

Dialogical Psychology

A Review of the book The Dialogical Mind: Common Sense and Ethics

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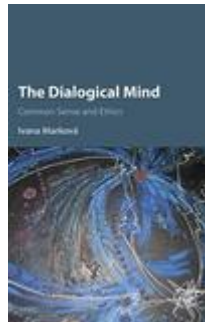
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Dialogical Psychology

A Review of

The Dialogical Mind: Common Sense and Ethics

by Ivana Marková

Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016. 246 p. ISBN

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Reviewed by

Luca Tateo 

Psychological sciences are in desperate need of epistemological reflection. This is required by the very object of study, not because epistemological elaboration is missing in itself. The psyche is historical (Tateo & Valsiner, 2015) as well as its physiological substrate (Wickens, 2014). So, the whole system of concepts, methodologies, and forms of knowledge must develop over time. Epistemology of psychological sciences must constantly change with its object of study also because our knowledge of the mind is affecting in return our psychological experience in everyday life. Besides, since the very origins of the study of psyche, epistemological, physical, ontological, ethical, and metaphysical problems intertwined. We are in a constant need for epistemological reflection in psychology also because the “mind” (or whatever is called the object of study) is the only example of the object studying itself in the vast and uncertain horizon of human knowledge.

These epistemological issues constitute the background on top of which Ivana Marková builds her learned and articulated reflection in the book *The Dialogical Mind: Common Sense and Ethics*. Unfortunately, such an airy critical discussion about the object and the foundations of psychological knowledge is becoming quite unusual in contemporary research. It seems that dealing with meta-theoretical and epistemological questions is moving the efforts of psychology away from its very empirical goals. After all, who cares about the general justification of the knowledge produced by psychological research if it only matters what kind of empirical evidence can be produced or what applications one can get to support very specific and short-range theories? Marková is instead one of the few scholars left to care about the very foundations of psychology and to grasp the complexity and concerns of its ultimate object and producer: the human being.

The Dialogical Mind is actually the summa of Marková’s lifelong work on dialogicality. The core of the book is the opposition between “monological” and “dialogical” epistemologies in psychology. According to the author, such a distinction—one among the many others we have in psychology yet more than others relevant to the understanding of the development of this science—is still orienting the different developments of psychological sciences. The monological epistemology, for instance, can be traced back to Descartes, Locke, and Kant.

It is characterized by an individualistic understanding of the psyche and a normative view of the processes of thought. The dialogical epistemology is instead rooted in the philosophy of authors such as Giambattista Vico (Tateo, 2017), Fichte, Hegel, and Bakhtin. The dialogical approach in psychology is based on the axiom of the inseparability of the Ego-Alter system. The mind is inherently dialogical, that is, in interaction with the Other—individuals, institutions, cultures, past, present, and future—in a totality that is often referred as *Umwelt* (von Uexküll, 1934/1992). The individual organism cannot exist as isolated from its environment, and in the case of human beings, the environment is constituted by meaningful relationships of interdependency with the others.

Marková claims that the relation of interdependency Self-Other is also fundamentally ethical, that is, it evolves in our daily encounters and joint activities with the others who require an adequate response to their social demands, just as we require of the other an adequate response to our personal demands in return. Since infancy, the human being learns that well-being depends on this well-tuned way of interacting with the Other. One could say that this is just common sense. “Precisely!” would answer Marková. This is why her discussion starts exactly from the longstanding opposition between science and common sense. In the first part of the book, indeed, she presents her view of common sense as the vital characteristic of social and psychological life, based on the Self-Other ethical relationship.

Since the origin of Western epistemological reflection, two modes of thinking and knowing have been acknowledged. They have been given several names: mythos and logos, episteme and endoxa, science and common sense, and so on. One of the constant topics of epistemology was that of establishing whether science and common sense are two irreducibly different modes of knowing—with the former of course higher than the latter—or if they are in some continuity. Marková shows how different psychological approaches are positioned with respect to the issue of mythos and logos but also how psychological sciences had a lot of hard times in trying to establish common sense as its object of study.

In the second part of the book, the author presents instead the crucial argument that the different mental functions acquire a completely different nature and meaning depending on which epistemological approach we adopt. Indeed, dialogical and interactional epistemologies imply that the object of study and the forms of knowing are radically different from monological epistemologies, as well as differing in the hierarchy of mental functions. The object of study in dialogical epistemologies becomes “*the Ego-Alter as an irreducible ethical and ontological unit*” (Marková, 2016, p. 94). For instance, it would make little sense even to study the individual brain out of its relationship with other brains or objects in the environment. Yet the form of knowing is also dialogical, as knowing occurs as the Ego-Alter-Object relation. This implies that we always know *with* something or someone, rather than *about* someone or something. The researcher builds *dialogical concepts*, that is, assumes that the relationship between Ego and Alter always refers to an object, but also that the relationship between Ego and Object is always established in a context of activity that includes the Alter—whether as present partner of interaction or distal generalized other or internalized voice of the other. Finally, the hierarchy of mental functions is also changing. If we acknowledge the relevance of praxis, everyday thinking, ethical relationships, and common sense in psychological life, then the normative view of rational thinking as the higher form of mental activity is no longer sustainable: “the metaphor of ‘inferior’ and ‘superior’ thinking” (Marková, 2016, p. 214) should definitely disappear. Marková shows

how imagination, intuition, language, trust, and so on play a ubiquitous role in everyday psychological life, often underpinning rationality itself.

Marková is of course advocating for the adoption of dialogical epistemology in psychology. Yet she does not claim that in a science war, a school should prevail over the other. She rather calls for a *dialogical turn* in social psychology. Dialogical epistemology implies a different *commitment* of the researcher with his or her object. The researcher and the object change and develop together exactly because of their encounter: They make a history together. This is why we need a constant epistemological reflection, abandoning the illusion of a total distancing between subject and object of the psychological science through empirical devices.

I think that the author's final argumentation is that dialogical epistemologies can help to develop any kind of psychological research and professional practice. No matter if you are a neuropsychologist, a social psychologist, a psychoanalyst, a hard cognitivist, or a cultural psychologist, you will find the confrontation with Marková's book a stimulating source for your own epistemological reflection and eventually a starting point for new approaches to psychological research.

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