Dialogues with Hume

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Conversation: and the Reception of David Hume

Peter Jones

Celebrating Hume's Tercentenary

David Hume was born in Edinburgh in 1711, attended the University of Edinburgh from 1723, and died in Edinburgh in 1776, having meanwhile achieved worldwide fame as an historian and philosopher. He and his associates were at the heart of the intellectual, literary and cultural events that are now known as the Scottish Enlightenment and he is generally recognised as the greatest philosopher ever to write in English. Today his work is studied by scholars from all over the world. Although Hume wrote in the 18th century, his works continue to be influential across many fields of scholarship and remain uncommonly relevant to the philosophical disputes of the 21st century and a wide range of current public concerns. It is fitting, therefore, that the 300th anniversary of his birth should be celebrated in Edinburgh in 2011 and the University of Edinburgh is hosting a programme of events throughout the year. As part of this, IASH has organised a series of seminars entitled Dialogues with Hume as follows:

Emeritus Professor Peter Jones (University of Edinburgh):
Conversation: And the Reception of David Hume

Gathering Uncertainties: A conversation between playwright Linda McLean and Professor Susan Manning.

Professor Daniel Schulthess (University of Neuchâtel):
Hume and Searle – the 'is/ought' gap vs. speech act theory

Dr. James Harris (University of St. Andrews):
Hume's intellectual development – an overview

A dialogue between Professor Don Garrett (New York University and Carnegie Centenary Professor, IASH) and Dr. Peter Millican (Hertford College, Oxord and Illumni Hume Fellow, IASH) on:
Reason, Induction, and Causation in Hume's Philosophy.

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About the Author

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It might be appropriate to inaugurate the tercentenary of Hume's birth by quoting a passage from the author who coined the splendid phrase 'the plastic life of [...] philosophers'.

> No sort of Prejudices stick closer to us, or are harder to be eradicated than those of the Society wherein we live and had our Education We cannot easily be brought to believe that our Ancestors were mostly in the wrong, much less that those with whom we daily converse have so little ground for many of their Actions....
>
> Most of the philosophers (as we read) had two sorts of Doctrine, the one internal and the other external, or the one private and the other publick; the latter to be indifferently communicated to all the World, and the former only very cautiously to their best friends.
>
> [Toland 1704, pp. 1, 12, 56]

The three octavo volumes of Hume's *Treatise,* on publication in 1739-40, cost the equivalent in today's money of £87.00 – which was four days wages for a labourer. Thirty years later, the first edition of Robertson's *History of Charles V* cost closer to £200 – which was more than the annual wage of many people. That is not my theme, but Hume was certainly right that few readers were either qualified or inclined to study 1100 pages of text, although wrong that there were no reviews: yet he was certainly right again that he had gone about things in entirely the wrong way.

In his famous, and subsequently withdrawn Addisonian essay 'On Essay Writing', he lamented the 'Separation of the Learned from the conversible World' [Hume 1985, p. 534]: 'Learning has been a great Loser' because it was being 'cultivated by Men without any Taste of

Life or manners, and without that Liberty and Facility of Thought and Expression, which can only be acquir'd by Conversation'. The only way to avoid chimerical and unintelligible conclusions is by consulting 'Experience, where alone it is to be found, in common Life and Conversation' [Hume 1985, p. 535]. The term 'conversation' reverberates throughout the essay. He considers himself 'a Kind of Resident or Ambassador from the Dominions of learning to those of Conversation', not least because 'the materials of this Commerce must chiefly be furnish'd by Conversation and common Life'. The Fair Sex are declared to be 'the Sovereigns of the Empire of Conversation'. The philosopher in his closet, as he says in another withdrawn essay ['Of the Study of History'] is apt to lose himself in abstractions and subtilties. In 'Immortality of the Soul' Hume repeated a fundamental tenet: 'the chief source of moral ideas is the reflection on the interests of human society' [Hume 1985, p. 595]: since such reflection can be effectively explored, challenged and expressed only in conversation, not in a private closet, it follows that conversation is essential to human society.

The Dialogues of Plato, and especially the *Symposium,* provided some models for later writers on conversation but, of course, the differences between Plato's context in the fifth century BC and that of Stefano Guazzo in 1579 Florence, or of Madelaine de Scudéry in 1684 Paris, or of Hume's close friend d'Alembert in 1759, embodied important intellectual, social and political elements. Over his lifetime, Hume came to adopt many of the views of these writers about philosophy and about human beings, and central among their ideas were those on conversation.

The ancients had their own formulation, but in modern times everyone agreed with Chaucer's friend John Gower, who wrote in his English poem of 1390, *Confessio Amantis,* that 'Although a man be wys himself, Yit is the wisdom more of twelve' – or, in brief, three heads are better than one. That was why Hume was right to reform the

style and form of his *Treatise* – as he later confessed, he had intended 'to innovate in all the sublimest Parts of philosophy' and 'above all' in 'a positive Air' [Hume 1932, 1.187]. He needed to reflect more carefully about his intended audience and their interests and beliefs, as well as his own goals, and the shifting contexts in which different means of communication might best achieve results. The total philosophy he offered was too challenging for most British readers – and, as Reception studies have conclusively established, readers everywhere merely took what they could get out of the text that seemed to resonate with their own contexts [Jones, 2005].

I shall offer a definition of what 'conversation' ought to be, derived from my historical mentors, and argue that, properly implemented, conversation is the 'cement of society'. Such a notion is prominent both in Hume's own social contexts and in the authors in which he immersed himself, including, of course, Cicero. We can use the idea to answer recurrent questions – what did Hume think he was doing in this or that precise essay or work, at this or that stage of his life? If, as I hold, Hume was mistaken in attempting to fulfil his mixed aspirations in the form and style of the *Treatise,* did he succeed in finding, adapting or inventing some analogue of conversation to communicate his views more widely, and by means of printed texts [Hume 1932, 1.268]?

Cicero famously viewed his letters to friends and family as surrogates for conversation, and countless later writers adopted his view. When the arts of letter writing began to spread among the growing numbers of literate and elite eighteenth century women, the processes involved were seen to address questions of context, identity and autonomy, and manners – all issues long acknowledged in the domain of rhetoric. However, conversation remained the essential device by which individuals could discover both themselves and where they stood in relation to others because only in the evolving contexts of conversation can participants learn how to discern precisely what

those contexts are, and what behaviour they call for. Moreover, texts always demand interpretation, however unconscious, of intention and tone, context and appropriate response: in the end, readers are alone with their own devices [Hume 1985, p. 604]. In conversation of an appropriate scale, participants can reflect on or enquire about such matters, withdraw or modify their own contributions, erasing if necessary earlier remarks. Since Hume prominently canvassed the increasingly accepted view that language was a human convention, that our concepts are tools, invented by us, for particular tasks in particular contexts, and that their history through different contexts records unexpected distortions [Jones, 1982], it followed that little unchallengeable authority could be attached to written texts – political, philosophical, or theological: including his own.

This conclusion enables me to introduce my theme: the cement of society is conversation, and the cement of conversation is propriety.

By examining the cement, we can identify the scale of the structures it bonds and supports – and whether there are some structures it does not well bond or support, for the scale of everything we do affects both their quality, and their inter-connections with everything else. It was asserted for well over a century in France that the proprieties of conversation are the very same as the proprieties of society, and to study one is to study the other. However deplorable many present day readers judge the *ancien régime* to have been, the arts of conversation, as I conceive them, can and should be cultivated independently of that irretrievable social context, and societies which remain in ignorance of those arts lack both values and skills which help to secure their very existence.

The notions of scale and propriety which are central to our discussion derive almost as much from the classical world of architecture as from moral philosophy and rhetoric. The learned Renaissance scholar and architect Leon Battista Alberti, responding to Cicero's near contemporary Vitruvius, emphasized that proportion and

appearance could be assessed only by reference to the particularities of the diverse contexts in which a performance was perceived. He counselled architects always to invest in the largest possible model of their intended structures, before proceeding further, in order to alert clients to what might unfold but also, and of greater importance, to help the architects themselves discern what might be entirely unsuitable. The reason was, and remains today, that what works at one scale will not necessarily work at another, and something small cannot retain all its apparent forms, balance and relations when enlarged – and the other way round, as well: we have all seen absurd miniature models of the Eiffel Tower, for example. Alberti's point underlines the fact that in most cases scale is a condition of intelligibility – to stretch a concept, for example, beyond the expected parameters of use is to diminish both the possibility of understanding and the capacity to act appropriately in the newly experienced context: we have only to recall the history of the diverse concepts of democracy, or philosophy.

The special notion of conversation which concerns me was at the core of formal education from the Italian Renaissance onwards: it was taken very seriously in France, and from the early 1700s was then developed in slightly different ways in England and Scotland.

Let us recall the elite group of aristocratic French women who organised their *salons* over an eighty year period from the late 1600s [Craveri, 2001]. From the outset, they explicitly set out to displace the adversarial tradition of discourse inherited from antiquity; and more recently nurtured to great effect by the Jesuits who, as missionaries, sought victory prior to conversion, but who, as doctrinal advocates, sought destruction and sadistic extermination. Few had previously objected to such an approach, since the rigid class structures themselves revelled in social combat to proclaim their superiority; indeed, some of the *salonnieres* periodically had to ban the device of ridicule to humiliate an interlocutor. The roles of wit, as of ridicule, irony, sarcasm, were endless topics for self-conscious comment – not

least because they were among the most subversive social strategies, and were invariably associated with combat and domination. [Girard, 1780; Montandon,1995].

Nevertheless, from the 1750s onwards the aristocratic hostesses and their guests unexpectedly faced renewed hostility by the wider public- Tocqueville later identified its source as rampant individualism combined with material competition. What seemed to work within small and self-consciously governed groups in the salons – mutual respect, propriety, loyalty – failed to make any impact on the very much larger scale of society at large. Why was this?

Membership of a *salon* was grounded in an implicit notion of friendship – *amicitia* in Cicero's term – and this notion was inextricable from a group of moral values that needed to be spelled out and defended whenever hostile criticism was launched in terms of political subversion, social divisiveness or even personal insult. The moral values included sympathy, mutual respect, and toleration towards others, together with modesty, moderation and *decorum* in one's own behaviour – the preferred all-encompassing French term was '*mesure*'. But none of this, lifted straight from Cicero's discussions in *De Officiis, DeAmicitia* or *De Senectute* [Jones, 1982] – let alone his writings on rhetoric or government – was familiar to the impoverished, inflamed and unrepresented crowds that increasingly thronged to urban centres. This is not surprising, since Cicero – and his philosophical admirers in the 18th century, such as Hume – had clearly shown how carefully the appropriate understandings had to be inculcated, learned, practised and nurtured. Cicero held that the chief bond between men is provided by thought and speech, and that justice in society is founded on trust in promise keeping. Among the other bonds of society is a principle of sympathy, by which men are attracted to *honestum* and its four constituent virtues: wisdom, justice, fortitude and moderation – the last of which is central to the idea of *decorum:* what is proper is morally right. [Precisely these views, of

course, exercised Smith in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*]. Cicero also insisted that we must cultivate the art of seeing ourselves from a spectator's viewpoint, and recognise that the established customs in a community constitute the rules of behaviour from which all learning and subsequent behaviour takes root. In Cicero's view, the claims of society and the bonds which unite it, take precedence over any individual pursuit of speculative knowledge, which is why the basic duties depend on a kind of quasi-natural social instinct rather than formal reasoning as such. So we have here: conversation, sympathy and trust; judgment, integrity, justice and moderation; and taste.

Eighteenth-century philosophers who tried carefully to sketch out the foundations of civil society and social harmony were invariably at odds with those who were impatient for power and personal advancement. The aristocratic *salonnières* were relatively safe from censorship or control by those in power, but neither they, nor those actually in power during the *ancien régime* did anything to introduce a wider public to the virtues of education and reflection upon the requirements of the emerging civil society. By the 1750s the French Encyclopedists were beginning to attempt this, recognising that British writers such as Locke, Addison and Hume, had identified necessary tasks at least a generation earlier. Diderot and d'Alembert prominently argued, against Montaigne, that the traditions of combat must no longer define the practices of thought or society itself. Adam Smith's lectures in the 1750s touched on all this.

As Aristotle and Cicero had insisted, to talk of proprieties in any context is to make a value judgment. It is essential to consider how value judgments are made, by whom, when, and why. How a concept is understood and used by an individual, and thus what it means to them, is intimately tied to how, when, where and from whom that individual learned to use the concept. The indefinite variety of contexts in which an individual can become acquainted, familiar and comfortable about using a concept lies behind the manifest range of misunderstandings that occur

and the often heated disputes about the authority, consequences and very meaning of a concept. Hume's intellectual concern was with ideas and arguments: his rhetorical challenges were what to tell, and how to sell.

In 1741 Hume commended the French for having perfected the most useful and most agreeable of all arts – *'l'Art de Vivre,* the art of society and conversation' [Hume 1985, p. 91]. Here, then, is my proposed definition:

> *Conversation is a sacred and improvisatory practice*
> *in which the duty to listen precedes the right to speak.*

Let me explain. Conversation is a 'practice', because it requires a range of learnable skills, which must be used or lost. It is 'sacred' because it embodies and conveys the values of the community in which it operates. The duty to listen underlines the necessity of judging the context before being able to estimate what might be appropriate behaviour; it also emphasizes the central role of manners in conversation, in which courtesy to others takes precedence over assertion of oneself – a point on which Hume insisted in 1741: 'among the arts of conversation, no one pleases more than mutual deference or civility, which leads us to resign our own inclinations to those of our companion' [Hume 1985, p. 126]. However, if the duty to listen must be learned, the right to speak must be earned: and it is also circumscribed by the requirement of appropriateness. Instruction to children to wait their turn, not to interrupt or hog the conversation, just listen to what is being said – all such guidance dwells on such matters, and also answers the mistaken objection that if listening precedes speaking, everyone must remain silent. That, of course, is absurd. What actually happens, and indeed must happen, is that learning the arts of conversation takes place in contexts of already existing and complex human social practices – and these most certainly are not silent. Nevertheless, we have to be sensitive to the knowledge, attention span and interest of the listener

– not to become boring, insistent, intrusive, upsetting, offensive: all matters concerning how others see us. This was Adam Smith's famous point in 1759 about learning to see ourselves as others see us – the flip side of the injunction to 'do unto others' [Smith 1976, p. 110].

Smith also said this: 'The great pleasure of conversation and society ... arises from a certain correspondence of sentiments and opinions, from a certain harmony of minds, which like so many musical instruments coincide and keep time with one another' [Smith 1976, p. 337]. The analogy between the improvisatory character of both conversation and music was commonplace by the early 1700s, because the emphasis was upon close attention to context, and constant adaptation to a changing context – without which there can be no appropriateness. The greatest musicians of the 18th century were admired for their extraordinary skill at improvisation – Bach, Handel, Mozart – and even at the popular level, no Scots fiddler at the dance, for example, or folk-singer, ever stuck to the minimal scores available. Similarly, properly educated and engaged conversationalists improvised throughout their performance, which would be centrally coloured by their breathing, posture and facial expression as well as by vocabulary, pace, gesture, tone, rhythm, pitch, volume. All of these ideas were explicitly discussed in 17th and 18th century France; and the over-riding premise that one's duty was to perform appropriately in the theatre of social life also emphasized that success depended as much on sensitivity to the context, as rational reflection on the content of thought. In fact, most of the *salons* accepted Condillac's view, central to many of the Scottish philosophers, that human beings are motivated by, and respond to, their feelings, rather than to reasoning alone. We are emotional beings, as well as thinkers, and judgments of propriety are as much aesthetic judgments as verdicts about thought [Hume 1932, p. 149; 2000, p. 5]. David Hume's distant cousin Lord Karnes, in a chapter of 1762 on 'Propriety' explicitly stated that 'no discipline is more suitable to man...than that which refines his taste,

and leads him to distinguish in every subject...what is fit and proper' [2005, 1.x. p. 233].

One feature merits emphasis. Everywhere in Europe, discussion clubs found it necessary to draw up strict rules of behaviour. This was not only because of the liquid consumption that usually fuelled the gathering, it was because sustained conversation presupposes manners [Hume 1985, pp. 132, 271]. The sociability fostered in the discussion clubs was sustained and monitored by conventions mutually agreed by their members: the rules of attendance and behaviour were enforced, and the defining criterion of membership was participation. What counts as good manners is always culturally and contextually anchored, because propriety is always their criterion. Manners are contrived to meet perceived needs and goals; they must be learned and practiced, and they rarely evolve at the same rate as other social changes – which is why they are often described as 'old fashioned'. The history and justification of all manners can be explained, although the task is undertaken too infrequently. One feature of manners was famously captured by Buffon in 1753: he said '*le style c'est l'homme même*'. This has often been misunderstood, since this ancient concept of 'style' derived from classical rhetoric, encapsulating one's philosophy of life and the behaviour it entailed. It lingered in the old mariner's metaphor that a man is judged by the 'cut of his jib'.

We must revert briefly to the notion of combat, cherished by the Jesuits but inherited from the Aristotelian view that enquiry should be directed at the truth, and that from a debate focused on such ends a winner must emerge. More sharply, those who were attracted to legal procedures held that winning is what matters – whether or not the winner arrives at the truth. The consequences of such notions bedevil present-day practices in very many domains.

Some modern western scholars are interested in a Japanese tradition which seeks to avoid loss of face, on the one hand, and to achieve consensus rather than submission to a declared victor, on the other.

It is called the ‘Both...and...’ approach. The assumption is that every speaker has some insight to offer, and that in any complex matter the resulting diversity of understanding should be accommodated. So: ‘Yes, you are right, and there is also this to consider...’ Some communities in Africa, presided over by chiefs and elders, practice not dissimilar traditions. Of course, if ‘moderation’ is viewed as an aesthetic indulgence and useless for both motivation and gaining one’s point, as both Ferguson and Witherspoon held – and Hume conceded as early as 1741 [Hume 1985,p. 27] – such conciliatory practices are likely to be derided [Jones,1982].

Why, then, is conversation a cement of civil society? Because the ultimate moral duty is to think, and, as d’Alembert insisted, ‘reciprocal communication’ [1770, 1. pp. 11-12] is the only means by which our personally meagre repertoire of knowledge can be augmented. It is requisite that every participant in a conversation pays attention – attention entails engaging one’s mind. The expectation and possibility of conversation within a group, and the acquired skills to conduct it, enable participants to explore, refine, express and finally act upon coherent, intelligible, justifiable thoughts. Only by expressing their thoughts can human beings come to know what they really are: expression is a necessary condition of thought. That is precisely why freedom of speech threatens tyrants – freedom of speech is a condition of freedom of thought, which is itself a condition of freedom of action. Another reason for conversations to be located only in small groups, no matter how limited in scope or circumscribed their ambition, is that when everyone knows what others think, extremes of reaction are less likely, toleration more likely, mutual interest and respect promoted, and social tensions minimized [Hume 1985, pp. 61, 607; cp. Smith,1976: pp. 12, 23, 213].

Everyone knows that rhetoric was the core of humanist education. It was an all-embracing concept, encompassing what we would call moral and mental philosophy, politics and social psychology, as well

as modes of communication and behaviour: everybody studied the Port-Royal Logic, Locke, Charles Rollin or Isaac Watts. In modern jargon, the study of rhetoric covered producer, process and product. Rhetoric was concerned primarily with the dynamic act of speaking – although its prescriptions later extended to writing – and underlined the view that effective public communication presupposed apparent transparency in meaning: this neither assumed, nor yearned for, self-evidence, but it did entail interpretation. But public oratory is not conversation, because the hearers are not participating [Hume 1985, p. 108]. So, if the moral life is defined in terms of agency, what kind of agency is available to mere spectators, witnesses – whether in the social, political or aesthetic domain?

The answer is that spectators can avoid passivity only by some form of participation: that means engaging their minds, through close reflective attention to what is going on. That is why the ultimate immoral act is choosing not to think – thinking is a central constituent and precondition of moral agency, and its expression the anchor.

Communication in eighteenth century Europe was becoming increasingly textual, and this generated new challenges. Ephraim Chambers, in 1728, echoed an idea trumpeted by almost everyone since Bacon: that wilful obscurity should be condemned because it gives a reader the spurious freedom to invent whatever meaning he wishes, and with it the seductive illusion of ownership. The human mind, he says, 'in apprehending what was hid under a veil, fancies itself in some measure the author of it' [1738, 'Fable']. The defining characteristic of impromptu speech is improvisation, which reflects the fluctuations of perception and thought, as well as of the multiple contexts in which they take place. Writing and texts, however, stabilize such perpetual motion at the cost of distortion, even deception:

> There is something arbitrary and artificial in all writings: they are a kind of draughts, or pictures, where the aspect, attitude, and light,

> which the objects are taken in, though merely arbitrary, yet sway and direct the whole representation. Books are, as it were, plans or prospects of ideas artfully arranged and exhibited, not to the eye, but to the imagination; and there is a kind of analogous perspective, which obtains in them, wherein we have something not much unlike points of sight, and of distance. An author, in effect, has some particular view or design in drawing our his ideas ...The case amounts to the same as the viewing of objects in a mirror; where, unless the form of the mirror be known, *viz.* whether it be plain, concave, convex, cylindric, or conic, etc., we can make no judgment of the magnitude, figure, *etc.* of the object [Chambers 1738, p. xvi].

Two seemingly intractable problems threatened to make communication impossible: first, the puzzling relations of language to the world, and second, the ubiquitous implications of change. Hume's close friend d'Alembert, clearly reflecting on Chambers, declared that:

> It is almost as if one were trying to express [a] proposition by means of a language whose nature was being imperceptibly altered, so that the proposition was successively expressed in different ways representing the different states through which the language had passed. Each of these states would be recognized in the one immediately neighbouring it; but in a more remote state we would no longer make it out [1770, 1. p. 47: 1963, p. 28].

He feared, in other words, that across separated points in time, and in the absence of an intervening medium, we may be unable to work out what was being said. The meaning of even everyday expressions might change independently of any changes in their supposed objects. Action-at-a-distance might be doubtful, but meaning-at-a-distance impossible. Why did Hume and Smith value so highly the Abbe Girard's *Synonymes François* [1737], and what were the consequences of their reflections?

Let us recall some of the devices available to us in tackling textual interpretation. To navigate the rich terrain we require maps of different kinds and on various scales. Several co-ordinates are needed to identify the contexts of writing – personal, historical, political, philosophical, religious, geographical: the publishing details and reviewing practices. Who were the intended and actual audiences? Who responded to what, how, when, why and where? Most readers use what they read for their own purposes, in the present, and the further they are from the date of composition the less they are inclined to detect original intentions, meanings, implications [Jones, 1975]. But we can rarely separate notions of 'interpretation' and 'use'. All texts operate within generic and rhetorical conventions peculiar to their contexts, and knowledge of these is necessary to determine what meanings were derived by contemporary readers. Meanings only operate contextually, with the same words conveying different messages in different contexts. Conversations can provide models and means of understanding to which texts, at best, can only approximate.

The intellectual, social, political and physical contexts of Hume and Smith were entirely different from ours. I cannot here explore more of these, except to make one final remark about improvisation, the defining merit of which is propriety – Cicero's *decorum.* The factors which condition propriety are judgments about context. Improvisation, as such, presupposes extensive preparation, a mnemonic repertoire and intense concentration on the present, momentarily extinguishing its temporality – why else is it regarded as central to children's aural education and in sport? It is the ultimate art which disguises art. As La Rochefoucauld said of conversation itself: 'Nothing makes it so difficult to be natural as the desire to appear so' [2007, V.431. p. 117]. These are central topics to address, in all branches of our moral life: performance, improvisation, propriety and context. All of them call for engagement of the mind, and the exercise of judgment; they typically also call for a grasp of the specific skills exercised in the performance.

Almost all the philosophers in Britain and France from Bacon and Hobbes onwards said something about the nature of language and meaning: Hume and his French friends had read most of them [Jones, 1972] – and d'Alembert enriched his reflections by analogies with music [e.g. 1770, 5. p. 161], about which he had argued at length with Rousseau and Rameau. Unsurprisingly, since with Diderot, who had already translated Shaftesbury, he was engaged in translating Ephraim Chambers's *Cyclopaedia,* he had to reflect on translation, meaning, definition, synonymy. He remarks that a translator, unlike an author, cannot choose what he wants to say and how; and although the freedom of one language can enrich another, absolutely literal translation is impossible, since languages differ greatly in the range and subtlety of their synonyms [1770, 3. pp. 10, 31].

I mentioned Cicero's view that letters were the only, albeit inadequate, substitutes for conversation – they can stimulate or provoke thoughtful responses and, to a degree, sustain the melodies of evolving reflections. They can also remind us that, typically, the goals of debate and argument are conclusion or closure – often to be followed by action. 'Don't open up the debate again' is, after all, a lament, not a celebratory remark. By contrast, the goals of conversation are precisely the opposite: they are to ensure continuation, no matter how extended interruptions may be. To record an 'end' to a conversation is to signal that life has ebbed from an endeavour or its participants.

So what constitute appropriate responses in a conversation? Two features are important: the evolving dynamics of a conversation mean that participants need constantly to adjust their responses; secondly, their understanding changes as they themselves contribute to ongoing exchange. The relations alter between what has been said, what is being said, and what seem to be the routes ahead, and emphasis oscillates between the three elements. The parallel with improvisatory musical performance is close.

The temporal character of wordless music, like the contingency of

conversation, lacked the fixity of painting or literature, yielding to the latter a seductive authority. Kant's friend J.G. Sulzer (1720-1779), who translated Hume for him, made this very point in the *Encyclopedié,* as did Charles Burney independently, here, in the 1770s:

> To the reputation of a Theorist, indeed, longevity is insured by means of books, which become obsolete more slowly than musical compositions. Tradition only whispers, for a short time, the name and abilities of a mere Performer whereas, a theory once committed to paper and established, lives, at least in libraries, as long as the language in which it was written [1957, 1. p. 705].

Nevertheless, as d'Alembert insisted, mastery of the arts of making music entails mastery of the reciprocal arts of listening to it [1770, 1. p. 66].

I come to my final 'reminder'. As you all know, medical practitioners in both Leiden and Edinburgh were openly speculating, by the 1730s, whether the so-called 'binary system' of logic so dominant over the millennia, and fruitful in the domains of formal propositions and inanimate matter, adequately captured the multi-caused events which seem to characterise the living world – the complex botanical and biological phenomena which revealed constant but unpredictable dynamic change: Robert Whytt and John Pringle in Edinburgh, Buffon in Paris, loudly supported by Diderot and d'Alembert, Barthez in Montpelier. These men and many others held the view that '*la science de l'homme*' [do not ignore the meanings of the Latin '*scientia*'] must be the ground of our claims about society and the world around us. So, what if our ideas and feelings were themselves the result of multiple causation and ever changing internal and external factors: how might a properly sceptical approach to our shifting beliefs and incomplete understanding be best explored and signalled to our fellow beings?

Possibly by texts, although only certain sorts of texts, since all texts are physically inert, and require interpretation: in any case, even in the *Treatise* Hume had lamented that 'the greatest part of men seem agreed to convert reading into an amusement' [Hume 2007, 293.21]. Hume thought that readers had refused to read properly his reflections as a philosophical 'anatomist'. Might 'conversation', properly understood and prosecuted, enable philosophical anatomy to be agreeably undertaken, since it often seemed to echo the dynamics of thought? Had Socrates attempted this? The *salonnières* certainly had, as had the *philosophes:* and Hume found himself drawn back to views he had privately expressed as a young man. He could not finally answer the question of how best to communicate with wider audiences than those in a private conversation, but neither could anyone else. If texts were necessary, what kinds of text – plays, dialogues, novels? Resort to the pragmatic policy of 'Horses for Courses' would uphold the premise of classical rhetoric concerning contexts, but the problems of securing understanding across different contexts remain: and who selects the horses, and the courses, and why?

Since antiquity, authors have experimented with the dialogue form as a means of capturing, and exploring, the dynamics of thought and personal interaction. But whenever an author seems to invest in the defence of a view, however implicitly, characters typically talk past each other and fail to address challenges that are made – Hume's interlocutors in his *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* engage only tangentially, if at all. The stage itself might seem to offer more opportunities, but dramatists rarely succeed with reflective and evolving interchanges. Texts, of course, can 'leave things up in the air', as in a conversation, and by so doing excite readers to reflect on their own: but, apart from dissatisfaction, that is precisely the moment at which readers begin to 'use' texts for their own purposes and according to their on lights. They are not conversing with the author. Many theologians and philosophers have explored the roles

of confession and autobiography as a means of achieving an internal conversation, but as Smith forcefully argued in his discussions of conscience, a monologue with oneself lacks the crucial role of an impartial monitor, as even Montaigne reluctantly admitted. Should or can ideas be explored 'neutrally', as it were, without assignment to an advocate, or without devices to persuade a listener?

One difference between a text and a conversation is that if one typically aims to get something out of a text, one aims, as a participant, to put something into a conversation, quite apart from what one might also hope to gain. And the point of improvisation or extempore indulgence is to discover things by means of unplanned and largely unpredicted means.

Three heads are better than one: two heads typically revert to combat and the demands of either/or. Three heads can explore, and even attempt to condone multiple perspectives, and a revisable verdict of both/and. Just as polytheism could embrace multiple causation, conversation allows for provisionality and revision, for heat and passion, moderation and compromise: immediate puzzles of interpretation can be addressed, motives and sources enquired after, and self-knowledge acquired [2007, p. 390; 1985, pp. 4, 7, 27, 61, 132]. Smith's Executor James Hutton wisely deplored 'the heresy of sceptical philosophers' who 'convert a laudible spirit of doubting or inquiry, into an absurd principle of disbelieving without evidence or examination' [1794, III. p. 622]. Conversation is the most effective antidote to such a principle.

Burne's famous Ciceronian injunction 'amidst all your philosophy, be still a man' [2000, 1. p. 7] was not a rhetorical flourish: all his reflections, to a greater or lesser degree, were intended as guides to how to live. However, let us not forget this: Hume is known to have responded angrily only two or three times by letter to his critics, and he never discussed philosophy, religion or politics in social company or with more than one or two close friends, such as Smith and

d'Alembert – with whom, of course he planned to travel in Italy [Hume 1932, 1. p. 499]. Did he himself not engage in conversation of the kind he advocated? The answer, perhaps, is this.

The famous epigraph to the *Treatise* from Tacitus, proclaiming the freedom to think what one liked and say what one thinks, quoted by so many of Hume's contemporaries, was a proudly sought ideal, which for ever eluded fulfilment – and Hume well knew it. Why otherwise did he leave out what he left out? Freedom of thought and speech are minority interests and achievements. The truth then, as now, is that it is not possible to discuss anything anywhere anyhow with anybody. There is no known context in which anything can be discussed, nor any issue which can be discussed with equal propriety in a multitude of ways. That is why I quoted Toland at the beginning.

It is always fruitful to be alert to what a writer apparently chooses not to discuss, and when. The enquiry is not perverse, because it derives from conversation itself. Rochefoucauld was not the first, but one of the most perceptive to urge that we learn the value and character of silences in conversation: a silence may signal rage or frustration or refusal to engage; it may signal awe or respect, excitement or anticipation, anxiety or disdain, assent or dissent, incomprehension or exhaustion – or merely boredom.

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