

Conversing, and with Nietzsche

David Cave
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That humans talk and converse is not revealing. We all just did before we walked to our seats. Talking in twos or threes or threading our way through the group we say a “hello” here, “a good to see you” there, a “how are you doing,” or we jump into a conversation whose origin began before we arrived. Through talk and conversation humans exhibit one of the attributes of our species --- the use of language and its manipulation to communicate not just information but emotions and abstract thoughts as well. Through talk we share ourselves, learn from others, and come together as people. Indeed, one of the characteristics of a free society, which we as Americans feel we are, is the ability to engage in dialogue, to talk and converse openly and freely, without being suspect. The First Amendment speaks to the right of open conversation as much as it does to free speech. We can say that failing to engage in conversation and in its open-endedness is to fail to exercise our freedom. It is through open-ended conversation, I believe, that we exercise this freedom, demonstrate a receptivity to life and to others, and share and develop our self and our individual style, our particular integrity. As the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche said “One thing is needful --- to ‘give style’ to one’s character --- a great and rare art!”¹ To create the self, our own individual style, and for adopting a receptive, non-defensive, dialogical engagement toward other ideas, toward people, and toward what life brings our way, is the subject on which I wish to speak tonight.

In order to understand the connection between freedom and the creation of the self through conversation, we must first speak of the distinction between mere talk and conversation.

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*. Trans. Walter Kaufmann. NY: Vintage Books, 1974, p.232.

Talk, to talk, arises with language itself. There's a New Yorker cartoon showing a prehistoric couple in their skins, he with his club, sitting back to back to each other on a rock. Under the banner caption "The Emergence of Language," she says, "We need to talk." His thought bubble shows him thinking, "Uh-oh." The woman wants to put the man in his place, get something straight, whereas the man regards verbal engagement as unnecessary and an annoyance. Talk here is equated with the monologue, the talking to or at but not with another. The prehistoric man feels he's going to be talked to, and for such a reason language exists. Then there's another joke, an old one, found in the earliest extant book of jokes we have on record, *the philogelos* (laughter-lover), said to have been compiled around the fourth or fifth century CE, where again talk is distinguished from conversation. The joke goes like this: "How shall I cut your hair?" The barber asks the customer. "In silence," comes the reply.² We get the joke because it not only recalls our experiences on the chair. We get it because we know the difference between talk and conversation. Talk, in simple form, is one way. Conversation is two way. The free-lance writer Stephen Miller, in his book, *Conversation, a History of a Declining Art*, distinguishes the two in saying "talk is generally purposeful whereas conversation is not."³ Samuel Johnson in prototypical wit put it well when asked by Boswell whether Johnson enjoyed good conversation at a friend's dinner party, "No, Sir," said Johnson, "we had *talk*, but no *conversation*; there was nothing *discussed*."⁴ In other words, there was no back-an-forthness engagement.

Talk is, fundamentally, the action itself, the emitting of a sound in the form of sustained speech. Conversation, rather, from con-verse, to turn over, turn around, implies a working over,

2 Jim Holt, *Stop Me If You've Heard This, A History and Philosophy of Jokes*. NY: W.W. Norton, 2008, pp. 10-11.

3 Stephen Miller, *Conversation, A History of a Declining Art*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006, p. 14.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 13.

a tilling, a massaging; it's an act of speaking and listening whereby each responds to the other, one leading and one following, in alternating action. There is the give and take, a considering, a weighing of what's been heard, and an appropriate response to what was just said. Indeed, the process of conversation is like a coordinated dance, or like jazz. Scholars of the field of conversational analysis, a field arising in the 1960s from the discipline of sociology, speak of conversation as the way in which people "socialize and develop and sustain their relationship with each other." Conversational analysis is less interested in the content shared than in how it is shared. It pays attention, for instance, to the cues (linguistic, tonal, bodily) people pick up on for enabling a conversation to start and to continue, and, if not picked up, how it, therefore, ceases.⁵

For conversation to work parties of two or several must adjust to what others are saying and to how they say it so as to calibrate and manage one's own words, speech patterns, feelings, and body language so that there is a synchronizing between and among all involved. Notice this next time you engage in a conversation with another or see a group of men in banter or women in a tight discussion and watch the process of each and of the group as they come together and then progress in their conversation over its duration. Each of the members come in and make the necessary adjustments for the bond to happen and for the conversation to continue. There is a "prospective-retrospective orientation," among the participants, a look forward and a look backward, for moving the conversation along.⁶ Those who cannot get into the rhythm, drop out, feel alienated. If something intervenes or a subject matter has run its course or the listening was not active enough to pick up the cues for a shift in direction or one simply chooses to back away, the conversation enters a silence, a lull, or just stops. The exchange between participants is a "negotiating" one. Each must give and take, assert and concede, speak and listen. When we

5 Liddicoat, 1-4.

6 Sidwell, 4-5

negotiate we take into account, consider, formulate an appropriate response, and offer our own voice in exchange. This negotiation can proceed at different paces, from the slow deliberateness of a philosophical discussion, to the quick rata-ta pace of a banter or of sports talk, to the calm and equipoised reflection, to the heated and argumentative. In each case no person monopolizes nor presumes self-sufficiency. Conversation is the coming together of parts.

However the dynamics, in conversation those involved know they have been taken seriously. They've been listened to. They've been treated as full, authentic individuals.

One might think that when you are in the free-flowing, in the moving back-and-forth of a conversation, when you and your interlocutor move as one, that your autonomous self is lost, that there is no self to cultivate, that the self has disappeared in the exchange. But the contrary is the case. For in order for a true conversational communion to occur, you have to have a self to contribute. You have to acknowledge and respect your own integrity and that of the other as a distinct self. The Jewish philosopher Martin Buber refers to the exchange whereby you regard your interlocutor as a subject as an I-Thou exchange, not an I-It exchange, where the other is regarded as an object, and treated as such.⁷ A conversation should be an exchange between subjects. As such, each comes away with and has during the conversation an integrity assumed and given. For out of the conversation one rises to a greater self expression, to have been elevated as a human being, of one with a mind, an outlook, a set of experiences, all historically conditioned. It is precisely because there is the integrity of subjects that a conversation, unlike mere talk, is able to be free flowing. Says Theodore Zeldin, "Conversation is not just about conveying information or sharing emotions, not just a way of putting ideas into peoples' heads...Conversation is a meeting of minds with different memories and habits. When minds meet, they don't just exchange facts: they transform them, reshape them, draw different

7 Martin Buber, I and Thou. 2nd. Ed. Translated Ronald Gregor Smith. NY: Scribners, 1958, pp. 4-5f.

implications from them, engage in new trains of thought. Conversation doesn't just reshuffle the cards; it creates new cards."⁸ "The kind of conversation I'm interested in," he says, "is the one which you start with a willingness to emerge a slightly different person."⁹

However undertaken, conversation exists "for its own end." We converse so as to converse more. True conversation is for its own communion. Conversation ought to have its progress, a move further down the path, yes. But ultimately it is not to come to closure, to resolve itself, to cease the inquiry. Rather, conversation is ongoing and open ended. We never arrive. Even in death others can still converse with what we've left behind, and we, if the living engage honestly with our vestiges, can converse back in response. We converse to enrich our relation with self, with others, and with life. We do not converse to come to answers, nor even to arrive at The Truth. Conversation mulls over, questions, reframes, moves here, shifts there. In all cases, it keeps going. The healthy soul, the vibrant community, allows for this conversational open-endedness, this freedom. To expect or force a closure therein is death and tyranny.

It is not difficult to find the death of and the tyranny over conversation. Miller notes that the art of conversation, mastered by the French (think the Parisian Salons), went into decline in England in the 18th century as English nationalism and English pride took hold with the defeat of the French in the Seven Years War, the rise of King George the III, and with the subsequent war against France in 1793. Whereas the French had animated conversation, the English, says Miller, regarded the delicacies of conversation as signs of superficiality, deceit, and untrustworthiness, and, in response, preferred taciturnity, impoliteness, and ill-humor.¹⁰ The English regarded the quality of politeness, an inextricable element of conversation, as devious, as

8 Theodore Zeldin, *Conversation, How Talk Can Change Our Lives*. Mahwah, N.J.: Hidden Spring, 2000, p. 14.

9 Ibid., 3.

10 Miller, *Conversation*, p. 175f.

feigning amiability, and as untrustworthy, thinking that in seeming amiable and affirming one moment, your gracious conversation partner will turn around and stab you in the back. English suspicion of French deference led the English to prefer direct speech instead, a cut-to-the-chase pointedness. While sometimes helpful for bringing to conversation an honesty, to go for this kind of directness can undervalue and misread the social nature of conversation, which, to be effective, requires a strong lubricant of indirect speech.

This lubricant is what we normally refer to as “politeness.” The linguist and social psychologist Stephen Pinker defines politeness as “the countless adjustments that speakers make to avoid the equally countless ways that their listeners might be put off.”¹¹ Politeness, as indirect speech, breaks down in the face of commands, requests, pronouncements, whenever hearers are put on the defensive and are expected to respond to an actual or perceived claim upon them. To show politeness simply means to respect the autonomy of another, to give the person the space to move about freely. So it should not be surprising, then, as Miller notes, that at times of national or group pride and of presumptions of self-righteousness or of presumed superiority, that conversation is shut down and the open-endedness of the give-and-take, of the cycle of speaking—of listening—of appropriate responding, breaks down, is halted. Indeed, at such times any negotiated concession in a conversation is thought to be a violation of principles, a betrayal of the group.

That national pride should shut down conversation should not surprise us. Following 9/11 and a period of collective grief, we, as a nation were marshaled into supporting without dissent wars into Afghanistan and Iraq, with the expectation that to be patriotic we were to support these wars without question. The give-and-take of conversation, of free-spirited disputation of ideas and of perspectives was not just discouraged but suppressed through

11 Stephen Pinker, *The Stuff of Thought*. NY: Penguin, 2007, p. 380.

intimidation. There was only one direction; one position. There was only monologue. No conversation.

Conversation today is going through a similarly hard time. Extremist calls for national, fiscal, or moral exceptionalism stamp down conversation. Our polarized electorate, our religious zeal, these appeal to argument, to competition, to the zero-sum. Winning not communing is the goal. For only by winning, it is thought, do you have the platform, the power, and the right to enforce change. The operative word is not conversation but talk (hence talk radio, which is nothing but speaking at the audience, not with it, or, more precisely, speaking at a narrowly defined constituency for the purpose of marking a clean divide between it and all others, a defined opposition). Talk is not con-versing, but con-tending. To take to the mat.

The national temper toward contention extends into other themes, from race to climate change, from abortion and same-sex marriage, to whatever is thought to be self-evident in its rightness. For these contentious subjects, regarded as self-evident by their adherents, any semblance of conversing around them is regarded as subversive, unenlightened, or just stupid. When truth is on your side, why converse. Just hear me talk.

It is not just ideological self-rightness that undercuts our individual freedom to develop our self through conversational exchanges. Conversation today is also stymied by mediums that purport to foster conversation. From the Internet, to smart phones, to email, to Facebook, to Twitter, each of these, while having their value, eliminate the corporeal nature of conversation and weaken our capacity to exercise the skill to navigate the ambiguities and nuances to converse with another in the flesh. These technologies in effect diminish our freedom because they give us the misleading solace of having communicated with another without having to deal with the messiness of communicating with someone face-to-face.

Now, one might say that the technological revolution via the computer and its miniturizations and networks is analogous to the introduction of the printing press in the 16th century, which did not eliminate conversation. It is true that with the introduction of the printing press more people could come into broader shared conversations because moveable type standardized and universalized information, pronouncements, and opinion more than ever before. Moreover, as Elizabeth Eisenstein says, an historian of the printing press and of its impact on European civilization, printing technology did in fact weaken community ties and some forms of sociability, since now people, with access to their own newsprint and pamphlets, did not need to gather to hear news and exchange opinion but could read about the latest silently at home.¹²

Nevertheless, even with these dampening effects upon conversation, the technology of print was not for its own end. People still gathered to converse and to hear oral presentations, though now more collectively informed because of the dispersal of print. Print did not suppress conversation. No lesser person than Michel de Montaigne, the inventor of the essay, whose writings, said the philosopher Stuart Hampshire, “came as near as it can come to talk among friends,” depressed the value of the book and of silent reading to favoring conversation instead. “The study of books is a languishing and feeble activity that gives no heat, whereas discussion teaches and exercises us at the same time,” says Montaigne.¹³

Today, however, computer technology and its offshoots, does discourage and weaken peoples’ capacity to converse. In a New York Times opinion piece, “*The Flight From Conversation*,” the MIT psychologist of contemporary technology, Sherry Turkle, says “We live in a technological universe in which we are always communicating. And yet we have sacrificed

12 Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe*, 2ed. NY: Cambridge University Press, 2005, pp. 104-05.

13 Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Works*. Translated by Donald M. Frame, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003, p. 855.

conversation for mere connection.”¹⁴ She quotes a sixteen year old boy who has relied on texting for communicating: “Someday, someday,” he says, “but certainly not now, I’d like to learn how to have a conversation.”¹⁵ Turkle does not disparage the many attributes of Twitter, Facebook, the web, but says they are no substitute for conversation. “Connecting in sips may work for gathering discrete bits of information or for saying, ‘I am thinking about you.’ Or even for saying, ‘I love you.’ But connecting in sips doesn’t work as well when it comes to understanding and knowing one another. In conversation we tend to one another. (The word itself is kinetic; it’s derived from words that mean to move, together). We can attend to tone and nuance. In conversation, we are called upon to see things from another’s point of view,” she says.¹⁶

The technological talismans and portals of computer telecommunication (such as the smart phones that people look into as if expecting some revelation to come forth to direct them in what to do or say) are changing who we are, and our capacity to deliberate patiently and to converse not just with others but with ourselves. They weaken our willingness and ability to engage in self reflection. Unlike the printing press, which produced a product (the printed book or pamphlet) from which to form opinions and become informed, computers, says Turkle, have become our “second self,”¹⁷ a substitute of the self; they eliminate the distinction between humans and tools. Smart phones, apps, virtual realities, are no longer tools and mediums through which to reach some other state; they are the state themselves. We rely on them to tell us what to say and do. A New Yorker cartoon shows a husband and wife at a house party. He is fixated on his smart phone while the other guests are talking amiably. She with a scowl on her

14 Sherry Turkle, “The Flight from Conversation,” in *The New York Times, Sunday Review* (April 21, 2012).

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid, 2.

17 Sherry Turkle, *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005.

face turns to him and says, “I suppose now you’ll find something to add to the conversation?”

Robotic technologies, notes Turkle, are the latest fascinations that threaten to replace our human selves altogether. With all these artificialities, Turkle, in her recent book, Alone Together, Why We Expect More From Technology and Less From Each Other, wonders aloud saying, “Technology reshapes the landscape of our emotional lives, but is it offering us the lives we want to lead?”¹⁸ The questions Turkle asks centers on wherein do we discover and cultivate our self and our self in relation to community. Do we do it via hardware and bites through the cyber-ether or via flesh-and-blood encounters.

In short, the polarization of un-compromisable posturing and the use of technology more to connect than to converse with each other, both inhibit conversation. How much we as selves and as a society are able to develop our own and collective self, respectively, through conversation will depend on the degree to which we enter into conversation with each other and sustain it, and not resort to blows or to retreating to our corners.

So far I have spoken of conversation as oral communication between individuals. That it is, of course. There are, though, other ways to regard conversation if we think of it as an attitude toward life, as a way to process what life brings to us, and as an outlook of hope toward the future. For instance, as individuals, we can converse with the experiences we confront and observe throughout our days, and with people living or, through their writings or artifacts, with those who are dead. We always carry on internal dialogues with ourselves from what we hear, see, experience. Some of us carry on these dialogues aloud, we think as we talk; others of us keep the dialogue internal, but the purpose, intended or not, is the same: to turn over in our heads what we are thinking. Thinking is “internalized conversation. What we think about is a

18 Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together, Why We Expect More From Technology and Less From Each Other*. NY: Basic Books, 2011, p. 17.

reflection of what we talk about with other people, and what we communicate with them about on paper,” says the social historian of philosophy, Randall Collins.¹⁹ And while our thinking can be kept internally or expressed externally, our thinking is never solely our own thoughts but draws in the ideas of others; our thinking is connected to other participants. At the unconscious level of our thinking, the psychologist Carl Jung said we participate in a “collective unconscious,” we feel and think from within an inherited cultural pool. Our thoughts are not simply our own.

Other ways by which we converse with the world and explore our innermost thoughts is through the writing of journals and diaries. Through them we process our days and work through fundamental questions. These conversations can take the form of confessions, apologies, travelogues, scientific observations, philosophical arguments, meditations, and prayers. Think of Augustine's Confessions, to Descartes's Meditations, to Montaigne's Essays to Darwin's Voyage of the Beagle, and to the journals of Emerson, Nietzsche, Gide, Edmund Wilson. If you are great enough others write down your conversations for you. There's Eckerman's Conversations with Goethe or Boswell's with Johnson, or those of Lucien Price with Alfred North Whitehead. Through journaling one converses with oneself to make the life one lives one's own. One's conversational partner in these internal dialogues are usually with an imagined interlocutor --- be it a living person or dead --- known through books and artifacts --- or some entity, as with God or some transcendent being, or with some concept, such as what is Truth? Beauty? The Good? The social psychologist George Herbert Mead refers to this imagined interlocutor as the “generalized other,” our internal conversation partner.²⁰ Trying to

19 Randall Collins, *The Sociology of Philosophies, A Global Theory of Intellectual Change*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998, p. 46.

20 Paul Froese and Christopher Bader. *America's Four Gods: What We Say About God --- and What That Says About Us*. NY: Oxford University Press, 2010, pp. 9-10.

figure out, through one's internal conversations, what sort of self I am --- what do I think, feel, believe, am willing to claim? --- in relation to this "generalized other," is the challenge and task every conscientious person faces as she goes through life. Those unable to put daylight between their developing self and the "generalized other," may lose their individual identity and possibly become dangerous to society, as when this "generalized other" speaks and not the person.

With whomever or whatever one converses, by means of conversation one can chew on the meat of existence and find through this dialogue the means to appropriate the impressions and data of one's world and thereby be about working out one's personal meaning and ways to act. I say "be about working out" because, as I will explain later, to expect and to find closure in meaning is death and the end of hope.²¹

Apart from the individual conversations in which we engage, we also converse in groups. Such conversations range from pure play, as in sports talk, to social bonding, as in types of gossip, to reflective thinking aloud on subjects of some weight. Humans are social animals, said Aristotle. One realizes one's nature through group activities and discussion. Stephen Greenblatt in *Swerve: How the World Became Modern*, writes of unearthed libraries in Roman villas in Herculaneum that showed that the early Romans relied less on ritual than on conversation to find the meaning of life, and they conducted their conversations in groups: "To realize one's nature

²¹ The philosopher Richard Rorty puts it this way, "[E]very human life is the working out of a sophisticated idiosyncratic fantasy, and a reminder that no such working out gets completed before death interrupts. It cannot get completed because there is nothing to complete, there is only a web of relations to be woven, a web which time lengthens every day. But if we avoid Nietzsche's inverted Platonism --- his suggestion that a life of self-creation can be as complete and as autonomous as Plato thought a life of contemplation might be --- then we shall be content to think of any human life as the always incomplete, yet sometimes heroic, reweaving of such a web. We shall see the conscious need of the strong poet to *demonstrate* that he is not a copy or replica as merely a special form of an unconscious need everyone has: the need to come to terms with the blind impress which chance has given him, to make a self for himself by redescribing that impress in terms which are, if only marginally, his own." Quoted from Rorty's *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* [Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1989, pp. 42-43] in Owen Flanagan, *Self-Expressions, Mind, Morals, and the Meaning of Life*. NY: Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 11 n.1.

as humans... was to participate in a group activity. And the activity of choice, for cultivated Romans, as for the Greeks before them, was discourse,” says Greenblatt.²²

In modern society, in 18th century England, for instance, coffee houses were place of conversation on every subject. “The English discourse freely on everything,” commented a Swiss visitor, “particularly on matters of politics,” a subject not discussed in the Salons of Paris.²³ The British clubs, like Samuel Johnson’s Ivy Lane Club, established in 1748, out of his “love of conversation,” or his later Literary Club, of 1764, for men of learning and of accomplishment (women were not allowed), were places for the clubbable, Johnson’s phrase, a word referring to being conversationally polite.²⁴ Equivalent to the Salons of France, and, like them, where one checked one’s political passions at the door, British clubs were places for men to converse on a range of subjects, in manners light, and, when needed, serious, but always preserving the decorum of sociability.²⁵ Darwin commented that if he remained unmarried he’d have more time “to listen to the conversations of clever men in Clubs.”²⁶

It was the French Salon's, however, of the 17th and 18th century, that most defined an era of conversations and set the standard for sociability and for conversation as play, for its own end, as an expression of one's character and, therefore, as a stance toward life. As mentioned, once England and France became at odds, it was this very stance toward life of the French conversationalists that the English would then detest and reject, such that conversation as a means of receptivity to others and to a cultivated society would suffer. The salons of France fostered a polite sociability, civilized playfulness, and uplifting educated discourse in large part

²² Stephen Greenblatt. *The Swerve, How the World Became Modern*. NY: W.W. Norton, p. 68 – 69

²³ Miller, *Conversation*, pp. 89, 91.

²⁴ Miller, *Conversation*, pp. 111, 117.

²⁵ Miller, *Conversation*, pp. 96-107.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 181-82.

because members were not allowed to discuss politics and religion, domestic matters, nor flaunt their social and aristocratic privilege. Conversants took themselves as equals. They listened more than they talked and they enjoyed the beauty and civilizing pleasure of language itself.²⁷

That these salons were run by women, like the incomparable Catherine de Vivonne de Rambouillet in her famous *Chambre Blue*, “Blue Room,” made them platforms for giving women greater stature in shaping French culture.²⁸ Writers like Balzac and philosophers such as Descartes wrote for the Salons,²⁹ precisely because they knew their works would be read and their ideas debated. The salons regarded the virtues of sociability around the spoken word as a virtue of its own, for no other reward than the pure joy of intelligent discussion. Conversation was at its best: open-ended and playful. In these groups one cultivated the self for society.

Today, book groups, associations, meetings for other purposes, can still function as collectives for conversation, not to achieve some end but to turn over, as a farmer rotates the soil or a gardener her plot, ideas, opinions, feelings and to see what comes up, regardless that what is shared is soon forgotten and goes unscribed.

As for collective discussions, are blogs and chat rooms the salons of the internet? The obvious but critical difference is that no human need be present in the flesh when discussing across cyberspace. All that counts is that there be a back and forth exchange, a dialogue it's

²⁷ Ibid., p. 345.

²⁸ Benedetta Craveri, *The Age of Conversation*. Trans. Teresa Waugh. NY: New York Review of Books, 2005, pp. 19-29f. The French feminist philosopher and public intellectual, Elisabeth Badinter, wishes for the return of the “great intellectual revolution in the salons before the French Revolution, when there was a gaiety, a charm, a grace and seduction” to conversation. Jane Kramer, “Against Nature, Elisabeth Badinter’s Contrarian Feminism,” *The New Yorker* (July 25, 2011, 44-55), 47.

²⁹ Craveri, *The Age*, pp. 338, 21.

hoped, if each is truly listening to the other.³⁰ Otherwise a blog is a monologue and a chat room is but a tree falling in the woods: no one there to know if there's sound or not.

Conversing, from the examples I have given here, is both an individual and a collective pursuit. But in each, there remains the individual. I can only converse through my own voice as a conversation partner, an interlocutor, I do so through my own head and gut. Whether I converse one-on-one or within a group, I come as an individual and the other or others come as individuals, too, such that everyone's self can be influenced by others, if one allows it. For at its most basic, to converse is to agree to a type of relationship, of two or more agreeing to connect to each other as subjects, not, as said before, as subject to object. As a relationship --- be it with a person directly or through a medium, such as through a text ---- I come to relate to that which is like or of me --- that is, that is familiar enough to me such that I am able to have a conversation --- and to that which is not like or of me ---- meaning, which is distinct enough from me and my position to justify conversing in the first place. It's not without reason that it's said that if two people in a conversation always agree, one of the two is not necessary.

Someone who practiced conversation as a means to develop the self and whose thinking sought to make the creation of the self an ideal to pursue, was Friedrich Nietzsche. Although he did not write on the art of conversation and was known for being an isolationist loner, he did practice most forms of conversation throughout his life and advocated certain positions that support the ends of conversation.

Born in 1844, to a Lutheran minister, Nietzsche from early on was a noticeably precocious student. His father died at thirty-five, of brain disease, when Nietzsche was five. Though he did not know his father well, Nietzsche acquired, undoubtedly from the family line of

³⁰ Some have critiqued on-line learning for its lack of visceral connection and for one's inability to respond immediately to the visceral inflections of one's conversation partner(s), such that one misses out on the flow, the pauses, and the interruptions that go with thinking.

ministers from which his father came, a serious, inquisitive, moralistic outlook on life, whereby he would both admit to the splendor and aspirational greatness of human nature and to its fallenness and deceitfulness all the same. This dialectical tension would influence the theological, ethical, and political philosophy of Reinhold Niebuhr, arguably America's greatest, homegrown, twentieth-century theologian.³¹ Nietzsche also acquired from his father his father's proclivity for neurological stresses. Throughout Nietzsche's life he'd be plagued by debilitating headaches and at forty-six years of age he went insane, due as much to his syphilis as to possible bio-polarity.

From his mother, a devout woman, Nietzsche inherited an intense move toward a life of spiritual formation, though, in time his spirituality took a radically different route and life philosophy.

Nietzsche's probing intellect and his fundamental good heartedness disposed him to developing solid conversational partners and attachments. He conversed with writers and, through the study of philology, the ancient Greeks and Romans, and with intimate friends and mentors. At seventeen, while attending the prestigious gymnasium the Schulpforta ("school gate"), Nietzsche came into the thrall of Ralph Waldo Emerson in German translation. Nietzsche read Emerson every year of his life, conversing with him through Emerson's essays. The works of Emerson are the most annotated books in Nietzsche's library.³² Through Emerson, Nietzsche got in touch with himself, discovered the kind of person he was, and saw the practice of philosophy as a way of life and for provocation rather than for systematic instruction on matters of truth and existence, says Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen in *American Nietzsche: A History of*

³¹ *Why Niebuhr Now?*

³² Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen, *American Nietzsche: A History of An Icon and His Ideas*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2012, p.6.

An Icon and His Ideas.³³ On entering Leipzig University, Nietzsche developed close friendships with fellow classmates Erwin Rohde and Carl von Gersdorff, who together formed an intellectual discussion group, and at Leipzig he came under the spell of his most influential professor, Friedrich Ritschl, with whom he had weekly conversations. Nietzsche recounts, “I went twice almost every week to see him at lunch time and on every occasion found him ready to indulge in serious or frivolous conversation.”³⁴

And it was at Leipzig that he discovered, by a chance encounter, Schopenhauer. Spotting the book *The World as Will and as Representation* in a bookstore, Nietzsche, like Augustine before him, who in a garden was told to “take up and read,” Nietzsche recalls that he was told to “take this book home with you” (no, it was not the sales clerk whispering in his ear), which Nietzsche did. He recalled that Schopenhauer enabled him to see his mind “depicted in frightful grandeur.”³⁵

For my purposes it is not important here to delve into the impact of Schopenhauer on Nietzsche’s thought, as much as it is to point out that Schopenhauer, via his works, became a conversational partner to Nietzsche. Nietzsche studied Schopenhauer closely, making notes in the margins and taking issue where he thought to and gaining from him where he could. Schopenhauer was to Nietzsche what the Apostle Paul was to Augustine and the naturalist Ruskin was to Proust, someone whose writing opened up a new line of vision in how to see the world and for finding one’s initial voice before leaving it behind as one settled on one’s own.

Nietzsche conversed with Schopenhauer's view of the world as will, as a driving impersonal force that’d contribute to Nietzsche's own formulation of the will to power. As in Emerson so in Schopenhauer, Nietzsche saw that to create one’s self one must move forward

³³ Ibid., pp. 17-18.

³⁴ Julian Young, *Friedrich Nietzsche, A Philosophical Biography*. NY: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010, p. 65.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 81.

with intention, aiming to become an individual self through distinct deeds and thoughts, a process that never comes to an end, for the self is always creating, is endlessly becoming.

It is not quite fair to say, though, that Nietzsche only knew Schopenhauer through Schopenhauer's works. For it was through Nietzsche's friendship with the composer Richard Wagner that Nietzsche met his Schopenhauer in the flesh. "Richard Wagner is the 'most famous living follower of Schopenhauer,'" said Nietzsche.³⁶ Nietzsche came to revere Wagner, and they came to be intimate conversants. In Wagner Nietzsche saw the aesthetic ideal and a person with whom he could share a conversation, a coffee, a walk, as Nietzsche sought to shape his own identity. But as with Schopenhauer, Nietzsche also turned against Wagner, as expressed in his *Contra Wagner*. We do not know what kind of conversational attempts were made to rescue the drifting away and eventual split. Perhaps irreconcilable differences or distastes took root such that to converse for redress was not desired. Nietzsche did grow disenchanted with Wagner. Perhaps Nietzsche got the point that Wagner wanted to teach him: that if Nietzsche was to become his own person, he must stand alone. Says Nietzsche,

Let us remain faithful to Wagner in what is *true* and authentic in him ---- and especially in this, that we, as his disciples remain faithful to ourselves in what is true and authentic in us....It does not matter that as a thinker he is so often in the wrong: justice and patience are not for *him*. Enough that his life is justified before itself and remains justified ---- this life which shouts at everyone for us: 'Be a man and do not follow me ---- but yourself!'³⁷

One can't speak about Nietzsche, though, without coming to one of his most notable statements and philosophical positions, first articulated in his volume *the Gay Science*: that God is dead. He introduces the concept by means of a town crier breaking the startling news to the public: "Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to

36 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. NY: Vintage Books, 1974, p. 153.

37 Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, p. 155.

the market place, and cried incessantly: 'I seek God! I seek God! ...'Whiter is God?, he cried. 'I will tell you. *We have killed him* --- you and I'. God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him.'³⁸

Nietzsche explained what he meant by God is dead that in later entries in *The Gay Science*, but he'd flesh it out in his prophetic *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. By God is dead Nietzsche implied that the demythologized world of science, a world without a validating, underpinning deity, of a ground upon which morality had traditionally been based, had been pulled out. No longer is there an ultimate initiator of all things, a giver of laws by which all nature and all humans must abide. For "us in the modern West," say the philosophers Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly, in interpreting Nietzsche, "we no longer live in a culture where the basic questions of existence are already answered for us."³⁹ With God dead humans must find other rationales for morality and for shaping personal meaning. One must find other grounds upon which to validate one's existence as an autonomous being and to legitimize one's sense of justice. This challenge to find these rationales was pursued by Kant in his *Critique of Pure Reason*.

If, as Dreyfus and Kelly claim, that "Western Culture in the twentieth century can be read, in part, as a series of responses to the death of God....,"⁴⁰ and that the death of God means "that there is no reason to prefer any answer to any other,"⁴¹ then we are confronted with a radical freedom (of the kind that'd appeal to staunch libertarians): each must find his or her own

38 Ibid., pp. 181-82.

39 Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly, *All Things Shining, Reading the Western Classics to Find Meaning in a Secular Age*. NY: Free Press, 2011, p. 20.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 44.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 20.

path without relying on a pre-given transcendent guide. Nietzsche found this freedom liberating. Others see it as anarchic and terrorizing, a burden too great to bear.⁴²

This open-ended freedom that Nietzsche advocates is not without its constraints and responsibilities. Nietzsche was not an anarchist but saw one's objectors, saw the "enemy," as he'd describe whomever was his challenger, as what calls one's choices and one's actions to account. Both this freedom and these constraints affirm the open-endedness and the movement forward of conversation and its dialogical nature. We receive life as it comes to us and by conversing with it we enlarge our self and do not fall into parochial, centripetal thinking. By bringing in others and that which is outside of us conversation becomes inclusive. As the philosopher Richard Rorty learned from Nietzsche, knowledge is a "social practice."⁴³ Nietzsche's Death of God concept serves to bring our focus back to the human community and, in doing so, to a plane where conversation is possible --- or more capable --- because it places the language and the assumptions for conversation within and among the human community.

An essay that ties, though not by name, Nietzsche's Death of God position to conversation is Richard Rorty's "*Religion as a Conversation Stopper*."⁴⁴ If conversation is defined as open-ended, as for its own end, as a give-and-take communion with others, then that which closes down conversation, which rejects parity among assumptions and a common ground for language, then, says Rorty, some of the premises of religion actually stymie conversation. They bring conversation to a stop. Rorty argues that in a pluralist, liberal democracy, where there are a number of voices desiring to speak into the public square, that all such "voices

⁴² For the literary star, David Foster Wallace, who committed suicide at the age of forty-four, the demands of a nihilistic worldview were too much to bear. To have to live and create meaning solely by the force of one's will, was, said Elizabeth Gilbert of Wallace's Nietzschean worldview, "a smidge too much responsibility to put on one fragile human psyche." Wallace committed suicide in 19...., at the age of 44.

⁴³ Ratner-Rosenhagen, *American Nietzsche*, p. 286.

⁴⁴ See the essay in Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*. London: Penguin Books, 1999.

claiming to be God's, or reason's, or sciences [should be] put on par with everybody else's."⁴⁵

That is, if we are to converse as one people within the public sphere, then we must be able to “gain assent from people who retain radically diverse ideas about the point and meaning of human life,” and not be caught in the paralysis whereby “one source of knowledge,” say scripture, is set against another “source of knowledge,” say another scripture, or against science, or against reason, and thereby prevents the conversation from moving forward due to mutually exclusive postures.⁴⁶

At some point in a conversation, particularly on moral matters, whereby a religious person's appeal to a source of knowledge outside of human affairs can say, “I can't speak any further on why I hold this and believe this because, in the end, I have to accept it on faith and because it is what God's word says I ought to believe and do,” such a conversation can no longer progress. End of discussion. End of a shared, common ground, unless you, with whom I converse, come to my side and accept what I say on faith.

Nietzsche echoes this view of religion as a conversation stopper when he says:

One sort of honesty has been alien to all founders of religion and their kind. They have never made their experiences a matter of conscience for knowledge. 'What did I really experience? What happened in me and around me at that time? Was my reason bright enough? Was my will opposed to all deceptions of the senses and bold in resisting the fantastic.?' None of them asked such questions,” nor do any of our dear religious people ask them even now. On the contrary, they thirst after things that go *against reason*, and they do not wish to make it too hard for themselves to satisfy it. So they experience 'miracle,” and 'rebirths' and hear voices of little angels!⁴⁷

Nietzsche here gives priority to reason as that which levels the field between conversation partners. His God is Dead orientation answers Rorty's observation: that by

⁴⁵ Nietzsche, *Gay Science* p. 172.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* p. 253.

eliminating metaphysics we keep our language and our validating assumptions on the human plane. Sharing a common ground does not mean that at one point we must come to an agreement, that we must converge in our opinion. What it does mean is that neither of us claims a special knowledge or access to a special knowledge that the other, our conversation partner, does not have access to as any other human being. In bringing our language down to earth, Nietzsche's God is Dead proposition has its value. Nietzsche has little patience, in fact finds “contemptible,”⁴⁸ that which falls back upon an outside-the-human-realm, a too easy, justification for moral and life-stance positions. When in fact the life that remains vigorous, receptive to the future, and flexible to changing circumstances, is the one that is open to questioning, to conversing with life, to listening, to pondering as much as to speaking, to explaining, and to affirming.

Nietzsche wrote his *The Gay Science* to take on any kind of stodgy, academic, pompous, smug thinking. Like his mentor, Emerson, from whom Nietzsche got the ideas of a “joyous science,” Nietzsche was a conversational provocateur, against thinking that finds its refuge in the tribe and the herd. For Nietzsche truth is not something there to be found, to be discovered, but to be created. Truth has no finality, no absolute, but is a process without a fixed and determined end. In Nietzsche, we find one who affirms our ability to create our meaning while at the same time being cognizant of the “genealogy of our life and of our values” that [arise] from the evolution of our lives in relation to the entire human community,” says the philosopher Thomas Nagel.⁴⁹

And, so, we do converse with history, with communities, with our context, with others, with circumstances as a way to formulate what we find to be true for ourselves, a truth, though,

⁴⁸ Ibid., pp. 76-77.

⁴⁹ Thomas Nagel, *Secular Philosophy and the Religious Temperament, Essays 2002-2008*. NY: Oxford University Press, 20010, pp. 12-17.

that is not independent of engagement with all that which is not of our own head and gut. Moral progress, says Stanley Cavell, cannot be achieved alone, and the life of conversation affirms this.⁵⁰ Conversation, then, cannot be just among the like minded but occurs in confrontation with those not holding our viewpoint, those variously described as “friend” by Aristotle, “my enemy,” by Nietzsche, and as the “true man,” by Emerson. In the contentedness of conversation Montaigne found the meat for his own development.

In the end, Nietzsche has much to say for making life a conversation, for creating the self through conversation, for establishing the integrity of each conversant, and for undertaking conversation on the human plane and in via, in a world of accident and in the absence of grand-narratives.

⁵⁰ Stanley Cavell, *Cities of Words, Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004, p. 174.