



CONVERSATION IN HUMAN LIFE

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Of all the things that human beings do, conversing with one another is the most characteristically human. It may be in the long run the only human activity the performance of which will ultimately preserve the radical distinction between humans and brutes and between men and machines.

In this century, chimpanzees have been trained by humans to use sign language with severely limited vocabularies. To those whose fanciful interpretation of the phenomena remains uncritical, the chimps give an appearance of making statements and of responding to human questions. Be that as it may, chimpanzees do not talk with one another, and in a state of nature they do not talk at all. Their communication in the wild, as with all the other higher mammals, including bottle-nosed dolphins, is by means of signals, not by means of signs that have reference to either perceptual objects or objects of thought.

The point is not that man is the only animal that communicates with his kind. Some form of communication occurs among all social animals. The point lies rather in the precise kind of communi-

cation that takes place. Human communication in two-way talk can achieve a meeting of minds, a sharing of understandings and thoughts, of feelings and wishes.

Shared thoughts and feelings, understood agreements and disagreements, make humans the only animals that genuinely *commune* with one another. Even though they signal their emotions or impulses to one another, other animals remain shut out from each other. They do not commune with one another when they communicate. The human community would not exist without such communion, which would not exist without human conversation.

This century has also seen the production of computer-like machines that are eulogistically referred to as artificial intelligence machines. Their inventors and exponents claim for them that they will soon be able to do everything that the mind enables human beings to do. Their claim goes further than predicting that these machines will someday simulate characteristically human performances of all sorts, such as reading and writing, listening and speaking, as well as calculating, problem solving, and decision making. It predicts that the machine performance of these operations will be indistinguishable from the human performance of them.

Three centuries ago, a famous French philosopher, Rene Descartes, countered this prediction by asserting that there would always remain at least one thing that would separate the performance of machines from that of human beings. This one thing, which machines would never be able to simulate so successfully that machine and human performance would be indistinguishable, Descartes said, was conversation. For him that was the acid test of the radical difference in kind between humans and brutes as well as between men and machines.

In Part V of his *Discourse on Method*, Descartes conceded that intricate machines might be constructed to simulate successfully the performance of other animals—brutes by virtue of their lack of intellect, reason, or the power of conceptual thought. If there were machines possessing the organs and outward form of a monkey or some other animal without reason, Descartes agreed that “we would not have any means of ascertaining that they were not of the same nature as those animals.” And in another place he wrote:

It is a very remarkable fact that there are none so depraved or stupid, without even excepting idiots, that they cannot arrange different words together, forming of them a statement by which they can make known their thoughts;

while, on the other hand, there is no other animal, however perfect and fortunately circumstanced it may be, which can do the same. . . .

This does not merely show that the brutes have less reason than men, but that they have none at all, since it is clear that very little is required in order to be able to talk. . . .

A central thesis in the philosophy of Descartes was that *matter cannot think*. It was, therefore, quite consonant with the whole tenor of his thought to use machines—purely material mechanisms—as a challenge to his materialistic opponents. Here is the passage in which he hurls that challenge at them. I quote only the first part of it.

If there were machines which bore a resemblance to our body and imitated our actions so far as it was morally [i.e., practically] possible to do so, we should always have two very certain tests by which to recognize that, for all that, they were not real men.

The first is that they could never use speech or other signs as we do when placing our thought on record for the benefit of others. For we can easily understand a machine's being constituted so that it can utter words, and even emit some responses to action on it of a corporeal kind, which brings about a change in its organs; for instance, if it is touched in a particular part, it may ask what we wish to say to it; if in another part, it may exclaim that it is being hurt and so on. But it [could] never happen that it [would] arrange its speech in various ways, in order to reply appropriately to everything that may be said in its presence, as even the lowest type of man can do.

What Descartes is here saying, as I understand it, stresses the almost infinite flexibility and variety of human conversation. If over a long period of time two human beings were continuously engaged in two-way talk with one another, interrupted only by brief periods of sleep, it would be impossible to predict with certainty what turns such conversation would take, what interchanges would occur, what questions would be asked, what answers would be given.

It is precisely this unpredictability that makes human conversation something that programmed machinery will never be able to simulate in a manner that renders it indistinguishable from human performance. The twentieth-century revision of Descartes's dictum, that matter cannot think, is as follows: all the wizardry of man's technology will never be able to shape matter into truly thinking machines.

I attempted to explain why this is so in the speech that I have placed in Appendix I. I think I have there demonstrated that machines will never—never in the whole of future time—be able to engage in anything like human conversation. Instead of repeating

the argument here, I refer the reader to Appendix I for that demonstration.

Readers persuaded by my argument will share my conclusion that only human minds, intellects with the power of conceptual thought, can engage in conversation with one another. Two-way talk that can end in a meeting of minds will always remain the irrefutable evidence that man is radically different in kind from brute animals and artificial intelligence machines.

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The communion that can be achieved by human conversation is of great significance for our private lives. It unites the members of a family—husbands and wives, parents and children. It is the spiritual parallel of the physical union by which lovers try to become one.

Please note that I did not say “the communion achieved by human conversation.” I said rather “the communion that *can be achieved* by human conversation.” Human beings sometimes—in fact, too often—fail to achieve it by their failures as speakers and listeners in two-way talk, especially in personal heart-to-heart talks.

When they fail, the sexual bond that unites husband and wife, unaccompanied by spiritual communion, usually fails to preserve their marriage. Divorce as frequently results from the failure to communicate intimately in heart-to-heart talks as it does from the weakening of sexual attraction.

One kind of intercourse without the other kind of interchange between spouses is less than completely human. Nor is it enough for them to be able to converse intimately about personal or emotional matters. A marriage not enlivened by sustained conversations about a wide variety of subjects, from which there results a meeting of minds in understood agreements or disagreements, has vacuums or voids in it that need to be filled to give it vitality.

Something similar can be said about the relation of parents and children. The so-called generation gap is just such a void or vacuum created by failures in communication between the young, especially adolescents, and their parents. The most obvious sign that the barrier that adolescence erects between them and their parents has been overcome lies in the fact that they are once again able to talk freely and frankly with their parents. Such communion reunites them after adolescence has separated them. When that does not happen, a permanent estrangement prevails in its place.

The broken home, the split-up family, whether it occurs through the divorce of husband and wife or an estrangement between parents and children, testifies that conversation has completely deteriorated, if it ever truly existed.

Outside the bonds of family life, friends and lovers face the same ultimate alternatives. Their friendship and love endure as a genuine communion only as long as they are both able, and also persistent in their effort, to engage in profitable and pleasurable conversation with one another.

Aristotle defined the highest form of friendship as that which involves the communion of persons of like character, two persons alike in their moral virtue. I would add that it also involves the existence of intellectual communion through conversation that achieves a meeting of minds.

However effective human conversation may be in achieving the communion of hearts and minds, it can never be so perfect that the solitariness of the individual is ever completely overcome. All of us are somewhat imprisoned in the solitude of our own minds and hearts. There always remain thoughts and feelings that we never do succeed in sharing completely with others.

We may never be as completely locked out from one another as other animals are, but we also never fully overcome the barriers to communion. We never achieve on earth that perfection of community which is attributed by theologians to the communion of saints and the company of angels in heaven.

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Turning now from our private lives to our dealings with one another in business and in politics, the contribution made by good conversation in both contexts is amply clear.

Few business enterprises are conducted without frequent and lengthy conferences, often too frequent and too protracted as well as too wasteful of time and energy when they are measured by the benefits they confer.

The agenda laid down are often poorly constructed. The discussion often wanders from the point at issue. The interchanges often exhibit inattention and failure to listen well enough to produce relevant responses to what others have said, and what others have said may often be too poorly expressed to elicit or deserve careful lis-

tening. The discussion too often fails to move on from point to point, making progress toward the decision aimed at.

When a later business conference succeeds an earlier one because there has been no meeting of minds at the earlier one (no understood agreement or disagreement about the solution of a practical problem from which decisive action should ensue), the succeeding conference too often fails to begin with an adequate summary of what has already been covered. It too often consists largely in repetitious talk instead of talk that moves forward from ground already covered.

Let me tell one autobiographical story that illustrates the importance of improving business conferences. In the late thirties, when I felt frustrated by the impediments to the educational reforms that Hutchins and I were advocating at the University of Chicago, I considered leaving the university and accepting a job at R. H. Macy and Company in New York.

I was offered a salary six times my compensation as a professor. When I asked Percy Strauss, then Chairman of the Board of that corporation, what title the job carried, I was told that I would become Vice-President in charge of Department X. When I then inquired what my duties would be, I was told that they would consist in thinking about every aspect of R. H. Macy's business.

That seemed a little vague to me. I pressed Mr. Strauss for a more concrete answer. Instead of giving it to me, he asked me what I thought I could do for the corporation that would merit the salary offered.

I told him that, over and above anything else I might do, I would undertake to run Macy's business conferences in a way that would make them so effective that it would reduce their frequency as well as the time the top executives of the company had to spend away from their desks and the important work they did in their private offices, to assemble for hours around a conference table in a meeting room.

When Macy's Chairman quickly calculated the annual salaries of his top executives and figured out the saving and efficiency that might result from less time spent in business conferences, accompanied by better results attained through them, he did not hesitate for a moment to say that, if I could do what I promised, I would more than earn my salary. (I did not take the job for reasons of no relevance here.)

Everything I have said about business conferences applies with equal force to faculty meetings in our colleges and universities, to the meetings of physicians on a hospital staff to decide matters of policy, and to the sessions at which the directors of foundations and other nonprofit corporations come together to solve their practical problems and reach decisions affecting their future actions.

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The public discussion of public issues, by the people at large as well as by those in public office or the candidates for such offices, is the lifeblood of the republic.

A republic in which there is no discussion of the *res publica*—the public things that we refer to as public affairs—is as much a caricature of its true self as would be a military organization in which there is no armament and no consideration of the strategy and tactics for the use of arms.

It makes no difference whether the republic involves direct participation of all its citizens or is a representative form of government in which both the people as a whole and elected or selected officials participate. The agoras and forums of the republics of antiquity in Greece and Rome testify to the role that public discussion played in their lives.

SPQR (*Senatus Populusque Romanus* - the Senate and People of Rome), that symbol of the Roman Republic while it prospered, signified participation by both the patricians and the plebs, the senators and the people, in government. This always involved them in the public discussion of public issues.

When the imperial and despotic rule of the Caesars displaced republican government, discussion ceased. The people came together only in the amphitheatre or at the circus to indulge in more or less brutal pastimes, but certainly not to discuss public issues. The senators took to their homes and tried to avoid any suspicion that they might have something to say about public affairs. The republic died when discussion ceased and the Caesars, with their praetorian guards, took over the reins of government.

Modern republics, most of them in the form of representative government, have their parliaments, congresses, diets, or otherwise named legislative assemblies, in the place of the agoras and forums of the ancient republics. The word “parliament” is the most significant of these various names because its etymology signifies that

this branch of government involves speech or talk, the kind of speech or talk, of course, that is concerned with *res publica*.

The amendments to the constitution of our own republic, which call for the right of the people to assemble and for the protection of freedom of speech, are still another indication of the importance of unfettered public discussion for the life of a republic.

The enforcement of these constitutional provisions may guarantee that public discussion of public issues goes on unfettered, but it does not and cannot ensure that the discussion is as good as it should be, either by the people's representatives in Congress or by the people themselves when they assemble for the purpose of political discussion.

This cannot be secured by any constitutional enactment or any act of government. Improvement in the quality of public discussion and political debate can be achieved only by improvement in the quality of the schooling that the people as a whole receive.

That improvement must, above all, include improvement in their ability to speak and listen well enough to engage effectively in two-way talk, as well as an enlargement of their understanding of the basic political ideas and principles that underlie the framework of our government.

Before the era of universal suffrage and the coming into existence of a democratic republic, it may have been proper to confine such schooling to the few who were then citizens. But now that "we, the people" means "we, the whole adult and sane population," requisite schooling of improved quality must be given to all and be the same for all. It must be as universal as universal suffrage.

The introductory volume that Robert Hutchins wrote for *Great Books of the Western World*, when that set of books was published many years ago by Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., carried the title *The Great Conversation*. It refers to that long and continuing conversation about common themes among the writers of the great books that constitutes the tradition of Western thought, or at least its basic framework.

In producing the *Syntopicon*, which also accompanied the set, I attempted to document Robert Hutchins's conception of the great conversation by assembling under almost 3,000 topics of conversation, references to passages in the great books in which this or that topic was discussed by all or almost all of the authors.

In the opening paragraph of *The Great Conversation*, Hutchins not only declared that the Western tradition is most strikingly embodied in the great conversation, but he also pointed out that the defining characteristic of Western civilization lies in the fact that it, and it alone, is the civilization of the dialogue. I cannot refrain from quoting that whole paragraph.

The tradition of the West is embodied in the Great Conversation that began in the dawn of history and that continues to the present day. Whatever the merits of other civilizations in other respects, no civilization is like that of the West in this respect. No other civilization can claim that its defining characteristic is a dialogue of this sort. No dialogue in any other civilization can compare with that of the West in the number of great works of the mind that have contributed to this dialogue. The goal toward which Western society moves is the Civilization of the Dialogue. The spirit of Western civilization is the spirit of inquiry. Its dominant element is the Logos. Nothing is to remain undiscussed. Everybody is to speak his mind. No proposition is to be left unexamined. The exchange of ideas is held to be the path to the realization of the potentialities of the race.

The writing of dialogues for the purpose of exhibiting philosophical thought, which is nothing but thought about the most fundamental ideas, begins with the Greeks, continues with the Romans, takes a somewhat different form in the oral disputations at mediaeval universities, which Thomas Aquinas, for example, records at length in written form, and persists into modern times with dialogues written by Bishop Berkeley, David Hume, and others.

In his essay on *Civil Liberty*, Hume acknowledges the centrality of conversation in human life and society, and praises the French for improving on the Greeks in this respect.

In one respect the French have excelled even the Greeks. They have perfected the art, the most useful and agreeable of any, *l'art de vivre*, the art of society and conversation.

With all due respect to the French, conversation flourished in eighteenth-century England and at the same time in the American colonies. Without it, this republic might never have come into existence. Conversation began to dwindle and wither away only toward the end of the nineteenth century, a tendency that has reached its nadir in our time. That decline runs parallel to the decline in the quality of public education as the population of our schools increased from the few to the many and from the many to all the children who would become the future citizens of our land.

Finally, let us go from national and local politics to the international scene. There the importance of conversation reaches its maximum. International wars begin when diplomatic conversations between nations fail. They are presaged by newspaper reports to the effect that “conversations are deteriorating” or that they have “broken down.” Then, if the conflict of interests between nations is sufficiently serious, there is nothing left for them to do but fight to secure their national interests.

This point was made most eloquently by Cicero in the first century of our era. He wrote:

There are two ways of settling disputed questions; one by discussion, the other by force. The first being characteristic of men, the second of brutes, we should have recourse to the latter only if the former fails.

The same fundamental insight was expressed centuries later in somewhat different words by the Italian, Machiavelli, and by the Englishman, John Locke. Machiavelli wrote:

... there are two methods of fighting, the one by law, the other by force: the first method is that of men, the second of beasts; but as the first method is often insufficient, one must have recourse to the second.

Locke’s statement of the same point comes to us as follows:

There are two sorts of contests among men, the one managed by law, the other by force; and these are of such a nature that where the one ends, the other always begins.

Fighting by law or managing to settle contests by law, in Machiavelli’s and Locke’s phrasing of the matter, amount to the same thing that Cicero had in mind when he wrote that the first way of settling disputes is by discussion, not force. The legal adjudication of any dispute or conflict of interests always involves discussion. If the decision reached is legally enforced, such force represents that monopoly of authorized force possessed only by a duly constituted government. All other force, unauthorized, is violence. The use of it is criminal violence, terrorism, or war.

War is nothing but the field of force. What we call the “cold war” does not consist in the use of force or the resort to violent measures. Even if actual warfare has not yet begun, it is truly a state of war, not peace, because it is a situation in which conflicts or disputes cannot be completely settled by discussion or by legal decisions that are enforceable by authorized force.

Peace, then, genuine civil peace, not the cold war, which is nothing but the absence of actual warfare, exists wherever the apparatus is available for settling all disputes or conflicts by discussion and by resort to law and its enforcement.

Civil government provides the apparatus needed for maintaining conversation or discussion as a way of settling disputes. When the machinery of government operates as it should, it does not allow conversation to deteriorate to the point where individuals or nations must resort to the use of force—the method of brutes in the jungle, not the method of humans in civilized society.

The lesson to be learned from this understanding of war and peace is that world civil peace requires enforceable world civil government, exactly as every unit of local civil peace requires enforceable local civil government.

I am fully aware that this lesson will come as a hopeless fantasy or as a counsel of despair to most people. Their immediate reaction will be to say that world civil government, federal in structure akin to the national government of the United States, is an unrealizable utopian dream. If they are inveterate in their parochial nationalism, they are likely to go further and dismiss it as undesirable because it calls for a surrender of national sovereignty.

My response to such reactions is that world government is not only desirable for the sake of world peace, without which the human race may not survive on this planet, it is also both necessary and possible. It is just as possible as the formation of the federal republic of the United States by the surrender of sovereignty by the thirteen American colonies after they had won their independence and after they found themselves at serious odds with one another during the period they loosely coexisted under the Articles of Confederation, which united them as loosely as the United Nations are united.

In the first nine *Federalist Papers* written by Hamilton, Madison, and Jay in favor of adopting the Constitution of the United States to replace the Articles of Confederation, the argument advanced for federal union—a more perfect union, as the Preamble to the Constitution declares—goes right to the point.

The writers argue that, under the Articles of Confederation, the several now independent states in the new world are likely to go to war with one another, for the same reason that the nations of the old world are perpetually at war with one another. If they were

alive today, they would argue similarly that the Charter of the United Nations is no better an instrument for preventing war than the Articles of Confederation.

I need add only one thing more. In 1946, after the dropping of the first atomic bombs, which grew out of the nuclear fission first produced at the University of Chicago, Robert Hutchins, then its President, created a Committee to Frame a Constitution for World Government. After two years of thought and discussion, the Committee produced a document that was published by the University of Chicago under the title *Preliminary Draft of a World Constitution*.

That document, in my opinion, provides grounds for thinking that world government is not only necessary for world peace, but also quite possible. The only matter left in doubt is the probability of its coming into existence before it is too late to prevent a war that can destroy this planet or preclude the survival of civilized life upon it.

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In conclusion, let me call attention to the role that conversation plays in the private life of every individual who has ample free time to be spent in the pursuits of leisure—not the activities of play that result in recreation or relaxation, but activities that contribute to learning and to the mental, moral, and spiritual growth of the individual.

The pursuits of leisure may be activities in which individuals engage in a completely solitary fashion, such as reading and writing, or artistic productions of any kind wherein individuals work by themselves. Or they may be social activities in which individuals engage with one another, such as conversation or two-way talk. When intellectual work of any kind, artistic or scientific and scholarly, is undertaken cooperatively by a number of persons associated in the enterprise, it will also involve conversation or discussion.

Engagement in the pursuits of leisure in the mature years of one's life is absolutely indispensable to completing the educational process which schooling barely begins but for which it should prepare. Without continued learning throughout all the years of one's adult life, no one can become a truly educated person, no matter how good the individual's schooling has been.

What are the major and most universal forms that such continued learning should take? My answer is threefold.

One form of learning consists in the discoveries about life and society that individuals make in the course of their experience. A second consists in the increasing knowledge and enlarged understanding derived from the reading of books that can provide such goods. The third consists in the benefits conferred upon the individual by engaging in profitable and pleasurable conversation with others about the discoveries of travel, about books read, about knowledge acquired, and about things understood.

The first two without the third fall short of the consummation to be sought for the process of continued learning in adult life. To consummate that process is to become an educated human being. That is why learning how to speak and listen well are of such great importance to us all. 

We welcome your comments, questions, or suggestions.

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