the desire to gain immortality in another human being<sup>13</sup>.

This is not the end. Flusser transfers religious threads not only to communication and culture, but also to the media – specific media. He refers to the tradition of Judaism there. Let us take a look at the fragments of *Into the Universe of Technical Images*: “All pretelematic images, from Lascaux to video, are discursive, broadcast images, projected against the other, obscuring his face. They are forbidden. They lead the wrong way, away from God. Telematic, dialogically synthesized images, on the other hand, are media between one human being and another, through which I may see the face of the other. And through this face I may see God. Dialogical programming of images (the dialogical life) can therefore be a celebration of God (of the absolute other), each one with all others and by means of all others, a prayer. That is basically what I meant by alternative programs. We may be at the point of remembering how to celebrate. We may be at the point of finding our way back, on a strange detour through telematics, to being genuinely human, that is, to a festive existence for another, to purposeless play with others and for others” (Flusser 2011: 156-157).

Here, in the utopia of the telematic society, the relationship between religion, communication and the media resonates with great force. Dialogical life is life with others and for others in technologically mediated communication, which is supposed to be ludic, “aimless”, although, it should be noted that still its “side effect” should be new information. Only a dialogue allows us to see the face of the Other, because only a dialogue is “responsible”, only in a dialogue do we listen, do we allow the other person to respond. In this case, specific communicational technologies are of great importance because they enable (e.g. a telephone) or block (e.g. television) a dialogue. It is not difficult to see the context of the philosophy of dialogue in these combinations of media, communication and technology as well as religious threads. Traditional dialogists argued that a dialogue with another person leads directly to God, or that the conversation with Him is the prototype of all other conversations. “Top and bottom are connected together,” Buber writes, “Whoever wants to speak with people without speaking with God, their word does not fulfil. But whoever wants to speak to God without speaking to a man, their word strays” (Buber 1992: 222).

In formulating this kind of thesis Flusser remains in the sphere of metaphor, utopia, philosophical fiction – but this should not surprise the reader who is familiar with his thought and way of philosophising. What could one of the attempts to untie this network of associations,

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<sup>13</sup> Similar themes appear in the philosophy of Hannah Arendt (1998). This similarity probably arises from the reference of both theoreticians to the tradition of Judaism, where this idea has one of its sources.

intuitions and images look like? Well, we could, for example, assume that the God Flusser writes about in the aforementioned passage is a kind of transcendence understood in a unique way. It is unusual because it has its source in the transgressed reality. Transcendence as a dialogue, as an I-Thou relationship, as something supernatural that is nevertheless somehow rooted in nature, this “surprising phenomenon of human communication”. Is there in a real insight into the soul of another human being, in the eyes of the world through his eyes or *vice versa*, in expressing what there is inside of us, expressing what has been available only to us, sharing our secret with someone – is there no element in any of these, which we could call “divine”? Is this not a borderline experience, almost mystical? Cases of this type of communication are certainly rare, such a dialogue, that may belong to the world of art. However, can we expect that meetings with God will be something prosaic?

### **Between resentment, freedom and dialogical life – final remarks**

Jan P. Hudzik begins his text with the observation that it is impossible to make only one correct interpretation of Flusser's thought. I will start ending mine by saying that it is also impossible to summarise this thought, since that would mean ending the dialogue and thus refuting the idea that motivates him to write – the text, if it is supposed to remain significant, cannot be “exhausted”. However, we may point out some interpretative clues that can be used as “new openings,” probably along with certain restrictions – ways to use the dialogue category in today's socio-cultural context. (There I will refer – just as Flusser did – to the context of Western civilization, broadly understood).

Against the idea of dialogical life, as the philosopher from Prague understood it, several arguments can be put forward, say, from individualistic-liberal positions. I will mention two such objections. First, the dialogical understanding of a subject may be accused of not fulfilling one of the characteristic features of classically understood subjectivity. I mean autonomy or autarky – using the terminology of the ancients. By stating – as *de facto* dialogists do, and Flusser as well – that subjectivity is created in relation with other subjects, it is assumed this is not possible to think of an individual subject existing on its own, not to mention its self-sufficiency (e.g. in the context of attaining happiness). Levinas even writes (1994: 127) that the subject is a “hostage” of the Other. Of course, such an argument based on Flusser's theory must be rejected as semantically empty. Accepting the dialogical “origin” of human subjectivity, it deals with the idealistic assumption that there is a solid core of this subjectivity, something definite, given “in advance”, which nature can be clearly defined. However, this argument against the dialogical

approach to a human being can be softened by referring to certain naturalistic themes in the Enlightenment philosophy (Rousseau 1992) or, above all, to Nietzsche's concept of resentment (1989: 36-37). The German philosopher writes on the morality of "slaves" as about a reactionary, always in need of external stimuli, and therefore mendacious, because it does not come from individual spontaneity – from the will to power. Resentment, of course, has its further harmful consequences in the form of the collapse of the entire culture. Flusser detected this threat but he saw it differently and expressed it in other terms – communicological terms. A discursive society in which people are not "programmed *for* communication but *by* communication" (Flusser TS I: 3) is a danger. This is how Flusser explains the creation of totalitarian societies. Within a culture in which a dialogue is an equal structure, this type of threat does not occur because people can respond – only now: spontaneously, with their "will to power" – to the cultural message they receive.

The second possible objection or doubt about the concept of dialogical life is to some extent connected with the first one and concerns the fundamental question of human freedom. Dialogical life is, above all, life "with others and for others". From the perspective of today's ubiquitous praise of freedom – understood most often negatively as "freedom from" – and individualism, this may cause anxiety. Since my creativity, my text, and even my own self depends – to some extent – on the Other, then this Other limits my freedom significantly and "besets" my individuality. I claim, however, that this doubt may be a kind of praise for dialogical life in postmodernity, in times of axiological uncertainty. Flusser does not deny that individualism and freedom are key aspects of a human condition – it is hard to find a greater individualist and nomad (life and intellectual). But he thinks that they cannot exist without dialogue. Individuality is guaranteed by a dialogue itself – we remember: responsibility – there is not a chance to rate any community above the individual. I have already mentioned that the telematic society should not be treated as universal, global direct democracy. In the case of freedom, the matter is more complicated. Nevertheless, broadly speaking, Flusser does not believe naively in freedom as self-sufficient, it must also involve something else – of course, another freedom. The dualism of positive and negative freedom is therefore pointless. This is a consequence of the interpretation of dialogue which I have suggested here. The relation with the Other, understood as a kind of "transcendence", is the only permanent goal of human freedom, a goal which is necessary. And only a dialogue leads to it, because only in a dialogue do I consider – recognise and not cognise – the Other as the Other. I let him be himself. Such a dialogue is not easy – it is clear. Admitting one's own limitations and incompleteness requires courage and acceptance that my freedom is limited and must remain like that for my own good.

On the one hand, it may be said that this ethical vision has nothing particularly new in itself. These are – simplifying – the truths of great religions: Judaism, Christianity. However, this will not be an objection. As Robert Spaemann writes: “In seeking answers to questions about the right kind of life, only the false could be really new” (Spaemann 2005: VII). He emphasises, however, that it is worth writing and talking about what is seemingly obvious, primarily because the conditions of the world around us change rapidly. And this is also where the power of Flusser’s theory lies: in reminding us of the known, “eternal” truths, reinterpreting them, and reapplying them under new cultural conditions in a landscape created by technology, mainly communications technology. The task would seem impossible. Just right for Flusser. He finally manages to “smuggle” dialogical and even religious content to this new world, in which even God did not survive – to put a postmodern apparently “postmetaphysical” man in a position where he has to face eternal problems and resolve them at the level of mythological imagination. And Flusser does it as he does everything, accurately and subtly, without flat moralising. A tinge of sentiment for the irretrievably lost world does not change into a song of disappointment over “the modem soul, which playfully spans oceans and continents, but for which nothing is as impossible as finding its way to souls who live just around the corner.”<sup>14</sup> It is rather a melody directed towards the future, cautious but full of hope, that we will be able to hear our neighbour among technological noise and through him – to reach further, to “eternity”. *Não morreremos conjugados*<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> These words come from a book of Robert Musil’s, *A Man Without Qualities* (1996: 236).

<sup>15</sup> It is a fragment of one of the two inscriptions on the tombstone of Flusser. In its entirety it reads: *Não morreremos conjugados. “Nós” nunca morreremos, porque apenas eu e tu, a solidão é para a morte*. It can be translated: “Together we will not die. »We« will never die, only me and you, solitude is death”. The second inscription presents the words from the Book of Hosea (Hos. 14:10) written in Czech – in the translation: “Who is wise enough to understand these things? Who is intelligent enough to know them?”.

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