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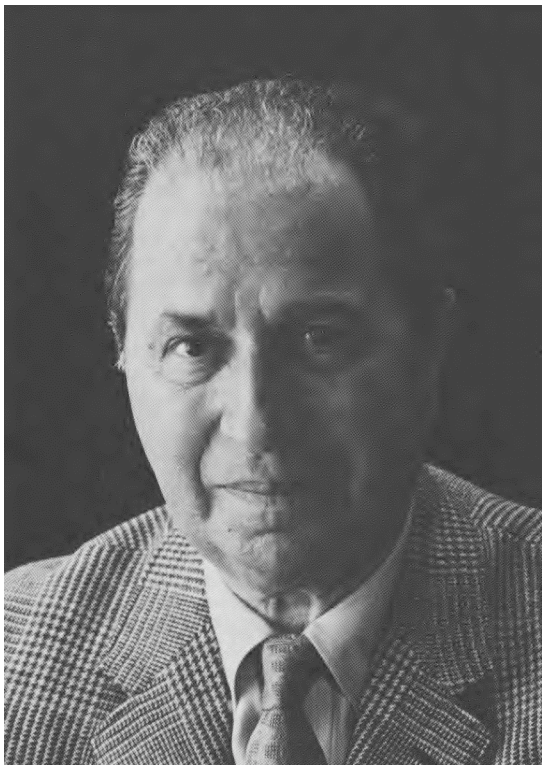

HOW TO MAKE CONVERSATION PROFITABLE AND PLEASURABLE

Mortimer Adler

PART ONE OF TWO

I

There are certain rules of sufficient generality to be applicable to serious conversations of every sort. There are also certain factors that are operative in such conversations, factors that must be taken into account, for they represent difficulties or obstacles to be overcome. Let us consider these first of all. I will come later to rules for improving social conversations.

Language is the instrument that we use, and must use for the most part, in communicating with one another. If language were a perfect or translucent medium through which one person could see into the mind of another, it would facilitate human conversation to the point where it closely resembled the perfect telepathy of angels. Unfortunately, language is the very opposite. It is a very imperfect medium of communication—cloudy, obscure, full of ambiguities and pitfalls of misunderstanding.

It is almost impossible for any of us to use important words that will be understood by those with whom we talk, particularly words of crucial significance for us, in exactly the same sense in which we use them. Even when we make a special effort to call attention to the meaning we attach to an important word, our cautionary remark often goes unheard, and the response our questions or statements elicit from the person with whom we are conversing reveals that he or she either has not heard or has not paid attention.

Of course, persons engaged in conversation can be expected to use words in a number of different senses. Everyone wants to use words his or her own way. This cannot be changed, but something can be done about it. We can take note of the different senses in which the same word is used and even label them. That takes more care and patience than most people are willing to exert for the sake of making their conversations more communicative, but unless it is done, misunderstandings and even apparently irreconcilable conflicts are bound to result.

Two things would facilitate our overcoming the obstacles that the imperfect medium of language puts in our way. One is a common, general schooling that included intensive training in the liberal arts of grammar, rhetoric, and logic. The other is a common tradition of learning, a background of common reading, an understanding of a relatively small number of basic ideas. Both of these things our ancestors enjoyed, especially in the eighteenth century and down to the end of the nineteenth century. We are for the most part deprived of both by the deterioration of our educational system and by the rampant specialization that abounds in the twentieth century.

Our ancestors were better trained in the liberal arts—the arts of communication as well as the skills of learning. Those who had a proper schooling and, through it, were able to become generally educated persons shared a common literary heritage that endowed them with a common vocabulary, not only of words but also of ideas. This made them members of the same intellectual commu-

nity, sharing a common background of ideas, references, and allusions. That made communication between them easier and better.

The educated person in the twentieth century is no longer a generalist! He is a specialist, an expert in this field or that. The language of a specialist includes many terms that are the peculiar jargon of his trade, not shared by specialists in other fields. In the twentieth century, well-educated persons, or perhaps I should say those who have had all the schooling available up through college and university, may come out of all that schooling with very little common background in books that all of them have read. This produces what Ortega y Gasset has called "the barbarism of specialization"—the antithesis of the culture of civilization.

A second factor to be controlled for the sake of serious conversations that are impersonal is the heat of emotion. This is not the case in heart-to-heart talks, where emotions are the very substance of discussion. Emotions also have a place in talk that aims to be persuasive in some practical way, but when that is well done, they are manipulated and controlled for the purpose at hand.

However, emotions are entirely out of place in impersonal conversations that have as their goal the achievement of better understanding and the attainment of agreement about the resolution of purely intellectual issues.

The intrusion of emotions into such conversations spoils them, turns them into emotional conflicts when they should be purely intellectual confrontations. As a result, they become battles between conflicting prejudices instead of interchanges that strive for a meeting of minds about ideas or about genuinely disputable opinions, where the dispute can be settled by the adduction of evidence and the marshalling of reasons.

Self-knowledge is still another factor that, when present, facilitates intelligent conversation and, when absent, impedes and frustrates

it. Understanding one's self is a necessary condition for understanding anyone else. One should be at least able to talk clearly to oneself. Such clarity in soliloquy is indispensable to clarity in dialogue. Those who lack the insight that is required for intelligent conversation with themselves can scarcely be expected to have the insight needed for intelligent conversation with others.

Last but not least is the amount of effort that must be expended to make any serious conversation worthwhile, both with respect to the profit that can be derived from it and also with respect to the pleasure that can be experienced from conducting it well. Saying what you mean is one of the hardest things in the world to do. Listening to what others say in order to discern what they mean is equally hard. Both call for expenditures of intellectual energy that many persons are loath to make. Such persons are lazy or indolent talkers and their intellectual sloth is one of the cardinal sins that, unrepented and uncorrected, bars the way to achieving the goods that energetically conducted conversation can bestow.

Most of us make the effort required only when the need is pressing and great—either for love or money. If we felt an equally great and pressing need for the meeting of minds, we might make the effort required for thoughtful conversation that aims at mutual understanding and some measure of agreement, or at least of understood disagreement.

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Let us turn now to some general rules applicable to all types of serious conversation. Some of these also apply to playful, social conversation, which I will deal with presently.

1. Pick the right place and occasion for a conversation, one that provides sufficient time for carrying it on and one that is free from the annoyance of distractions that interrupt or divert it.

There are times for small talk and times, so to speak, for big talk. A cocktail or dinner party is seldom a place for serious conversation. Whenever conversation must be larded in between other activities, such as going to the theater or going to bed, it might just as well be playful or social. You must always have plenty of time. Good talk is usually slow in getting started and long in winding up. A gathering in which many of those present are strangers is usually a small-talk group. An evening of relaxation, when most of those present are tired, is no occasion to solve the problems of the world. But when friends or acquaintances are present and they share an impulse to discuss problems that have a common interest for them, then serious and even protracted discussion can take place.

Not all occasions are appropriate for good conversation. When you walk into the office of a man with whom you hope to spend an hour or so in serious conversation, and you find him preoccupied with something that happened that day, either in the concerns of his business or of his family, that is hardly an occasion when you can expect to have his full attention.

There is one way to make a dinner party involving more than six persons, some of whom are relative strangers to one another, an occasion for good conversation. I am indebted to my friend Douglass Cater for introducing me to this device.

When the small talk has dwindled and died away, Douglass turns the occasion into one at which big talk may occur, by taking the floor and posing a question to which he solicits answers from everyone, proceeding in round robin fashion. After everyone has expressed himself or herself on the subject chosen, Douglass continues to chair the meeting by moderating the spirited interchanges that ensue from the differences of opinion expressed. This always turns out to be an enjoyable and profitable experience for everyone concerned.

The other device for turning a dinner party into an occasion for instructive conversation is for the host to ask one of the guests to deliver a short speech on some subject that the host knows will provide substance for a good discussion. The speaker may then be called upon to answer questions from the others present, or the others may make comments on the speech that challenge what has been said.

2. Know in advance what kind of conversation you are trying to have. The first rule for reading a book well is to know what kind of book it is that you are trying to read. Reading a novel is a different

exercise from reading a history, and both are different from reading a philosophical work or a scientific treatise.

As we have seen, serious conversations also differ from one another in the substance of what is to be discussed and in the purpose or aim of the discussion. Be aware of the character of the conversation in which you are going to be engaged, whether it is to be theoretical or practical and what its objective is in either case.

3. For whatever kind of serious conversation it is to be, select the right people with whom to have it. Don't try to discuss everything with everybody. Even some of your best friends may lack competence on certain subjects, or interest in them. Sometimes it is not competence or interest that is lacking, but affinity of temperament and some degree of personal affection. If you happen to know that Green and Robinson dislike each other, don't engage them in a conversation that will elicit only their emotional antagonisms.

All of us have had the experience of broaching a theme that is inappropriate for discussion by the persons assembled. When you make that mistake, the conversation falls dead as a doornail, or it wanders away from the theme proposed to gossip or small talk about the weather, the headlines, or sporting events.

Most important of all, never engage in the discussion of a problem with someone you know in advance has a closed mind on that subject. When you know that someone is unpersuadable, don't try to persuade him. When you know that someone is incorrigibly convinced about the truth of this or that position, don't try to change his mind by discussing the question or issue on which he has resolutely and irremediably committed himself to one answer or taken one side. He will remain deaf to all arguments for another answer to the question or another side of the issue.

A judicious selection of the persons with whom to talk about certain matters is as important as a judicious choice of the right time, place, or occasion for conversation about them.

4. Certain matters are undiscussable and, therefore, one should avoid discussing them. The familiar maxim, *de gustibus non disputandum est, is* more often disobeyed than honored, and yet violating this rule always turns two-way talk into nothing more than an exchange of personal prejudices.

About matters concerning which individuals can differ only in their tastes or preferences, their likes and dislikes, conversation can be informative only to the extent that you may learn how the other

person's taste differs from yours, or why he likes what you dislike. Such differences do not yield to argument and so there is no point in arguing about them. To do so is an utter waste of everyone's time.

In addition to likes and dislikes, concerning which one should not engage in dispute or argument, there are also personal opinions or prejudices for which no support can be given, either by an appeal to facts or by an advance of reasons. These, too, when expressed in a conversation, should simply be acknowledged for what they are and not be made the subject of discussion that aims at a meeting of minds. About such matters there can be no meeting of minds and so it is futile to argue about them.

Only about matters concerning which objective truth can be ascertained is it worthwhile to engage in argument of one sort or another for the sake of ascertaining it. The personal prejudice or unsupportable opinion that I hold may have subjective truth. It may be true for me, but not for you. If that is all there is to it, there is no point at all in my trying to defend it or in your trying to get me to change it for an opinion that is subjectively true for you, but not for me. Objective truth, in contrast, consists in that which is true, not just for you or for me, but for everyone everywhere.

5. Don't listen only to yourself. All of us have had the experience of conversation that proceeds in the following manner. Brown speaks while Jones remains silent, not listening to what Brown says, but only waiting politely for Brown to finish, at which time Jones enters the conversation with a statement of something on his mind that may have no relation whatsoever to what Brown has just said.

While Jones speaks, Brown also politely waits, but does not listen. When Jones finishes, Brown then expands on what he said earlier or talks about something else that in no way relates to what Jones has just expressed. They might just as well have been in different rooms talking to themselves, because that is the only person they have been listening to.

6. A closely related rule calls on you to listen to a question with an effort to understand it before answering it, and then with an effort to address yourself to the question in the light of your understanding of it. Many persons take questions as nothing more than signals for them to speak, uttering whatever happens to be on their mind at the moment, whether or not it has any relevance to the question that calls for their response.

If you have any sense at all that you may not understand the question you have been asked, don't try to answer it. Instead ask your interrogator to explain the question, to rephrase it in some way that makes it more intelligible to you. There is no point in trying to answer questions you do not completely understand. Keep at the task of reaching for that understanding before you attempt to answer.

7. A parallel rule, if you are on the questioning rather than the answering end of a conversation, is to ask your questions as clearly and as intelligibly as possible. Don't be a lazy questioner. Don't suppose that, because you understand the question, the way you express it makes it understandable to others. It may be necessary for you to ask the same question in a number of different ways, keeping at it until you find the one way of expressing it that really catches the mind of the other person.

8. There is still one more rule about questions in relation to good serious conversation. Some people think that they are engaging in conversation when they ask another person one question after another, receiving each answer without commenting on it, and without any connection between the questions asked in sequence. This may be a form of interrogation that is useful under certain conditions and for certain purposes, but it is not a conversation in which the interchanges of two-way talk advance significantly from one point to another.

9. Don't interrupt while someone else is speaking. Don't be so impatient to say what is on your mind that you cannot wait for the other person to finish speaking before you say it. Don't interrupt even if you think you know, from his initial remarks, what he is going to say. Give him the chance to say it.

10. Don't be rude by engaging in a side conversation while someone to whom you should be listening is talking. At the same time, don't be too polite. One should always be civil in the tone and manner of one's utterances, but excessive politeness should not restrain one from saying what is on one's mind. If you think what you have to say may be offensive, try to phrase it in such a way that giving offense is avoided, but do not clam up when what you have to say deserves saying.

11. Recognize that anything that takes time should have a beginning, a middle, and an end. This is as true of a conversation as of a play or a symphony. Some things that take time, such as working on an assembly line, may have a beginning, middle, and end, but in an inorganic manner. Each part of the time, whether beginning, middle, or end, is like the rest. That is why the work becomes tedi-

ous. But in a play or a symphony, the beginning, middle, and end are organically related, each contributing something different to the whole. That is the way a good conversation should be organized. The more each part serves the purpose appropriate to it, the better the conversation will be.

The beginning should set the stage for the conversation by focusing on the theme—the problem, the question, the subject to be discussed. The middle, which should run for a longer time, should be devoted to exploring the problem, the question, or subject and should elicit all the differences of opinion that are relevant to it, with support for these opinions to be given by argument. The end should bring the conversation to a conclusion—a decision reached if the conversation has a practical purpose, a position agreed upon if the matter is theoretical. If agreement is beyond reach, then the conclusion may involve suspended judgment and the tabling of the matter in question for further conversation, and perhaps resolution, at a later time.

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