

FROM THE EDITORS

## CONVERSATION THE GRACE OF THE MOMENT

After the volumes of “Ethos” dedicated to the categories of the word,<sup>1</sup> silence and not speaking,<sup>2</sup> as well as hearing and listening,<sup>3</sup> it seems appropriate to address the topic of dialogue and conversation, which, in a way, encompasses the three preceding ones. An exchange a conversation is involves not only uttering words, but also falling silent, so that the other could speak, and—obviously—listening and hearing. Unless it succeeds in meeting these conditions, a conversation would remain a medley of unrelated monologues.

Sometimes, communication without words, in complete silence, is also considered to be a kind of conversation—as it is the case in the paintings called *sacra conversazione*. They usually depict the Madonna and Child, accompanied by other figures, mainly those of saints (but sometimes also of the donors of the works). The figures, however, are rarely represented as engaged in dialogues.<sup>4</sup> In this sense, conversation is conceived as a spiritual, or even holy community,<sup>5</sup> where one’s individual thoughts and feelings expressed in words are of little importance.

The concept of conversation may also be extended to embrace the totality of human culture and all the acts of creating it. Thus different texts of culture become voices in dialogues continued, as it were, beyond the limits of space and time. To join in such an exchange, its participants do not need to stay together in the same place, and it is possible to hold a dialogue with one’s own self, while drawing inspiration from works of art and literature which themselves may be interpreted as conversations.

Hans Georg Gadamer seems to adopt a similarly broad notion of conversation in his essay *Gedicht und Gespräch*,<sup>6</sup> where he first opposes poem and

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<sup>1</sup> *Ethos* 25, no. 1–2(97–98) (2012).

<sup>2</sup> *Ethos* 29, no. 1(113) (2016).

<sup>3</sup> *Ethos* 32, no. 1(125) (2019).

<sup>4</sup> See Rona G o f f e n, “*Nostra conversatio in caelis est*: Observations on the *Sacra Conversazione* in Trecento,” *The Art Bulletin* 61, no. 2 (1979): 201.

<sup>5</sup> See, *ibidem*: 199.

<sup>6</sup> See Hans Georg G a d a m e r, “Gedicht und Gespräch: Überlegungen zu einer Textprobe Ernst Meisters,” in Gadamer, *Gedicht und Gespräch: Essays* (Frankfurt am Mein: Insel Verlag, 1992), 165–182.

conversation to later identify these two concepts with each other. He initially claims that poems exist as pieces of literature, i.e., as texts which have been written down and thus immobilized, deprived of their original energy, while conversations exist, or live by “the grace of the moment.”<sup>7</sup> Further reflection, however, makes Gadamer recognize similarities rather than differences between poems and conversations; in particular, both serve the same goal: to bring about reconciliation. Conversation, as the German humanist observes, achieves its purpose by making it possible for the interlocutors to find a common ground even “despite the roar of motorcycles”<sup>8</sup> in the background. Finally, Gadamer states that a poem actually *is* a conversation because, in a sense, every poem conducts an unceasing dialogue with itself, but also “overcomes ... silent listening and exposes itself to interruption, to another word which might be uttered as if in reply.”<sup>9</sup> In *Gedicht und Gespräch*, also reading poems is portrayed as entering into a dialogue with them and, *vice versa*, poems may converse with their readers; the aim of these conversations is always to “to allow the meaning to mature.”<sup>10</sup>

Such an extended idea of conversation seems to be present also in the current volume of *Ethos*, as it were, in the background, in the shape of a no longer obvious presupposition (or, perhaps, a hope) that one can, in fact, find a common ground for understanding among all human beings, a shared human *cultura animi*, which rather than being one of the actually existing, particular cultures, makes all of them possible, at the same time enabling us to hold individual conversations in the narrow sense of the word. This more limited concept of conversation—as an exchange of ideas expressed in words between individuals who are in a direct, live contact with one another—is, as it were, the *analogatum princeps* for all the other concepts the authors of the articles collected in this volume employed to describe the phenomenon of conversation.

It is worth noting that being in a direct contact while engaging in a conversation seems, on the one hand, essential and, on the other hand, unnecessary. The latter appears to be the case particularly today, as increasingly sophisticated media enable remote communication. However, the function of such media is to emulate physical closeness of the participants in a conversation, as if they were staying in a common ‘spacetime,’ e.g., sitting together at a table, beside a fireplace or on a bench in a park, or walking there—as the ancient Peripatetics did in the gardens surrounding their famous school.

<sup>7</sup> Ibidem, s. 171. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

<sup>8</sup> Ibidem, s. 173.

<sup>9</sup> Ibidem, s. 178.

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem, s. 171.

In the history of culture, and particularly of philosophy, conversation (in the narrow sense) was considered as a privileged way of communicating (and acquiring) knowledge and of education. Plato, all of whose philosophical works were given the form of dialogues (although these conversations occasionally include also long monologues)<sup>11</sup> is known to have greatly preferred a conversation to studying a written text. As the historian of philosophy Giovanni Reale writes, the Athenian philosopher believed that “the living and spirited conversation between those who have had knowledge impressed on their souls is much better and much more powerful than a written presentation.”<sup>12</sup>

In a similar way conversation was praised by Michel de Montaigne, who declared to appreciate it so much that, had he had to choose, he would have consented to lose rather his sight than his hearing and speech. “The study of books, he wrote, is a languishing and feeble motion that heats not, whereas conversation teaches and exercises at once.”<sup>13</sup> In his view, the most useful and interesting were, certainly, conversations with “a strong mind” as an interlocutor.<sup>14</sup> He also appreciated “quick and sharp repartees which mirth and familiarity introduce amongst friends,”<sup>15</sup> as “in this jollity, we sometimes pinch the secret strings of our imperfections which, at another and graver time, we cannot touch without offence, and so profitably give one another a hint of our defects.”<sup>16</sup>

Like Plato, Montaigne emphasized the usefulness of conversation, its cognitive and educational, as well as moral function. Both philosophers recognized also the pleasure, or even joy, provided by both serious and playful exchanges.<sup>17</sup> When Montaigne refers to “heating” which cannot be expected from reading books (it seems that Gadamer would have disagreed with this view), he most probably means stirring up emotions and, in particular, the satisfaction drawn from intelligent and instructive dialogues, rather than intellectual stimulation. Also the manner in which he praises conversation might be described as enthusiastic, or even ‘hot.’ With equal fervor, however, he criticizes some particular types of dialogue, especially disputes “governed and

<sup>11</sup> See Thomas A. Szlezák, *Reading Plato*, chapter 6, “Characteristics of the Platonic Dialogues,” trans. Graham Zanker (London: Taylor and Francis, 2005, Kindle Edition).

<sup>12</sup> Giovanni Reale, *A History of Ancient Philosophy*, vol. 2, *Plato and Aristotle*, trans. John R. Catan (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 10.

<sup>13</sup> Michel de Montaigne, *Essays*, book 3, chapter 8, “Of the Art of Conference,” trans. Charles Cotton, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/3600/3600-h/3600-h.htm#link2HCH0101>.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>17</sup> “The dialogues owe their existence not least to this brilliant writer’s artistic instinct for play.” Szlezák, *Reading Plato*, chapter 12, “The Critique of Writing in the *Phaedrus*.”

commanded by passion”<sup>18</sup> and held only in order “that we may contradict.”<sup>19</sup> He claims that such “disputes ought to be interdicted and punished as well as other verbal crimes.”<sup>20</sup> He also complains, “When the dispute is irregular and disordered, I leave the thing itself, and insist upon the form with anger and indiscretion; falling into willful, malicious, and imperious way of disputation, of which I am afterwards ashamed.”<sup>21</sup>

Conversations applauded by Plato and Montaigne can be described as, broadly speaking, ‘didactic’ dialogues. This is, however, only one of multiple kinds of conversation and, perhaps, neither the ‘paradigmatic,’ most frequent, nor most important one. It would probably not be easy to decide which actual dialogues fall under the latter three headings and, in the case of the most frequently held conversations, their identification would pose a special methodological challenge. Neither is it easy to classify conversations using homogenous criteria. Instead, one would need such different criteria as, e.g., an intended purpose of a given dialogue, its expected result, but also the result it has actually produced, the manner of conducting a conversation, the relationship between interlocutors, their attitudes or the way in which each of them perceives both himself or herself and the other. Such categorizations might involve also ethical criteria, which would make it possible to identify certain conversations as in some sense bad (e.g., initiated in order to persuade the other to succumb to a moral evil, or conducted in a dishonest, manipulative fashion) and consider whether, regardless of their having the external form of a dialogue, such exchanges actually deserve being called dialogues or conversations.

The latter may be divided, for instance, into ones that make a difference, whether intended or unintended, and ones that do not alter the *status quo*. Such a classification is deficient, and the categories so established appear too broad; still, they turn out to be useful. The subset of conversations which do not make a difference might contain both ‘small talk,’ used, e.g., to maintain a friendly atmosphere at a social gathering, where the participants hardly know one another, and diplomatic talks between politicians held to keep peace among nations. (Incidentally, can one imagine a conversation which would cause no effects at all?) Yet, the category of conversations which do not make a difference appears to reflect our everyday experience; which of us has not participated in long and difficult discussions which did not lead to making any decision? The term ‘conversations which make a difference’ seems also excessively broad, as its denotation might be extended to include every dia-

<sup>18</sup> M o n t a i g n e, *Essays*, book 3, chapter 8, “Of the Art of Conference.”

<sup>19</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>20</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>21</sup> Ibidem.

logue or exchange of ideas, but it also helps describe our experience, as most of us would be able to recall a breakthrough conversation that (positively or negatively) transformed our lives.

However, as far as the essence, conditions, and types of conversation are concerned, particular examples preserved in the works of culture appear more effective than abstract distinctions. Some of those dialogues, although recorded in writing, have not lost their vitality and are found compelling by ever new audiences. A momentous conversation of the protagonists of Richard Wagner's opera *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* belongs among such examples. The dialogue between the experienced cobbler Hans Sachs (who also composed poetic songs) and the young knight Walther von Stolzing turns out to be a maieutic (yet not Socratic) conversation.<sup>22</sup> Sachs, a recognized poet and a wise compassionate man, acts as a teacher and, as it were, a midwife, helping a sensitive, but somewhat arrogant and impetuous youngster to create a remarkable song. This work, in which innovation blends with respect for tradition, makes it possible for Walther to win the singing contest, marry his chosen bride, obtain the blessing of her father, as well as gain the approval of the Nuremberg community, and especially of the city's *Meistersinger* guild (whose members he had previously antagonized with his improvised, unruly singing), while overcoming their prejudices and opening their ears to new qualities in poetry and music. His extraordinary prize poem would not have been born without the dialogue (*nota bene*, Sachs explains in it the relationship between the parts of a well-composed piece using the metaphor of a well-matched couple and their offspring) in which the fresh and original talent of a young man encounters an older one's time-tested gift and wisdom, as well as his keen sensitivity which has not been dulled by age or suffering. Hans Sachs and Walther von Stoltzing are unequal in many respects, e.g., they represent different generations and social classes and milieus. However, in their conversation—which has not been planned and develops spontaneously, living, as it were, “by the grace of the moment”—whatever divides them either loses its significance or opens a possibility for them to complete, mutually teach, and learn from each other. Through this dialogue they encounter each other as artists and as human beings, and although their exchange is not meant as fun, they are granted joy.

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<sup>22</sup> Piotr Kamiński describes this conversation, included in the third act of the opera, as “a dialogue of rare beauty . . . where poetry goes hand in hand with deep thought, while the music ensures fluent, flexible, and natural narration.” Piotr K a m i ń s k i, *Tysiąc i jedna opera* (Kraków: Polskie Wydawnictwo Muzyczne SA, 2015), 1767. The dialogue appears particularly moving in the production directed by David McVicar and premiered in Glyndebourne in 2011; the role of Hans Sachs was then sung by Gerald Finley, while that of Walther by Marco Jentzsch. See *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, DVD, Opus Arte, OA1085D, 2011; see also: Glyndebourne: Our Opera Archive, <https://www.glyndebourne.com/opera-archive/explore-our-operas/explore-die-meistersinger-von-nurnberg/>).

The circumstances, the time, and the place in which Wagner's characters engage in their conversation are of great importance for the results of their encounter. The composer sets the scene of the dialogue at Sachs's home (where the young Walther was given refuge after the previous night's brawl), early in the morning, on a festive day. Sachs is engrossed in a melancholy meditation on human nature and on the plight in which he, the knight, and his beloved have found themselves, while Walther has just awakened from his sleep and is enraptured by a beautiful dream. He has realized that the cobbler is not his enemy but, even having so powerful an ally, he still does not know what to do. At the beginning of the breakthrough dialogue, he has not yet assumed his role of an impulsive nobleman, has not yet become entangled in any disputes or difficult emotions, nor undertaken any precipitate action. He is revived by sleep, in love, and ready to accept help. In this way, he is also prepared to enter into a conversation.

It seems, however, that the night when—to use Gadamer's phrase—"the roar of motorcycles" subsides, is a more propitious time for having important conversations. Perhaps, if the dialogue to which I wish to refer now were to take place in our age, with its never abating noise and so brightly illuminated nights (particularly in the cities), a different hour would be chosen for it. However, the exchange took place long ago, when the hustle and bustle of the day sounded differently, and the night was calm and dark, providing better shelter for those who did not wish to be seen. The conversation I have in mind is also of an incomparably greater significance than the moving scene from Wagner's only comic opera.

The dialogue of Nicodemus, a Pharisee and one of the Jewish leaders, with Jesus, was described in the third chapter of the Gospel according to St. John. We do not know the scope of the consequences of this encounter for the life of Nicodemus. St. John did not record the answer Nicodemus gave to the final words of Jesus. From the Gospel we just learn that later Nicodemus assisted Joseph of Arimathea in the burial of Christ, "bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds" (John 19:39) to anoint his body.

Perhaps, by failing to include the Pharisee's reply, the Evangelist intended to help the readers of his account of the Gospel 'hear' the words of Jesus as if they were addressed also to them and to prevent them from focusing on details which are unimportant in the context of the narrative. On the other hand, St. John's restraint in describing the response of Nicodemus stimulates imagination to reproduce details of his encounter with Jesus. Such a reconstruction of the Pharisee's motivations and feelings has been attempted by Fr. Tadeusz Styczeń in his retreat conferences, or meditations,<sup>23</sup> where he also identifies Nicodemus's errors.

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<sup>23</sup> See Tadeusz Styczeń, SDS, *Trzeba ci się narodzić z Ducha Prawdy!*, in Styczeń, *Poszukujący czy poszukiwani? Rozważana rekolekcyjne* (Lublin: Instytut Jana Pawła II KUL, 2006).

Styczeń shows that the Pharisee “has swiftly diminished the scale of his problem: he reduced himself entirely to the function he performed”<sup>24</sup> (it was a genuinely important social function and a source of his pride). However, this was not his only mistake: “It was not only himself that he reduced to the function the person performed. Also his interlocutor, Christ, was reduced by him to the role which Nicodemus wished him to play.”<sup>25</sup> The answers Jesus gave to the Pharisee’s questions disrupted the latter’s self-image, made it impossible for him to continue playing his respectable role, and showed him the way towards the understanding of who both participants of the dialogue really were.

In our everyday conversations, it usually seems almost impossible for us not to play any role and simply be a human being and an unrepeatable person; it would also be futile to expect that others will not play their roles, or to approach them as if they were not playing any role. Not only do roles (in other words, our masks, or costumes we wear) help us recognize our ‘usefulness’ in the community but, by concealing our deep selves, also protect us. On the other hand, masks must not be understood only as a means of concealment, as they frequently reveal a part of who we are. However, there are conversations in which, to communicate with others, we need to give up wearing masks (or, take off at least some of them); but sometimes it is our masks and roles that enable mutual understanding.

Playing roles would prove unnecessary and lose its meaning probably only in the presence of the absolutely good Being who is the source of our existence. Perhaps, in our conversations with other human beings—to avoid Nicodemus’s mistakes—it would be useful to obey the following rule, which is Kantian in its spirit: ‘Conduct your conversations in such a way that a social role, whether your own or that of your partner in the dialogue, never entirely conceal the humanity and unrepeatability of either of you.’ Although the above principle is a categorical imperative, we may hope that, once we adhere to it, we will be granted “the grace of the moment”—the grace of conversation.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibidem, 31.

<sup>25</sup> Ibidem, 32.