

# CONVERSATION

by

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## CONVERSATION

This paper began with an image—really a sustained metaphor—that I encountered long ago in the work of Kenneth Burke. I have over the years thought about it, fretted at it, forgotten about it and had it float back into my head at odd moments. But for many years it has been, so to say, asking me to think about it in the only way that really works—writing, as itself part of a conversation. Tonight's paper, then, is a kind of meditation, or contemplation, or maybe a conversation, beginning at the following passage from Burke's *Philosophy of Literary Form*, first published in 1941.

Where [Burke asks] does the drama get its materials? From the "unending conversation" that is going on at the point in history when we are born. Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally's assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress.

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Obviously, we have to do with an elaborate metaphor in which the course of our lives is seen as our participation in a conversation to which we come long after it has started and which we must leave long before it ends, if it ever does. It's a conversation, we must suppose, which started in that long-lost Garden when the first man said to the first woman, "Madam, I'm Adam," and she replied.

Burke's human conversation, as Frank Lentricchia and others have pointed out, is a quasi-domestic one, in a parlor rather than a classroom or an office—a parlor, perhaps, in the sense in which this generous Louis Sullivan room could be called a parlor, for surely Burke has in mind the old meaning of *parlor* as "a place for talking." It's not a TV room, or a "family room," and if it's a living room, it's that because for human beings living and talking are almost synonymous. But Burke's parlor, like ours here, is in any case not a place where teaching is going on, nor one guided principally by the search for personal gratification.

The conversation, Burke says, is heated, rather intense; it generates allies and opponents; indeed, he uses the term *conversation* only once, and that once in quotation marks; once he calls it an argument, and five times a discussion.

I suppose a number of issues fascinated me. How could this ongoing talk be *simultaneously* an argument, a conversation, and a discussion? If it was never to end, what was the point of argument (since I took Burke to mean argument in the scholarly sense of rational discussion with proof)? What, indeed, was the point of a discussion without end? Yet somehow the idea of an endless conversation made sense in a way that an endless argument or an endless discussion did not. Not long afterwards, I came to know some people for whom conversation, discussion, and argument were in fact indistinguishable, whose habitual low-key family conversations—what they perceived as low-key—made traditional Midwesterners or laid-back Californians expect blows or divorce suits.

So it was possible, in some circumstances, for conversation to embrace discussion and argument. Then why were there at least some arguments and discussions that clearly were not conversations? What was it, after all, that made a conversation still a conversation despite its differences in intensity, its widely varied strategies, the relative seriousness or triviality of its content? Perhaps, I thought, looking back again at Burke, it was indeed the interminability of conversation—the fact that

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it had no end. An argument, of whatever kind, ends when someone wins—whatever the strategies used to gain victory, whether cool logic or yelling loudest. A discussion ends when it reaches a conclusion—a decision, a plan of action, consensus, an agreement to disagree. But conversation never ends in those ways. We may perhaps discover we have run out of things to say; we may be called to dinner; we may leave town or, as Burke suggests, die and so permanently terminate our part in the conversation. But the structure of the conversation is not itself framed toward an end. It exists, like poetry, for its own sake (and we'll see later on that there are other parallels to poetry too).

Well, I thought, is that right? Is conversation really talk we do for its own sake and the pleasure it gives, with no end? What do others say? Well, others had, as matters turned out, quite a lot to say; but none of the standard dictionary definitions saw endlessness as being so central as I did. Most of them defined *to converse* substantially as Dr. Johnson had in his great Dictionary of 1755: "to convey the thoughts reciprocally in talk," a definition which the *Oxford English Dictionary* reprinted and to which it added the note: "The ordinary current sense." The definition of *conversation* paralleled that of *converse*: "Interchange of thoughts and words; familiar discourse or talk."

But the history of *converse* and of *conversation* proved illuminating. They had not always meant talk, interminable or not. They had, for about the first three hundred years of their presence in the English language—they arrived about 1340—meant moving about or dwelling in a particular place or among particular people—passing one's life there or with them. *That* was one's conversation. By Shakespeare's time (he died in 1616) the sense of passing one's life with people had added the overtones of close familiarity with them, and the wrong sorts of familiarity—adultery—came to be called *criminal conversation*, usually in later centuries slyly abbreviated *crim. con.* That term survived in legal and journalistic language, and prudish gossip, until the end of the Victorian era, long after the other senses of *converse* and *conversation* had narrowed down to talk alone. By Shakespeare's time, too, the sense of *conversation* as communication or exchange of ideas had begun to develop. This older meaning of *conversation* is still preserved in the word *conversant*, meaning familiar with something or someone through extended being-with. For whatever reasons, it never picked up the specialized

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meaning of "talk," and hence we no longer perceive the close relation which once held between *converse*, the verb; *conversation*, the noun; and *conversant*, the adjective.

There is a long stretch, late in the seventeenth century and on through the first half of the eighteenth century, when it's not very clear how these senses of *converse* and *conversation* are sorting themselves out, or how they are, so to speak, abandoning *conversant*. In, say, 1620 the older meaning hasn't yet been challenged. By about 1750 the modern meaning is established. But even the fifty-six quotations in the *OED* under *converse*, and the sixty-six under *conversation*, don't tell us the stages in the process. They illustrate the sequence of meanings, some half-dozen or more, but they don't show how the meanings developed and interacted.

For that there are reasons, and they have to do with the limitations on all scholarly endeavors and on all efforts to provide knowledge or even information. In the case of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, these reasons have to do with the reading preferences of most of the 225 or so men and women who gathered the materials for the dictionary, five million small slips of quotations, of which one million eight hundred thousand are printed in the Dictionary itself. The readers were for the most part ruling-class Victorians. A good many of them were The Rev. So-and-So; a few were peers; there were a significant number of The Misses So-and-So. They were reading as volunteers in the years between 1863 and around 1900, principally before 1884, and reading mostly what they read by preference: the popular novelists and moralists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the preferred poets like Tennyson and Browning but also like Samuel Rogers, now forgotten but in his day considered greater than Wordsworth or Byron. They didn't, on the whole, read much that had been written before the Glorious Revolution of 1688. A rather small cadre of enthusiasts and scholars covered the four centuries from 1250 to 1650 or so, and did what they could. So the *OED* quotations overrepresent the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and seriously underrepresent the sixteenth and seventeenth. And unfortunately it is the seventeenth century, more than any other, in which one kind of England gave place to another, one kind of social world died and another was born. And the notion of "conversation" changed.

A second problem was that the *Dictionary* and its magnificent editor,

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Sir James Augustus Henry Murray, viewed the development of successive senses of the individual words of the English vocabulary as just that—the development of successive senses. For reasons which were deeply philosophical, and also in considerable measure religious, Murray, and the three successor editors whom he trained, were committed to tidy sequences of definition and to attaching quotations to such tidy sequences, rather than to the messy process of untangling how these successive senses had differentiated themselves from each other in the first place. It is fair to say that the dictionary would never have been finished if they had tried to do that. At that, the publication of the *Oxford English Dictionary* took forty-four years, and the appearance of the first part in 1884 had been preceded by over a quarter-century of planning and preparation.

We should not, then, look gift dictionaries in the mouth. We are lucky to have what we do have. But there is a lot we'd like to know. We are not likely to know it for a long time to come, at least from dictionaries. The so-called second edition of the *OED* which appeared a year or so ago is actually a consolidation of the original dictionary with the four volumes of supplements which R. W. Burchfield edited in the nineteen-seventies and -eighties, plus some odds and ends and bits of new material, all tidily in one alphabet. The resetting of the type for that edition made possible the creation of a CD-Rom disk which will permit us to ask a lot of new kinds of questions of the *OED*, but won't add to what was never there. The Oxford Press has talked about a major re-editing, but I would not myself bet on it.

For one thing, the resources aren't strong enough. Three more dictionaries are needed before we can really develop the historical record adequately. One is nearly completed—the *Middle English Dictionary*, published by the University of Michigan, which is in the middle of the *S*'s and probably will be completed by the year 2000. Its scope is 1150 to 1500. Since it is as big as the *OED*, but covers only three hundred and fifty years instead of six hundred, it adds a lot to the *OED* record. The other two dictionaries are still gleams in someone's eye—the dictionary of Old English, the language from 450 to 1150, long meditated by the University of Toronto. All the materials for it are gathered and available on microfiche, but someone needs to edit it and someone needs to publish it. And someone needs to pay for it.

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The potentially most useful dictionary, from my perspective, is the one which is farthest from any kind of realization: the Dictionary of Early Modern English, which would cover the period from 1500 to 1750—the period, I've suggested, of the crucial social changes which shaped the England that is only now beginning to change radically once again. The University of Michigan is the sponsor, but their hands, and their fiscal resources, are at the moment fully committed to the *Middle English Dictionary*. They have no spare hands or spare change.

My digression on dictionaries has been meant to show why it's often so hard to reconstruct what really happened as words change their meanings—what the social forces are that underlie, and perhaps create, the changes that human beings make in the ways they talk. We are divided from the older forms of the English language more sharply than we sometimes think.

If, for instance, we look for *conversation* in the third edition of the *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, published in 1979, we find what might have been expected—an even dozen quotations, five from Dr. Johnson and his contemporaries in the eighteenth century, five from the nineteenth century, one from a nineteenth-century gentleman who survived into the twentieth (Anthony Hope, whose old-fashioned values are clear in *The Prisoner of Zenda* and *Rupert of Hentzau*), and just one from Shakespeare. These, except the Shakespeare, are all about good talk and the conditions which make it good (with characteristic dissents from Emerson and Thoreau, neither one much of a conversationalist).

The Shakespeare is distinctly quirky; we should take a look at it. It's from *Othello*:

Haply, for I am black,  
And have not those soft parts of conversation  
That chamberers have, or, for I am declin'd  
Into the vale of years—yet that's not much—  
She's gone, I am abus'd. . .

*For* here means 'because': Othello has become convinced of Desdemona's infidelity ("She's gone . . .") and is looking for reasons. Perhaps she has strayed because he is black, perhaps because he's older. But what then are the "soft parts of conversation / That chamberers have,"



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and why should they be related to his being black? *Chamberers* are people who live indoors, in rooms or chambers, in contrast to the army camps which have been his habitat; are these perhaps conversations in the sense of talk? This seems very odd: Othello is an excellent talker, an excellent conversationalist. But of course we already know now that Shakespeare is not thinking of talk at all here. Othello isn't part of this world of the Venetian court, and his blackness is the external index of that. He isn't *conversant* with it, it's not familiar to him, he's an outsider. It's not a matter of talk, but of what underlies the talk. There are parallels elsewhere in Shakespeare. In the closing scene of *Love's Labour's Lost*, Rosalind says to Berowne:

You shall . . .  
Visit the speechless sick, and still converse  
With groaning wretches.

The speechless sick and groaning wretches are not conversing in our modern sense, and neither were the chamberers. What they are doing is associating, keeping company, being together on a familiar basis (the force of *converse* in that last quotation from *Love's Labor's Lost* is that Berowne will be doing quite a lot of this during the coming year of exile; he's paying penance for taking love too casually, that's what's happening. *Still* in the same line means 'always').

The quotation dictionary won't tell us about these changes in meaning; its compilers assume that we will look up oddities and nuances in a standard dictionary. Maybe we will. Odds are we won't—we'll just figure that this is Shakespeare's complicated late style, which often forces words into frames which were eccentric even by Elizabethan standards, partly because the language was going through a lot of flux and game-playing just then, partly because many of Shakespeare's characters are emotionally overwrought and their language reveals that. If we figure that, then we miss something—Othello here as so many other times sees himself as a fish out of water, excluded from the daily life, the *conversation*, of Venice.

So Shakespeare's way of using the word is lost to us, and with it some of his nuances. Does Dr. Johnson's way of using *conversation* ("convey[ing] the thoughts reciprocally in talk") really still survive? The single

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new definition of *conversation* in the first volume of the *OED* Supplement, just about a hundred years after Murray first published the C's, is in the phrase *making conversation*, garnished with this quotation from 1921: "He simply could not 'make conversation' to her." Something's happened to the idea of a conversation when it has to be manufactured.

Neither the historical dictionaries nor the dictionaries of quotations give us much confidence that we are really here in the twentieth century—soon to be the twenty-first—and not in the eighteenth or the nineteenth. So I turned next, in this ruminative quest for understanding, to something so modern as to be positively postmodern—the 220,000-word thesaurus compiled by Microlytics, Inc., and supplied as an accessory by the Microsoft Corporation with my program disks for Microsoft Word 4.0D for my almost-obsolete but still postmodern Macintosh SE. It's called Word Finder ®, or WF (without the R-in-a-circle) for short. It represents, the accompanying guide assures me, the very most up-to-date lexical help for the practical businessperson. Word Finder lists fifteen synonyms for *conversation*. If you look up *talk*, you get the same list—minus, of course, the word *talk* but with the word *conversation* instead. For the folks at Microlytics, then, sixteen words make up a kind of family of synonyms, and whatever word you look up the same group shows up.

Well, as it happens, this postmodern thesaurus living in my postmodern hard disk instead of my definitely premodern bookshelf opens up another kind of postmodern way of talking about language. In English, any synonym is also an antonym. That is, no two words in English *mean* just the same thing (there is one pair of exceptions, *gorse* and *furze*, which I leave to the botanists; I would recognize neither if it appeared in a field before me). So one of the ways we understand language is as a network of *differences*—the sort of thing that some Frenchmen have developed into a whole new way of attacking the Fifth Republic and its institutions, but also the sort of thing that can be used in simple and sensible ways. We look at these synonyms and say, "What is it about this word that makes it mean something different from *conversation*—something rather similar but recognizably different?" And as we come to answers about these differences—this play of simultaneous synonymy/antonymy—we start to understand how it is that we really understand a word.

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So we can ask: why isn't a conversation a *dialogue*? Or a *chat*? Or an *exchange*, or a *forum*, or, God help us, a *meeting*, *caucus*, *conference*, or *parley*? And why, finally, isn't *talk* an adequate replacement? I have no intention of going through the whole list; but, again, I'd see most of these forms of talk as different from a conversation because they are formal, or adversarial, or limited by some specific purpose; conversation, again, is none of these. The nearest we come is *discussion*, which, we remember, was Burke's frequent synonym in the quotation from which all this started off.

I kept looking for ways that *conversation* was used in this second half of the twentieth century, and found that it has become a key term for a cluster of modern philosophers—to the extent that modern, or post-modern, philosophers ever allow themselves to become a cluster. Most of them go back to the use of the word by the British political philosopher Michael Oakeshott in a paper called "The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind," first published in 1959. I have no idea whether he knew of Burke's use of the metaphor, though my suspicion is that he did not, that he reinvented it independently. In any case, his use of the metaphor is different from Burke's. For Oakeshott, "conversation" is a metaphor for what is more often called "civilization" or "culture." These are both terms he wants to avoid, because he thinks they suggest more homogeneity than is really there.

A civilization (and particularly ours) [he says] may be regarded as a conversation being carried on between a variety of human activities, each speaking with a voice, or in a language of its own . . . [It is] a conversation, because the relations between them are not those of assertion and denial but the conversational relationships of acknowledgement and accommodation.

His conversation is less a heated debate and more a reciprocal conveyance of thought than is Burke's, though that may be only the difference between St. George's School and Cambridge, in Oakeshott's case, and a New York City public education, in Burke's. In any case, he is concerned to reject the then-prevailing philosophic conception that there is only one valid voice, "namely, the voice of argumentative discourse, the voice of 'science', and [that] all others are acknowledged

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merely in respect of their aptitude to imitate this voice." There are, he says, at least three valid voices, none with a final claim to represent truth.

One is, indeed, the voice of argumentative activity, as in science and some forms of philosophy—the voice that speaks of “the world understood in respect of its independence of our hopes and desires, preferences and ambitions.” This world is “a system of conceptual images related to one another consequentially and claiming universal acceptance as a rational account of the world we live in.” In being that, it’s a world created by a “universe of discourse, a way of imagining and moving about among images”—above all, an activity of rationality.

The second voice is that of practical activity, of desire and aversion, the world of economic man and Utilitarianism, whose “constituents are images of pleasure and pain.” Because it is *practical* activity, it is “the reflection of a desiring self engaged in constructing its world and in continuing to reconstruct it in such a manner as to afford it pleasure. The world here consists of what is good to eat and what is poisonous, what is friendly and what is hostile, what is amenable to control and what resists it. And each image is recognized as something to be made use of or exploited.”

The third voice—there are probably others, he says, but these are the three he discusses—is that of poetry. “By ‘poetry’ I mean” (he says),

the activity of making images of a certain kind and moving about them in a manner appropriate to their character. Painting, sculpting, acting, dancing, singing, literary and musical composition are different kinds of poetic activity.

What distinguishes the poetic activity, for Oakeshott, is that it is contemplating or delighting in images in which the question of fact vs. not-fact does not arise; we don’t, if we’re sensible, ask whether *Othello* is true. We also don’t ask where these images came from or what results from them: they have, he says, “no antecedents or consequents.” They are not in themselves pleasurable or painful; they are just part of our contemplation and delight. They are not the subject of moral approval or disapproval. These are aspects of the world of practical activity, and poetry is not part of that world. But poetic images are not the key to

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some superior "reality" either: this is not the religious contemplation of Plato and the great mystics.

This kind of contemplation is what I myself believe in. It is, I have to say, almost unteachable, mostly because the pressures from the other two voices are so strong—poetry, they say, should be true (to something or other). Or it should gratify us, answer to our desires or aversions. It should be scientific, or practical. But for Oakeshott, and for me, poetry is neither. It has no purpose as such: like the other two voices, it is somehow built into us.

To listen to the voice of poetry is to enjoy, not a victory, but a momentary release, a brief enchantment. And perhaps, obliquely, it is to enjoy something more. Having an ear ready for the voice of poetry is to be disposed to choose delight rather than pleasure or virtue or knowledge, a disposition which will reflect itself in practical life in an affection for its intimations of poetry.

Which is why we have the Art Institute across from us and Symphony Hall down below us, why we have the dozens of small theatres and the bookstores and coffee houses that have more recently become part of the Chicago scene. In Oakeshott's terms, they provide the settings for part of the conversation as much as do the Board of Trade and the law offices on LaSalle Street, or the research facilities of Northwestern and the University of Chicago. There just are these three voices (at least these three) in the conversation, and when we limit ourselves to just one or two of them, we—well, limit ourselves.

Finally, another philosopher has appropriated Oakeshott's image of a conversation and given it a turn of his own. He is Richard Rorty, formerly of Princeton and now of the University of Virginia. We exist, for Rorty, as for Oakeshott and for Burke, in a world we have made from our own talk and action, and there is no other, "truer" world available to us to measure our talk and actions against. In a long footnote to the passage I started with, Burke says,

[I]t is in this "unending conversation" that the assertions of any given philosopher are grounded. *Strategically*, he may present his work as starting from some "rock-bottom fact" (he starts, for instance: "I look at this table, I perceive it to have . . ." etc.). Actually, the very selection of his

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"rock-bottom fact" derives its true grounding from the current state of the conversation, and assumes quite a different place in the "hierarchy of facts" when the locus of discussion has shifted.

Burke means that there are no foundations for what we say and believe other than what the conversation itself has provided. We can call attention to the table in front of us, and state what we "perceive" about it, only because the people who shaped the English language, in conversation, created the word "table" to mean a certain kind of object but not a lot of other kinds of rather similar objects. Neither the table nor the word represents some final reality. Nor does the word *conversation*.

When Burke and his fellow-conversationalists say that there is no other, "truer" world available to us, they mean that even if we had the absolute truth about everything in the real world, there would be no way we could know that. We don't deal, and we can't deal, in absolute truths. We can only deal in what we have found by experience to be *more* true and *less* true, more and less powerful in explaining our experiences and our discoveries. We don't know if it is *the* truth—just that it's the best handle on the truth we have found so far. And since the best we can do is what's truer, not what's True with a capital T, the conversation will never end. Nor can any one voice be allowed to dominate it.

Like Oakeshott, Rorty has been attacking, through his use of the metaphor of conversation, the notion that there is some specially-privileged way of talking, which we usually call science, and that the only valuable ways of talking are therefore those which are somehow "scientific"—like the pseudo-analytical philosophy which has dominated college and university faculties since the nineteen-forties and which has significantly contributed to the near-death of philosophy. It's associated with the name logical positivism and for me at least is terribly sterile. It believes that philosophy should be, in Rorty's term, a "mirror of nature"—that it should reflect accurately the way Things Really Are. As we've seen before, our folks don't think that there's any way to be sure we have a handle on the ways Things Really Are—only the descriptions that seem to hold up from our conversation so far.

These antifoundationalists also believe that the formal philosophical study of ethics is sterile. If we want to understand human ethical choice and the moral dilemmas which shape it, we should turn to fictions—

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most of all to the drama and the novel. So Rorty, in his latest book, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, spends a chapter each on Vladimir Nabokov and on George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. They have, in his view, best anatomized human cruelty in a way that makes it understandable; and for Rorty, as for most of the others, "cruelty is the worst thing we do." He describes himself as a "postmodern bourgeois liberal"—postmodern in freeing himself from the belief that there are foundations somewhere for our beliefs, other than the conversation; bourgeois in opposition to the Marxists; a liberal in what Judith Shklar has called the "liberalism of fear"—the sure knowledge that the alternative to freedom is always the secret police, and the cruelty that's associated with the Gestapo and the KGB. Burke probably shares these beliefs, though he would soft-pedal the "bourgeois" label more than Rorty; and Oakeshott too, though he's more a "classical liberal" economically than Burke or Rorty.

What's central, then, is a commitment to conversation. Once we have made that commitment, we can't also believe that there is some higher overriding force, some end, which justifies the means, whatever they are. When we attend to others' voices in "the conversational relationships of acknowledgement and accommodation," as Oakeshott put it, we also acknowledge that they matter. We resist—at least—the temptation to see the world in our way only.

History, too, opens up for us. The words we think we command—like *conversation*—turn out to have been different for Shakespeare, or for Chaucer's contemporaries. The historical dictionaries, the repositories of quotations, the literature of Greece and Rome and the Middle Ages, turn into parts of the conversation once we stop expecting them somehow to mirror our ideas and preoccupations. And we can let them speak with their own voices instead of asking them to speak with ours. Chaucer recognized that; in *Troilus and Criseyde*, about 1386, he said,

Ye knowen eek, that in forme of speche is chaunge  
With-inne a thousand yeer; and wordes tho  
That hadden prys, now wonder nyce and straunge  
Us thinketh hem; and yit thei spak hem so,  
And ferde aswel in love as men now do.  
Eke for to wynnen love in sondry ages,  
In sondry londes, sondry ben usages.

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What we are still not sure of is how much alike we might be, under the historical differences, the contrasts of civilizations and cultures and the current state of our conversations. The anthropologists like Clifford Geertz see human nature in the raw as buried so far under the conversation that it's inaccessible. The brilliant young classicist and philosopher Martha Nussbaum has recently been suggesting that we *can* get at what human nature is, perhaps by beginning with the qualities of being human that Aristotle listed—the so-called “virtues”—and thus opening another conversation.

Many years ago, Warren McCulloch, another member of this Club, asked (but not, alas, in a paper for this Club), “What is a number, that a man may know it? And a man, that he may know a number?” I ask, “What is a conversation, that a human may live it? And a human, that we may converse?” Perhaps some answers to the second question have emerged this past hour; but most of this paper has been about the first question—what is a conversation, that we may live it?



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