

Communication and Conversation

Leaving my house in the morning in order to go to the Institute of Philosophy, I regularly meet and greet my next-door neighbour, also a pensioner. We usually exchange a couple of sentences about the weather. What is really communicated? Both of us listened to the early morning news, in fact knew already from last night's weather forecast what the weather is going to be. So, the information conveyed seems nihil. And yet, we had an important conversation, be it 'about nothing'. An alien observing our behaviour and not knowing the institution of neighbourhood, nor the fact that many of us, at least of people my age, descend from small farmers or farmworkers for whom the changeable nature of the weather in this part of the world was something to be constantly worried about, – such an alien would look upon us as quite irrational, or at least very strange creatures. The fact is that even conveying proper information requires familiarity with a certain set of 'language games' (Wittgenstein) and their grammatical, pragmatic and (particularly) social rules. Otherwise it cannot be recognized nor accepted *as* real, appropriate information.

Communication is usually looked upon as purely a means, an instrument, in the service of an independent actor with certain pre-existing intentions, i.e. the sender of a message to a receiver (with the lowest possible amount of 'noise') from whom he desires the response he needs. But real communication between real people is much more than that. It rather is a *medium* in which we, sender and receiver, are inevitably taken up and at the same time cannot but participate. Communication understood as such a medium or 'space', one can call 'conversation'. Communication as conversation is as diverse as human life itself. Whether we are aware of it or not, like it or not, our sayings (and doings) must be understood as made possible only within the socio-cultural setting or context in which we live. This conception of communication at the same time requires a rather sophisticated understanding of psychology as well. We wouldn't know who we are, how to behave, what we want, what to say in any situation, but for the fact that we have been introduced into, and learned to participate in, certain 'language games' people are used to play in a common culture. Even if we wanted to do so, we could not really play the language games of primitive tribesmen, or of the priest-astronomers of Hellenistic Babylon. New language games (such as science) are not the result of the creative imagination and desire of individuals on their own, but of the interaction between already existing communal practices, historical opportunities, and individual creativity. Neither can such practices continue to exist unless whole groups of other language games are continued to be played as well, or are (more or less slightly) modified in specific respects.

Understanding communication as conversation, not as a means, but as a medium, allows one to focus attention on features of meaning which we are familiar with, but do not usually explicitly recognize. Whatever their superficial grammatical form, utterances (like statements, questions, orders) are as one says *expressive*, not in the sense that they simply refer to psychological facts, let alone to

neurological phenomena. They are expressive of an inter-subjective reality of neighbourhood, friendship, enmity, etc., which can of course be *explained* by reference to a psychological or neurological origin, but which cannot be properly *understood* except through familiarity with these very meanings and their social context. Without these expressions as so understood, reality as we know it in real life, i.e. in our relations with each other, would not exist. Can we really believe that the love for our children and grandchildren is not a reality, or only the reality of some brain state? The British philosopher Roger Scruton writes somewhere: “When we see another’s smile we see human flesh moving in obedience to impulses in the nerves. No law of nature is suspended in this process: we smile not in spite of, but because of, nature. Nevertheless, we understand a smile in quite another way: not as flesh, but as spirit, freely revealed. A smile is always more than flesh for us, even if it is only flesh”.

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