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Education from the Perspective of the Philosophy of Dialogue: Ethical Aspects During the COVID-19 Pandemic

ABSTRACT

The personal relationship between teacher and student is an important element of the educational process. It takes place in a specific space, which is usually a school. Interpersonal relationships and the space in which the interaction occurs are very important for understanding the essence of humankind. Problems related to the understanding of interpersonal relationships and their place in the broader educational process are also key issues in the philosophy of dialogue, as perceived by Józef Tischner. Therefore, the article first presents the main outlines of the philosophy of dialogue, understood as a starting point for education; then it emphasizes the importance of dialogue in education and the role of the meeting between teacher and student in the educational process. Over the last two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, interpersonal relationships have been greatly limited and sometimes even impossible, while the learning process was carried out remotely. With this in mind, the article discusses the ethical dimension of education in both real and virtual meetings. The main aim of the article is to draw attention to the threats facing today's changing education and to emphasize one of the important elements of education, which is educational dialogue.

KEYWORDS

education, dialogue,
meeting, ethics,
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Introduction

The time of the pandemic influenced all aspects of our lives. It is hard to find a space that would not have been affected by restrictions, lockdowns or isolation. A life-threatening disease keeps each person in a state of permanent readiness and tension. Our health, which is the basis for our existence and action, provides us with strength necessary for functioning in the field of science, work, culture, and education. When we instinctively want to protect ourselves and other people, we ignore the cost we have to bear. It is not surprising, then, that the circumstances in which we live make the protection of our health and life a priority. Unfortunately, during the long time in which we were under various pandemic restrictions, the quality of our life decreased. Travelling, which used to be so simple, started to require several sanitary rules that limited our freedom to move from place to place. Everyday life showed us that, apart from hospitals, shops and offices became places in which the most significant changes occurred. There were restrictions related to the number of people per one square meter in those places, as well as many other sanitary requirements for everyone who wanted to access them. Pandemic restrictions involved changes in almost all spaces in which people met both for private and professional purposes.

One of the spaces which experienced such changes in a particularly strong manner was education: primary schools, secondary schools, universities, and other places related to education. It is difficult to predict how online education, which has already exerted influence on students' functioning, will be interpreted in future. That is why, in this article we will discuss a fundamental educational issue, i.e. the personal relationship between a teacher and a student at school, with particular reference to the online educational process.

Issues connected with understanding personal relationships and their place in broadly understood educational process are also key issues in the philosophy of dialogue according to Józef Tischner. In his opinion, the space of interpersonal relations and the space in which the meeting occurs are very important for understanding the very essence of a human being. The philosophy of that thinker from the Polish Highlands reveals the relationship horizon that makes it easier for us to understand the transformation of teaching (from

traditional to remote one) from the ethical perspective. It is worth mentioning, however, that providing final responses in a normative form is very difficult, as the changes are taking place all the time and we do not know when they will end or what their final results will be.

Thus, the objective of this article is to indicate threats facing modern education which is undergoing dynamic changes, and to emphasize the most important elements of education. Therefore, first we will outline the philosophy of dialogue as the starting point for education, and then we will discuss the meaning of dialogue in education and the process of upbringing in the context of a meeting. Also, we will emphasize the ethical dimension of education that is not only taking place in a meeting in the real world, but also in the virtual world.

Philosophy of dialogue as the starting point for education

Philosophy of dialogue is one of the trends of modern thinking which is based on the concept in which relationships constitute the foundation for a human being's existence. In this approach, a person's existence is based on dialogue/talk with another person. Dialogue goes beyond the subjective cognition of the world because it does not refer to the subject-object relationship, but it facilitates the subject-subject relationship. The philosophy of meeting, which is another name for the philosophy of dialogue, objectivizes the reality due to interpersonal interactions, revealing the foundation for the axiological basis for the "I-You" relationship (Kiereś 2001: 570).

While tracing the development of the philosophy of dialogue in Polish thinking, we can come across its leading representative: Józef Tischner. His work related to this subject is *Filozofia dramatu* [*The Philosophy of Drama*] (1990) from which we can draw the basic knowledge for understanding human relationships, as well as the relationship between a person and the world. The space in which we live enables us to experience impulses that inspire our attitudes towards life. The relationship between a person and another human being is a direct experience as a result of which we enter a dialogue. "Dialogic opening is opening to another person; to you, him, her, us, and to them. In another person a human being is present for me, and I am present for the other" (Tischner 1990: 18). It is worth

emphasizing the fact that in the world full of pandemic restrictions it is not enough to be open to another person because it is difficult to meet when all people are locked down or isolated from one another. In this specific situation, all the complexity of communication faces barriers in the fulfillment of the assumptions of a dialogue. The presence of another person is not just the exchange of thoughts, but also a handshake or a facial expression through which he/she asks us to say: “How are you?” In a dialogue, this is a verbal and non-verbal form of expressing being for someone else and communicating with them. Modern communication devices give us the opportunity to talk to someone without physical contact. However, is such a contact (e.g., on the phone) equally valuable as a physical meeting? The reply may be difficult. On the one hand, it is good that we have at least such a contact. On the other hand, it is impossible to communicate with someone fully if we only hear each other, without experiencing the real presence here and now. A meeting in such conditions cannot be complete. I am not fully present for you, and you cannot be fully present for me. That is why, referring to the basic assumptions of the philosophy of dialogue and to broadly understood communication problems during the pandemic, it is worth discussing the space of contact in education.

Scene as the place of a meeting is one of the fundamental assumptions in Tischner’s philosophy of dialogue, which were described in the book *Filozofia dramatu*. “We are in the world like on the stage” (Tischner 1990: 14–18), says Tischner. Narrowing the field for understanding the role of a “stage” in an interpersonal dialogue, we may assume that each talk takes place on a “stage.” A place itself can evoke specific emotions and behaviours in us. When we are in a public place, we follow different principles than we do in our own house. Also, in a cafe we behave according to different principles than in a sacred place. Each location can be our little scene that facilitates or hinders dialogue. School, which is a particular meeting place, aims at teaching knowledge and objective values, as well as educating a young person. While undergoing many transformations, education, which originated from the ancient Greece, in its history has worked out a special place for the fulfillment of its assumptions, i.e. a school. While entering a school, we know from the start what the place is intended for. We become intentionally oriented at gaining

knowledge, looking at the place from the perspective of a student. Also, a teacher entering the school building is aware of the fact that this is a place of his/her work and fulfillment of their vocation to be a pedagogue.

For education and philosophy of dialogue the following two basic aspects are crucial: a meeting with another person and the place of such a meeting, i.e. a specific “scene.” Nevertheless, what conditions must be fulfilled to make the meeting/dialogue/talk valuable and to make the place itself facilitate the true presence and being for each other? Teaching is a special kind of a meeting in which the teacher aims at transferring his/her knowledge to the student. But, in this situation, after the changes that took place in the way of teaching, which form new barriers for the “scene” of the educational meeting, does the educational value itself remain intact? In this context, is not the ethical dimension of education weakened by the impossibility to participate in a real meeting between the teacher and the student? These are certainly important questions which we should try to answer.

Dialogue in education

The beginning of education is marked by the presence of a teacher, a *paidagogos*, who lived in Athens of the ancient Greece and who was usually a slave. He was perceived as a craftsman, and his task included physical, intellectual, cultural and civic preparation of a student for public life (Juraś-Krawczyk, Śliwerski 2000: 104). He was treated as a skilled businessman or technician who was able to transfer his experiences to his pupils. He was often perceived as a member of a family whose job was to teach his students the art of hunting, courage, power of the spirit, and fitness. In this classical approach to education, teaching in a remote manner would be unthinkable. The master-student relationship has always been crucial in educational practice. That is why, we should consider whether dialogue that cannot overcome certain barriers is still a dialogue in the full meaning of the word.

If the meeting of a teacher and a student was a common teaching practice, it is worth considering general, and, at the same time, basic tasks of a teacher. The most important competence typologies,

focused on the specific features of a teacher's work, were indicated by Hanna Hamer and Czesław Banach. The first of them (Hamer 1994: 25–125) divides teaching competences into:

- specialist ones, which mainly include knowledge of the subject taught, as well as self-education skills;
- didactic ones, which specify the skills related to directing the students' learning process;
- psychological ones, which combine attitudes and personality traits related to the positive approach to people with communication, social and self-regulation skills.

Let us analyse the third task. A teacher is to combine “attitudes and personality traits” with particular skills, and the transfer of knowledge should be based on dialogue. Everything that is combined within psychological competences is the expression of the influence of one subject on another subject. Communication skills, which are necessary in the modern world, are first born within a meeting with a parent and with the surrounding world. Then, a child meets a teacher who is to shape the young mind and body. Education should not just assume the transfer of pure knowledge.

In the history of humankind, educational activity has always faced various challenges. Nevertheless, it has never experienced such a specific and difficult challenge as the COVID-19 pandemic time. In the pedagogical dimension it is important for the teacher to become fully involved in the educational process. He/she is to give the students their time, knowledge, presence, values, and ideals. Such a vision of a teacher is a model for all pedagogues. The experience of everyday life, however, shows various attitudes of teachers towards such an ideal. A teacher is to encourage a student to search for the truth, to do good, to be open to the beauty of the surrounding world. It is due to direct contact that a person responsible for teaching is able to react to possible deficiencies of a student, so that, in the educational process, the student may not only gain knowledge but also become a responsible person. A student who is about to complete his education should, apart from gaining broad knowledge in various areas of life, become equipped with reliable social competences and proper communication skills. In further stages of development, as a result of previously gained competences, a young person is to shape his/her self-confidence, new horizons of self-fulfillment of their dreams and

ambitions, as well as the awareness of perspectives awaiting them in future, not only on the job market, but also in personal life.

However, do not students have their obligations, too? The opportunity to gain education is given to everyone, but using this benefit assumes being open to knowledge. Readiness for dialogue assumes presence, but presence itself does not result in interaction. It is because the presence itself does not always involve openness at the beginning of a meeting. If a student, being in a classroom during a lesson, is not open to dialogue and to the knowledge which is being transferred to him/her, the presence itself will not result in adopting the knowledge. And what happens when the student does not sit with his/her classmates in a typical classroom, but in a room of their own house? The temptation to focus on something else than on the knowledge which is being transferred is very strong in such circumstances. While sitting in front of a computer at home it is much easier to open a new window in the Internet browser and read things that seem more interesting, but are less useful. In such a situation, a student remains "in the virtual classroom," but his/her attention is somewhere else. The same situation may occur at school, but then, seeing that a student is focused on something different than the subject of the lesson, a teacher may react more quickly, and the student, through being "here and now," is forced to think about what is happening in the classroom. Openness is an internal and external attitude of intentional orientation towards messages sent by another person who is searching for contact (Tischner 1990: 18; 2000: 297). If a teacher is looking for such contact, he/she may come across the student's presence, but not always openness. Then, the teacher's words and attempt to transfer knowledge is "like herding cats." The need for common openness appears, as neither the teacher's competences, nor the student's presence are sufficient for effective education. However, it is worth emphasizing that the value of education does not only consist in knowledge itself, but also in shaping a person's responsibility, justice, knowledge of good manners in all kinds of everyday situations, awareness of one's social and personal granting of priority to objective principles, such as "do not kill; do not steal," etc. In this way, the value of ethical dimension of education is fulfilled in dialogue.

Taking into account differences in dialogue taking place in the real or virtual world, we can notice that they result from differences

occurring in other places (scenes) of that meeting. Each of them has its strong and weak points, which results in, on the one hand, new opportunities, and, on the other hand, obstacles on the way to a real personal meeting. Virtual education certainly makes it possible to follow the adopted curricula. However, does this exhaust the basic meaning of education, or perhaps this only aims at the continuation of knowledge transfer? Have not we, somewhere on the way, lost a person whom we are educating? What does upbringing mean? How should we understand education that is fulfilled through a meeting?

Education as a meeting

In the context of the above outlined issue of dialogue in education taking place in the real and virtual world, we can formulate the question concerning a meeting in a strictly educational perspective. Let us make the question more precise: how does a meeting influence education, and how should we understand education as such? If we answer these questions, it will be easier for us to specify what we can learn from the experience of online learning during the pandemic.

It would be a mistake to assume that the pandemic, changing the ways and place of teaching, is the only (if at all) reason for the crisis of education. Did the crisis of school start during the pandemic? It seems that the pandemic, changing the dimension of the real meeting and taking us into the virtual world, only made the existing educational crisis deeper. "We are talking a lot about the crisis of school. According to Plato, the author of one of the archetypes of European education, every crisis is, in its essence, a personal crisis. It consists in living in the illusion of good, truth and beauty" (Gadacz 1991: 50). We have already discussed tasks of a pedagogue, as well as the crisis of dialogue that occurred during the pandemic. However, the key issue includes values that should be the basis for education. Nowadays education stops leading to knowledge and affirmation of basic values, and boils down to pure knowledge, without axiological weight. Such education is deprived of its meaning. For Plato, that meaning included basic values, such as truth, good and beauty. He taught that it is in those values and through them that we can develop our souls. The more a person developed the value of truth

in themselves, and the more they learnt about it, the easier they saw good and beauty which grew up along with themselves.

A person full of these three values made themselves able to be fully human. The crisis of a person may be expressed in, e.g. distortion of the hierarchy of values, or the lack of knowledge of such a hierarchy, as a result of which a human being cannot fully develop as a person. Plato's ideal world assumed taking values as patterns that help us live in harmony with the world, other people and ourselves. When we start looking at the world as the arena of wars and conquests, and at another man as a tool for the fulfillment of our needs, then we experience a crisis of ourselves, our personality and humanity. "For modern times, knowledge discovers the world, but no longer as a way to values, but rather as an object one may rule. Truth ceases to be the fruit of unselfish cognition that allows us to return to the world of ideas and becomes the power of ruling over a man and the world" (Gadacz 1991: 52). The personalistic perspective shows the primacy of a human being over the world of things. Placing himself in the centre of the universe, without proper hierarchy of values, a man risks losing the ability to understand himself. This means that a person, being in the centre of our interest, instead of material goods, such as power, money or other minor values should see the values of truth, good and beauty as the basis for his existence.

If those basic values are not a priority, education becomes just teaching the technical will of ruling over the world and another person, and not upbringing for experiencing the fullness of one's humanity. A modern post-industrial, transhumanist man often adopts the attitude of rejecting truth, good and beauty for the willingness to rule the world and his own life, without noticing that, in quest for such power, he loses himself. One of the consequences of such an attitude may include aggression towards basic values, because when such a man lies, truth dazzles him; when he does wrong, good judges him, and when this happens, he is not beautiful in his humanity, but he is a caricature of himself. What is a person, then, if not a true reflection of higher values, basic values, the only values that make them human? Is he/she only a part of a technical, mechanical world? Or perhaps the image of the future is not so dark?

Let us go even further to avoid doubts. If changes in education assume reducing a person's education to teaching them how to

consume this world, what this means or what it can lead us to? “Education is upbringing for being a person. Apart from the well-known distinction between «be» and «have» by Gabriel Marcel, which is extremely important for the issue of education, we also make a distinction between «be» and «function». Being is being a person. Functioning is a non-personal activity” (Gadacz 1991: 53). If functioning is the priority of education, values seem to be pushed to the background. In such an approach, truth is only useful and right if it helps us functioning. It becomes a usable product that can undergo a subjective transformation for one’s needs, and not a pattern of behavior as an objective paradigm of existence. A man in such a reality is threatened with losing his essence, i.e. his humanity.

Obviously, we do not want to say that the ability to function in the society is of secondary value. Communication competences, management skills, as well as the ability to carry out effective trade and provide services are very important competences in the modern world. However, we should also ask ourselves about the place of a human being and the role of his/her competences in functioning as a person. All competences and skills are to serve a person. If they do, we can develop, understand the world better and build the world in a wiser manner. However, such a servitude requires the acceptance of the normative nature of basic values. They are values that make it possible to normatively specify what is good, i.e. what serves a human being and what does not. However, very often it is exactly the opposite. A human being becomes a tool for the fulfilment of imposed assumptions that take into account only economic, social, etc. good. Such a reductionist approach does not take into account the primacy of basic values, which is why the proper hierarchy of values becomes distorted. Again, the question about the hierarchy of values returns: are truth and good more important than material goods?

The philosophy of dialogue emphasizes the relational nature of a person. Such nature results from the common experiencing of one’s existence in the common space. A person is in the center of a meeting and, at the same time, he/she is not alone. “Education as a certain intention is a vocation” (Gadacz 1991: 50) because a teacher “lifts a young person up” and develops what they already have, i.e. humanity.

Therefore, does a meeting have an influence on education? It seems that it does. What's more, it is mainly in a meeting that we should educate a person for values. "A teacher who educates in a personal manner has spiritual and intellectual authority which he/she does not lose when ideologies collapse and social orders change, as the teacher is a mandatory of God. Being such a mandatory, the teacher does not have to hide his/her weaknesses" (Gadacz 1991: 60). A person with such an authority may or even should be called a pedagogue by vocation, i.e. someone who acts with a certain intention aiming at educating others. The ability to open oneself and sacrifice one's work for another person to show them basic values is a model attitude, i.e. an attitude that should be shown by each pedagogue. "The world of values is revealed in a living manner through a meeting of people. But just as we have separated the order of being from the order of functioning, we can differentiate education «in the optics of being» and «in the optics of functioning»" (Gadacz 1991:58). This optics of education for functioning is presented as a rigid fulfillment of the assumptions made in advance. In this attitude there is no openness to the individual dimension of education. As we are all individuals, none of us needs a technical instruction of using oneself as a cog in the machine of humanity. Instead, we need a perspective for development and fulfillment of ourselves in the world in which we live. We need to learn the attitude of openness to being oneself in the full meaning of the word, i.e. to be delighted with objective values and fulfill them in everyday life. A pedagogue by vocation should be a leader directing young people towards real humanity. A teacher who only teaches others to function in a society becomes a tool of ideologization. He/she treats students as actors preparing for playing their role in the society, which seems a very narrow-minded approach to the multifaceted process of learning and education.

Ethical dimension of education in a real and virtual meeting

It is a cliché to claim that proper education of the young generation is an expression of concern for the future of humanity which is nowadays developing fast in almost each possible direction. Such concern for the improvement of our children's conditions of life results from our need to feel that their future is safe. By sending

children to school, we hope that they will gain knowledge that is necessary for living in the modern world. Such knowledge is a value and it also involves development of self-knowledge, i.e. knowledge of who one actually is.

The fulfillment of the assumptions of the philosophy of a meeting without taking into account specific time, space and another human being, seems impossible. School as the place for education enables the meeting of an internal world of a child/young person with a teacher responsible for their education. Various aspects of that meeting depend on constant changes that are made in the educational process. Such changes include the necessity to adjust the form of education to the requirements of modern times. Changes in the way of teaching which resulted from the pandemic include the mass introduction of modern technologies into the process of education. However, the use of such technologies should not erase the personal primate and relational nature of transferring knowledge and education. The time of the pandemic moved us into virtual places of education, i.e. internet platforms, which is related to a new, different quality of education. However, that new, different quality cannot be the reason for forgetting about the teacher's mission and vocation. Education, in its essence, must take into account upbringing as the foundation. "Ethics wants to understand the sources and meanings of fears of human conscience; it wants to understand the scope of human freedom; and, first of all, it wants to give a meaningful shape to human hope. It is because the whole human quest for values; the whole effort aimed at fulfilling values in the real world and in oneself; the whole searching for *ethos*, is full of the experience of hope [...]. That is why, our concern for the basic ethics includes: making unbridled human hopes meaningful" (Tischner 2018: 68). The meaning we are discussing is not easy to find. Neither material goods, nor fame or power can satisfy the need for such a meaning. It seems that if a person wants to follow the internal ethos of searching for the meaning, he/she has to return to what Plato taught. Thus, basic values should fill in our internal and external world of hopes in an objective manner. Such values may become a pattern for a man's way of life in his constant fulfillment of the meanings to which his own hope leads him. If a person is to follow the way of truth, good and beauty, i.e. constantly to learn about oneself and look for the meaning

of their existence, it is necessary to educate them in a way that is not just education for “functioning,” but also for “being.” Thus, a question arises about the ethical dimension of education in the virtual world.

The time of the pandemic was very difficult for education which had to face new challenges. As a virtual place of meeting, school facilitated further separation of “education for being” from “education for functioning.” The virtual world that was introduced into education makes it possible to activate new forms of knowledge transfer, but, in itself, it does not give us a new quality. Tadeusz Gadacz notices that “the symptom of the school crisis is losing the meaning of the word «education». School does not provide education; it only teaches and transfers knowledge” (Gadacz 1991: 51). During the pandemic, education perceived in this way was deprived of the event of a personal meeting in which upbringing may be carried out in the best manner. It turns out that, in a way, the pandemic deepened the school crisis. This can be noticed in losing the personal, physical relationship between a teacher and a student, which is why the meeting based only on a virtual transfer of knowledge loses the features of a real, personal meeting. Obviously, I want to emphasize that my intention is not to close education in traditional forms, because I am aware of the fact that new techniques of education, as well as new information technologies, may improve the educational process. However, while chasing the future we cannot forget that it is grandparents, family, peers, teachers, and the local community who create the original environments in which a person develops. Another natural environment which supports educational places is school where, first of all, we should care about the personal master-student relationship. “A teacher, who is a master, can open his/her house to the student and invite them in. In the ethos of life, the student can find place in that house. In this way, school becomes an extension of a family home” (Gadacz 1991: 60).

Ethics in the space of education does not only involve revealing incorrectness. First of all, it should show a young person the proper way. In its essence, education should teach “being” and not “functioning.” Teaching the meaning of being is to discover the values Tischner discussed in the context of ethics. Why should it be this way? Because virtual “places of teaching” may, in a way, dehumanize us through separating the process of education from the requirement

of fulfilling it through a meeting in the real world. That is why, such a way of teaching may deepen the crisis of school. Despite the fact that the curriculum is carried out, its essence is not so clear anymore. Education for living in the light of values becomes blurred and diminished through the radical change in teaching methods. We should hope that, in education, we will always keep “the subjective I” and “the subjective you” as the priority, so that our common meeting in the unspoiled world of our stage of life can constantly develop and motivate us for further work on ourselves. However, we have to admit that, in future, online education may become the basic form of teaching and learning. This is as much possible as impossible. Before the pandemic it seemed impossible, at least in Poland. It turns out, however, that reality sometimes goes beyond our imagination. What we can learn from that difficult pandemic time is that we have to search for such technologies, skills and competences that facilitate a good meeting in which educational assumptions can be fulfilled. The primate of a meeting and shaping students’ basic values as the essence of the educational curriculum can never be moved to the background. Responsibility for future generations requires education in accordance with the objective values such as truth, good and beauty. Virtual methods of teaching seem to distort the meeting to such an extent that education for values becomes very difficult or even impossible. The crisis of school, from modern times to the pandemic time, can only be stopped if we start educating a man “for being.” As the main educational idea, learning for the development of one’s humanity should not be reduced to the transfer of knowledge, which usually happens in strictly virtual education. Truth, good and beauty are values that can only be fulfilled in the personal meeting with another person. Education for these values, as well as fulfilling them, is impossible without the reality of a personal meeting, and not just a meeting based on the telephone, computer or other internet devices.

Conclusion

Interpersonal relationships are based on people’s meetings. During such meetings it is possible to carry out real communication based on dialogue. There is no doubt that dialogue is a very important educational interaction. Preparing students for dialogue and developing

it is a long and complex process, which is to be taught at school at all educational stages. Dialogue occupies special place in a person's social life and functioning, as well as in the life of human communities or institutions. In education, dialogue is related to the subjective approach to the whole educational process, to activeness, innovation, creativity, as well as responsibility for the autonomy of the educational process subjects. Also, it is worth mentioning that, in the present social, economic and political situation, education requires teachers, parents and students to adopt specific skills and good will to carry out dialogue. A meeting, which used to take place in a specific place and time, can now be fulfilled through various communication devices using new information exchange techniques. That is why, in today's school reality, it is very important to create, maintain and care for the proper course of dialogue which, to a large extent, already moved into the virtual world. We should always remember that "the key experience for human ethical self-knowledge is the experience of another person" (Tischner 1982: 399–400). According to Tischner, a meeting is connected with an ethical experience, as it involves responsibility for another person and going out of one's own comfort zone. In such an approach, education is particularly sensitive to the experience of another man. When meeting a student, a teacher carries out dialogue and, at the same time, he/she teaches dialogue and through dialogue. All possible disorders in dialogue through new, virtual meeting places, emphasize the need for careful research and analysis of this phenomenon. The future of education shaped in the ethical perspective requires subjective approach which should lead to educating a person in such a way that makes him/her prepared and open for the experience of another person.

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