

# A metaphilosophical dialogue

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**Abstract** Three philosophical attitudes in dialogue are suggested in answering the question posed by the Journal. An inviting, First Inner Voice understands philosophy as a shareable theoretical task that can be explained and understood even across distant philosophical paradigms. A Second Inner Voice, sometimes termed in the dialogue as sceptic, distrusts any metaphilosophical definition of what philosophy is and what it should do, but would, nevertheless, aspire to retain a certain universalistic understanding of its own work, though it cannot be strongly and conceptually rendered. A Third Inner Voice, regarded in the text as somewhat Hegelian, insists on the unavailability of strong philosophical definitions both in historical and in conceptual terms. No proposal or conclusion is forwarded regarding what should be done in contemporary philosophy, though an analysis of harmful experiences is taken as an example of philosophical work.

**Keywords** metaphilosophy · dialogue · universalism · scepticism · harm · experience

FIRST INNER VOICE—What do you think should be done in philosophy?

SECOND INNER VOICE—Perhaps that is a dangerous question. It seems to ask for a sort of Philosophical Manifesto or, at least, for the exploration of some conditions that would make it possible. In both cases, it would require a certain partisanship; and to be a partisan is necessarily to be reductive and, probably also, too determinate. I don't see the philosophical

atmosphere neither as clear as to allow a straightforward statement that wouldn't be easily contested (by anyone, even by myself in a couple of years) nor as messy or worrying as to demand any urgent direct intervention. I might say that after centuries of erection and demolition of philosophical systems, or after the past century in which we have witnessed all too many and all too easily deciduous avant-garde reductionisms, I tend to be more skeptical of the possibility of such partisan or urgent answers and more aware of their dangers. It only takes a couple of nights to write a manifesto, very few months to start suffering its burdens, but long and strenuous decades to get free from its trappings. I feel we have to be more pluralistic and tolerant and just let people do their stuff.

FIRST INNER VOICE—You shouldn't be so overly sensitive. My question can be taken in a more humble or simple way: it could be understood as just asking something like *What do you plan to work on in the near future and why?* This more personal and local framing certainly seems a more civilized and gentle start, which could make you more comfortable. It allows for the existence of different programs and styles. Even resisting what you call avant-gardism (which, in any case, I don't necessarily consider as dangerous as you do) and having a pluralistic or tolerant attitude towards different philosophical styles and agendas does not amount to not knowing what to do and why. It only implies, for example, that one believe that the complexities and diversity of interesting questions or relevant problems are such that a certain specialization is required and not everyone everywhere should be doing the same things all the time. But, even taking that for granted, the question still retains its sense. Pluralism is just a starting point, even too obvious a

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starting point, I would say. The interesting things come after that, once you take pluralism for granted and put it to work. And I would say that, in philosophy, whatever comes after must have a certain justification that you can share or, even more, that you should share with someone else, however vaguely you picture him. What I was asking, I guess, is if you have anything to offer that has some general interest *after* acknowledging pluralism.

THIRD INNER VOICE—Both a strong pluralism and a milder one, of the kinds you seem to accept, strike me as flying too close to earth and being too parochial. I would like to push this last point a bit further and argue that there are some epochal themes or tonalities that, in a sense, cannot be ignored when one does philosophical work. Philosophy is a peculiar type of rational debate, and you must debate with your own time and justify what you propose to your contemporaries. In the first place, there are inescapable questions and problems with respect to which I don't think you can avoid taking sides and stating clearly your own position. If you are doing philosophy you must have a certain theoretical position: even when supporting a minor position, what seems a small argument in a corner, a lot of other positions and arguments are required. Any minor theory is only seemingly so. All the time, and all over, you have to support, or criticize, a set of coherent theses concerning something; your talk of philosophical manifestos is a way of ridiculizing this inescapable condition. Think of the linguistic turn in the past century, or of the practical turn of the last 30 years, or of the more recent revival of questions regarding agency and the first-person perspective. All these themes seem to attract a great deal of philosophical interest, and that seems to require your having a stand on them. And it strikes me that it's not just a question of fashion ...

SECOND INNER VOICE (*interrupting*)—Although there is always a way of degrading any suggestive philosophical position into *prêt-a-porter* consumerism. Think of existentialism, of critical theory, or of deconstruction. Of course, one could say that some philosophical schools are more easily turned into popular ideologies. In any case, this proneness of philosophy, or of certain philosophies, to *prêt-a-porterism*, if I may put it that way, would be a further reason for distrusting any agenda that is too determinate.

THIRD INNER VOICE—That's mean. It could also be said that what we take as highly technical philosophies, such as phenomenology or the wide variety of analytic and post-analytic philosophies (and I am not implying that existentialism or critical theory are not technical), have also become ready-made

frames and agendas of philosophical papers and careers. Their playground being more specialized and technical does not make them more resistant to consumerism, albeit of a different kind. My own position would be that there being an acceptance of certain problems or of a certain way of understanding certain problems—be it among a specialized or a wider consuming public—does not seem to be a valid standard for measuring philosophical relevance. And the point I was trying to make is that, in the background of fashions and market considerations, certain philosophical themes seem to be engaged in a dialogue with each other, as we are now, about what may be thought of as philosophically relevant. It is some sort of internal philosophical coherence that does the job. The linguistic turn came as a response, or a family of responses, to previous ways of understanding epistemology and philosophy in general; and the practical turn of the 70s seems to me to be a reaction to a previous neglect of social and political issues as philosophically relevant.

SECOND INNER VOICE—I might agree with those particular analyses, but what your tolerant irenism, First Voice, and your more robust idealism, Third Voice, seem to forget is that all these cases—as well as others that could be brought up—have more to do with confrontation or opposition, or even social luck, than with reasonable dialogue or philosophical coherence. It is your reconstruction, Third Voice, that depicts them as an ongoing philosophical conversation which—and this troubles me more—goes on by itself, in a peculiar idealist vacuum. Who sets those agendas? Why? And, may I (ironically) suggest that your own depiction is not relying then on any acceptance of pluralism, not to mention tolerance, but, more deeply, on trust in a still vaguely pictured, but strongly felt, underlying continuity in what philosophy is? And I am afraid that applies to First Voice also: the possibility and even the necessity of giving reasons, in a framework of tolerance, for what one does or is going to do need not define anything of interest but for myself or my immediate circle of friends.

FIRST INNER VOICE—I'm afraid your reaction to our positions has pushed you into an uncomfortable situation. You started out stating the dangers of any monolithic view—any manifesto, you said—and now you are yourself being a victim of a reductionist vertigo. You've fallen victim to the relativist maelstrom. While I concur with you on the dangers of any reductionism, I resist your last move. And, as I say, the question of what you are yourself doing or proposing to do retains its sense. But let me add that we have all mentioned the public with too despising an attitude, as if the public were only a realm of passive consumers

who degrade whatever they get into yearly fashions. What you, Third Voice, called the wider public can be conceived as an audience that is sensitive to certain philosophical styles or proposals because they give a name to some of the problems they live or feel should be addressed (think of existentialism in pre- and post-war Europe, for example). Or we can think of the more specialized audience—the philosophical academic community—as the only sphere that establishes standards and criteria of correct and sound academic work. It is both to that general, interested public and to this more restricted community that you, Second Voice, could address your response.

SECOND INNER VOICE—Yes, you are probably right. I wouldn't like to be judged as particularistic as I sounded, basically because (and contrary to what you suggested) I abhor all parochialisms—in philosophy as everywhere else. I guess it is easy to tell a story about what kind of philosophy I'm doing, but I trust that such a possible explanation is far from being a reason for something like “what *should* be done” everywhere by everyone. I'll come to that narrative later, if you push me, but for the moment I would like to stick to the suspicion that very different stories could be told in different places; and they do not necessarily fit into coherent pictures. Not to mention that I'm afraid an academic community is not necessarily a philosophically relevant standard for anything (though theoretically we usually take it to be so). We've seen too many funny (or disastrous) developments to trust academic communities per se.

THIRD INNER VOICE—Well, you needn't picture me as so strong a Hegelian as you did, Second Voice, to acknowledge that what we normally understand as philosophy is as much a question of traceable continuities and discontinuities, at least, as it is a question of variation and localisms. I would suggest, first, that if you are to make any sense of your strong particularism you must do so by placing it somewhere on the map of the different rational inquiries we have been pursuing in the last two thousand years. And, yes—secondly—perhaps I am somehow a Hegelian, or a defender of the Enlightenment, to understand philosophy as a kind of apprehension in thought of our own historical time, as a sort of understanding articulated in reasons that we are required to make coherent by the very nature of what we take rationality to be. I don't see how you can escape not only giving reasons for what you do, as First Voice asks, but also placing them in some relation to the relevant theoretical questions present in your own time.

FIRST INNER VOICE—Why don't we get more specific? I'm afraid I'm getting convinced that meta-

philosophical dialogues per se don't bring any clarity. Metaphilosophy is empty unless it is tied to some more substantive philosophical issue. If I may push my understanding of the question again, what are you two doing and why?

SECOND INNER VOICE—That was my point. But I would be more radical: I don't see that metaphilosophy can be illuminating at all.

THIRD INNER VOICE—I wasn't trying to make what you call metaphilosophy *the* issue, though I think it is unavoidable. I just wanted to point out that the mere fact of stating your position as philosophical requires you to map it somehow within what we take, as broadly as you wish, as philosophy. However you name them, there are philosophical fields or problems that frame any philosophical inquiry: you'll talk about ethics or political philosophy, about epistemology and science, you'll even end up talking about first philosophy or metaphysics (if this name is not too despicable for you—it isn't for me at all). And you'll talk of those things in terms intelligible to your contemporaries. If we do not share this common understanding—even in such vague terms—some type of argument concerning our very disagreements might be of interest. But we can come to that later.

SECOND INNER VOICE—Well, I'll leave your remark aside for the sake of moving on and avoiding repeating myself. I'll try to be constructive. Perhaps what I do can be mapped within some of those fields you mentioned, Third Voice, but that's quite irrelevant. And just to answer briefly: that was my point precisely; you have to get specific to make any sense of what you are doing. Maybe you historians (or dogmatics, as I would call you) will like to place us in whatever map you draw; but that is no reason, nor is it an explanation, for me to do what I'm doing. It doesn't add anything to it. You need to go more microscopic to understand the details and what might be of interest somewhere. Having said that, I would add that I consider myself a universalist, although I'd like to put that in inverted commas. I don't think we can't be understood beyond the borders of our language or our culture. We can be understood and someone can even find interest in what we do. Philosophy is quite an open market (though more like a medieval marketplace or a bazaar), where ideas are free to circulate. But I think I'm more a metaphilosophical skeptic than you two and that there are no clear rules in this market; I doubt that there are any metatheories there that don't turn out to be just another circulating idea. But, metaphilosophically skeptical as I may be, I wouldn't consider my work as irrelevant to what I take to be certain problems I see around me, nor would I

take it not to bear a certain philosophical meaning—which, however, I cannot easily state and I'd rather leave open. As an old artisan, I enjoy what I do and just hope it will somehow be appreciated by somebody, sometime.

FIRST INNER VOICE—Go on, please.

SECOND INNER VOICE—Just to give you an example, I've been concerned in the last few years with how we—this “we” being that larger wide public you approvingly referred to, Second Voice, or simply, perhaps, some of us—give names to certain experiences, especially experiences of harm and of suffering. We needn't get into the details now of different historical processes and events of the past century—from the Holocaust to Iraq, from the Gulag to Hiroshima—to realize that something like an acute sensibility to these experiences has been growing in different ways and that this growing process includes moments of resistance and of acknowledging, and has all sorts of political and moral implications.

FIRST INNER VOICE—There's a lot of literature in that field. I gather you have had to go through witnesses' reports and detailed historical analyses. You seem to understand philosophy as a sort of cross-field research that relates both to immediate historical or social analyses and to the social sciences that account for them.

SECOND INNER VOICE—Well, that's true, but my point would be that there are also interesting conceptual, philosophical questions involved in these processes. You could not understand these questions outside those analyses or removed from them; but, conversely, you would probably not be able to develop the latter without some type of abstract, conceptual work. There are, specifically, what could be considered philosophical issues in those processes that it would be important to analyze. Probably forgetting them might hinder the experiences themselves. Just to point to two of them, I would suggest—and this suggestion can be seen at work in the detailed narrative of the building of each of those experiences—that, first, any of them requires the concurrence of different voices and authorities: the first-person authority of the victim, the third-person authority that objectively describes a state of affairs, and a third-person plural that draws consequences and that, ultimately, is able to state the negative imperative that should never happen again. Should one of these agencies be missing, I guess, the building up of that sensibility would be delayed, as has been and is still being delayed in so many cases. Just think of torture, which we naively took it for granted had been abolished, or of the death penalty. Or just think

of what we still do not see, what still we do not name or label as harm or as suffering.

THIRD INNER VOICE—Excuse me, but I feel that your metaphilosophical skepticism was just a pose. Had you considered this interest of yours solely in descriptive terms (what has happened, where, to whom, etc.), I would find it more consistent with your general position. But you've talked of the need for clear concepts and the like in order not to hinder an experience, and you've now referred to something like a conceptual necessity for all your three voices to be present in order for an experience—or a sensibility as you called it—to be formed. It strikes me as quite a general philosophical thesis that would require further elaboration and should be assessed within specialized discussions in the philosophy of mind, the philosophy of language, or even metaphysics. Just to bring some history to the story, I might even point out that, as you stated the question, or at least as I understood it, there is much Hume and Kant involved in it.

SECOND INNER VOICE—And several others, I guess. It seems you'll end up being right and that metaphilosophy is inescapable. The thing is, nevertheless, that I cannot commend either my choice of problems or my conceptual strategy to anyone; less so can I impose it by way of an agenda, as I said. Not to mention that I am quite unsure of both of them. But I would not deny that this way of framing the relevance of philosophy to the analysis of these types of problems (and there are a wide array of other equally urgent questions, such as social and cultural inequalities and the concern for future generations) brings into play a wide host of characters and theories. Your metatheory would say that so should happen, and you'd feel reassured by that. I am not.

FIRST INNER VOICE—You mentioned two philosophical questions that were relevant to the analysis of those experiences. What would the second one be?

SECOND INNER VOICE—Not just relevant to the analysis of the experiences themselves. It comes in my assumption that we are both patients and analysts, if I may put it that way. In this approach we have to be negotiating our own schizophrenias all the time ...

THIRD INNER VOICE—And that sounds like a bunch of good philosophical questions: how can we analyze what we experience or do? At the same time; in two subsequent moments; in two, sometimes conflicting, attitudes or stances? When and how does one determine the other? What, finally, comes first and to what ends? And these questions, I would suggest, drag obvious metaphilosophical issues along: How does philosophy relate to science? Are the sciences a

necessary mediation between philosophy and what you called historical and social experiences? How does philosophical, conceptual analysis fit in the picture?

SECOND INNER VOICE—But all these questions retain their sense—I mean, just plain sense—if you are able to relate them to something that concerns you, like the experiences of harm and suffering I was referring to, or to something that has to do with your direct experience. Otherwise, they turn into vacuous speculations, in which you'll easily get lost and where, normally, anything goes.

FIRST INNER VOICE—I like that. It was partially what I was suggesting when you called my initial question in doubt: at least you can picture what you do by relating it to something, like a social and historical experience of the kind you referred to. And, above all, you do so by way of addressing your first- or third-person analyses and experiences to some relevant other—be they witnesses or academic colleagues, the wider or the restrictive public we talked about before. That would be a way of introducing in your scheme the authority of a second person, her voice—which I missed in your previous presentation.

SECOND INNER VOICE—Yes, I take it that we are all somehow dialogical. I would not deny that, and in the processes I have studied the relevance of the second person is massively present. But not always necessarily in a positive sense; sometimes the other to whom you address your experience of harm or your understanding of it is a wall of silence, not to mention worse possibilities. But to return to the second issue you might find philosophically relevant in my work—and I am afraid Third Voice will soon easily jump in with his Hegelian reassurances—, I find that the crucial issue in understanding experiences of harm is our being able to place them in various modal frames, so to speak. We call something harmful if we deem it necessary that it should not happen again. This sort of practical necessity (yes, I am turning Kantian, Third Voice, don't get nervous) implies, obviously, both that it is possible for that not to happen again and that, on top of that, our actions are such that they can avoid its happening. I'm interested in the way modalities and experiences go together in these processes and the way they relate to the agent, to the "us" I was talking about. It's not only an issue of modal propositions, but also of modally framed perceptions and experiences, if I may put it that way.

THIRD INNER VOICE—You seem too aware of the general philosophical background and implications to need either my suggestions or my reassurances. This mix of logic and experience you're exploring is at the core of the modern philosophical

tradition. From that perspective, it is not new. I was thinking both of the late Husserl and of recent post-analytical discussions. But then, first, you have to take sides in the type of conceptual work that must be done. You have to be a realist, for example. Or, in a different cartography, you have to strike a path between empiricism and idealism. And that means you'll have to establish some sort of general picture of the relation between reality and knowledge. In a nutshell, you'll have to get into metaphysical issues right away. But, in the second place, you need to say something new or original in that field. If not, what's the use of all your particularistic analyses? Not that I despise them; they look very interesting in themselves. They just don't look philosophically relevant to me unless you do that job too. And I would urge you to do some work in modal logic and argumentation that might be of help.

SECOND INNER VOICE—Thanks. Well, frequently the problem is not so much finding something new to say as saying something that makes plain sense—not only to oneself, but to other people.

FIRST INNER VOICE—See, you agree with me. Although you find it problematic, you don't doubt that some kind of mutual understanding is what makes your work meaningful, even for yourself.

SECOND INNER VOICE—Well, I'm not so sure misunderstandings are not as significant as understandings. We tend to forget that failures are frequently more influential than successes. And, especially, I doubt that we can reach any sort of clear insight concerning any of those metaphilosophical, or philosophical, positions Third Voice referred to; by themselves they are sort of empty. And I take their confrontation to have been quite fruitless. Back and forth from empiricism to idealism sounds like moving uselessly in circles. The interesting thing, I guess, would be the peculiar blend that is required on the basis of what you are looking for. Nevertheless, I would not deny that, in the end, some sort of metaphysics is involved. What I doubt is that you can get to meaningful knock-down arguments right away. I may privately enjoy them, but ...

THIRD INNER VOICE— ... they are unavoidable. I mean, not only illuminating, but unavoidable.

SECOND INNER VOICE—I suspend immediate judgment on that. I would propose to delay metaphysics—not that it is an easy thing to do; but it might be helpful.

THIRD INNER VOICE—I'm not so sure we can do that. Philosophy always seems to be delayed, and perhaps that is more dangerous than engaging in it—to give a twist to your first answer to First Voice's initial

question. Some years ago, when I was closer to your frame of mind, Second Voice, I was tempted by a friend to write a non-technical introduction to philosophy that was finally entitled *Invitation to Philosophy*. I had to put that title because, as I tried to come up with an easy presentation of epistemological issues, action theory, moral theory, and political philosophy that cohered in an enticing narrative, I always had the feeling that philosophy was being delayed, and the final chapter tried to show how all that had been said hinged on certain questions of—let's call it, I think adequately—first philosophy, or metaphysics, that had always been there and that we are always invited to ponder over. Perhaps it's time for me to write it again in clearer terms.

SECOND INNER VOICE—Well, I would not deny you the privilege. I wouldn't feel tempted myself right now if I were in your place. Plus, I'm not sure your metaphysical rewriting would be easily understood, in spite of the fact that it could even turn out to be popular. Contrary to that, I rather like the idea that philosophy is always a situated, always open invitation; but, I would add, a not-too-pressing one. Let me also add, to make myself understood, and though it may sound too personal, that sometimes I find myself in too bad a mood to take a general understanding (however wide or restricted that "general" is taken) of my work for granted or even possible. It would make it even more difficult if I engaged, as you seem inclined to do, directly in *First Philosophy*.

FIRST INNER VOICE—But you said that you took your work to be somehow relevant or meaningful.

SECOND INNER VOICE—Well, I guess it's a hypothetical: *if* I could put this—whatever I'm writing on—correctly and *if* it could be adequately framed, then it might perhaps be understood and deemed relevant ... or, if all those *ifs* were satisfied we could start talking about its relevance. I'm afraid it's more wishful thinking than any sort of conceptual or pragmatic presupposition.

THIRD INNER VOICE—Your problem is not that you refuse to believe in the objective philosophical relevance of what you do, or that it could be somehow tested or contrasted ... but that you distrust the institutional mechanisms to push it through to where it might be valued or criticized. That's completely a different issue; I thought we had left it behind.

SECOND INNER VOICE—Yes, I think you are right that I distrust academia. The thing is that I feel some or many of us—I don't know which—have internalized that distrust in academic philosophy to the point of turning somewhat skeptical. Which is a better

solution than turning cynical, in the contemporary, non-philosophical, meaning of the word.

FIRST INNER VOICE—Now, do not disguise yourself! I've heard that your distrust hasn't prevented you from taking, at least to a point, academic positions that had a say on the very running of those mechanisms which, at the same time, you say you distrust.

SECOND INNER VOICE—I claim no innocence. I just wanted to explain my philosophical doubts. There is a sense in which a philosopher both must belong somewhere and doesn't belong there.

THIRD INNER VOICE—Now, you sound a bit like Plato.

SECOND INNER VOICE—Maybe I do. It's a great compliment. Thank you.

THIRD INNER VOICE—But that doesn't explain, in the sense of justifying, what you do. It only shows—impudently, I would add—your doubts in your psychological capacities or abilities. Something that is, I would suggest, not so interesting—except, obviously, for you and your friends. There must be some more objective standard by which you evaluate yourself and which would allow your favoring certain agendas over others. Neither the power-related fact that you had to choose, nor the psychological fact that you feel uncomfortable doing so, explains or satisfies this question of the objective standard I'm posing again.

SECOND INNER VOICE—That's a good point. On the one hand, I am generally reluctant to foster any kind of proposal as to what should be done. On the other hand, in acting, I do have to endorse one. And more so when I'm deciding—in the very short term—what is going to be done and who should do it.

FIRST INNER VOICE—Yeah, the problem is how and when we shift to the practical modality of necessity you spoke of before. The practical turn we mentioned.

THIRD INNER VOICE—In a Kantian reading, I may add.

SECOND INNER VOICE—Yes, that's the problem. Even in the small parochial sphere of deciding academic positions or possible research programs. Would that be a relevant example of a philosophical problem, Third Voice?

THIRD INNER VOICE—I guess it's only a minor instance of it. Don't give yourself too much importance!

FIRST INNER VOICE—Now, you sound demeaning or, conversely, too easily claiming innocence and freeing yourself from the burden of your own decisions! Even minor decisions might be extremely harmful. And, though it might be only a minor example, it points to the fact that everywhere everyone faces that problem. Think

of deciding who's going to be elected to any political position that depends on your vote ...

SECOND INNER VOICE—I'm afraid it only relates to people with power, including all three of us. I don't see how we can escape this predicament.

THIRD INNER VOICE—You're right, Second Voice, I'm not free from short- or longer-term responsibilities, and I doubt, except in extreme cases—which are extremely relevant in themselves—that anyone is free from them. I would emphasize that, generally, we are always amenable to, and never free from, the attribution of responsibility. There are extreme cases—highly significant in themselves, as I said, and unfortunately not infrequent—of people who cannot decide anything significant in their lives. But I'm afraid—and it's neither agreeable nor comforting—that we are not among them. We're choosing all the time.

SECOND INNER VOICE—Now you sound like a human being.

THIRD INNER VOICE—I hope not too human. But I would not like to have looked inhuman in what I've been saying. My stronger metaphilosophical positions are not as detached from the world as you depict

them. Conceptual objectivity does not rule out the contingencies of life: it can be taken as their counterpart.

SECOND INNER VOICE—Yes, I think you're right in that.

FIRST INNER VOICE—In spite of your differences, it strikes me that you need each other.

SECOND INNER VOICE—Are we approaching a happy end? He needs me more than I need him. And, by the way, what is your work about? You both have been arguing with me, but no alternative proposal has been laid out.

THIRD INNER VOICE—Ha! I guess you cannot avoid me even when you go most particular. Maybe that is my function: your metaphysical shadow. I look up the books for you, your unavoidable metaphilosophy.

SECOND INNER VOICE—You may be right. But not everybody would agree. I'm still not sure. And what about you, First Voice? What are you up to? Do you need any of us in your Imperial Reasonableness?

FIRST INNER VOICE—I guess I am the listener. Someone must be listening to make sense even of your disagreements. Is it too late for a drink?

P.S. Dear Ermanno,

I'm afraid I will not be able to write the short piece for *Topoi* you kindly asked for. I hope I will be able, in some future moment, to think and write coherently on the topic you suggested.

Sincerely,

Carlos