

On Quiet Conversation: Ethics and the Art of Self-Conversation*

Sundar Sarukkai

To converse is not merely to speak. It involves both speaking and listening. It establishes a relation between what is said and what is heard. One can talk to another, one can even be in a dialogue with another but need not necessarily be in conversation with the other. To hold a conversation with more than one person is a much more demanding task, for if conversing is to establish a relation between what is said and what is heard then such a relation has to be established between more than one participant in the conversation.

What kind of a relation is this between speaking and hearing? Between what is spoken and what is heard? One kind of such a relation is automatic response. Such a response arises when one responds on immediately hearing the words of the other. Conversing is also a special kind of this relation. The response that characterises a conversation is based on understanding, not merely linguistic understanding but also involving knowing what is not said by the other. Thus, it is a relation not only to the verbalised language of the other but also to the domain of the unsaid which is part of what is said by the other. Such a possibility of accessing the unsaid, of verbalising the unsaid, is predicated on the idea of empathy essential to the notion of understanding in this context.

Thus, the dominant element of conversing lies in bringing out the unsaid of one by the other and vice versa. What characterises conversations is the ability of one to voice what the other has *not*

* This essay is dedicated to Professor Mrinal Miri. The title and theme of this essay are inspired entirely by my understanding of his approach to philosophy and life.

said. And that is why conversation is as much about the silence inherent in every conversation as it is about verbal communication. Such an awareness of the making of conversation also indicates another essential characteristic of it—its multi-semiotic character. Conversation is not and cannot only be about talking and listening to spoken words. The silence and the decoding of the unsaid so essential to conversation is made possible through 'reading' (listening?) non-verbal gestures, moods and emotions that accompany the spoken word.

With these preliminary remarks, I will engage with a specific question: What distinguishes conversing with oneself from conversing with others? It will be my contention that the process of conversing with oneself is what teaches us how to converse with others. Perhaps more importantly, I will present an argument as to why this idea of self-conversation is the originary impulse to ethics. Our idea of ethical conduct is based on the model of self-conversation.

Self-conversation

Do we converse with ourselves? We all know that we talk to ourselves. We hear ourselves. We can have a dialogue within us. But conversation, as suggested earlier, is more than just speaking and listening. It arises in the silence between these two acts and invokes the notion of understanding. What distinguishes conversation and self-conversation?

What other similar activities do we do with ourselves? One could sing to oneself. One could talk to oneself. Thinking is also another such similar activity. While thinking, are we talking to ourselves? Are we conversing with ourselves? Thinking is not conversing, although it is 'internal'. We think 'inside' us. We hear the thoughts that arise in thinking. I tend to, for the most part, accept that thinking is inherently associated with speaking and hearing. Another way of stating this claim that thoughts are only linguistic is to say that we hear thoughts. Not only this, but our access to our thoughts is only by listening to them. I hear, therefore I think.

However, thinking by itself is not self-conversation although these two are closely related. Self-conversation is indeed a process

of thinking but not all thinking is a process of conversation with oneself. For example, sporadic thoughts or a random sequence of thoughts are not conversations. If conversation is a response then self-conversation is a sequence in which each thought responds to the other. But, as suggested earlier, we should note that conversation is a specific kind of response, one which is more than mere verbalisation.

What does it mean to converse with oneself? Is there a simultaneity of speaking and hearing? Do I hear at the same moment as I speak to myself? Is there any difference when compared to speaking 'out'—speaking to another person or speaking aloud? For those with normal auditory capacity, they hear what they speak—whether internally or externally. And the hearing follows speech in both cases in the same manner.

How is the phenomenology of inner and outer speaking different? In the outer case, we hear the sounds made by us. Those around us, under appropriate conditions, can also hear us. The sound is primary and hearing follows the sound. When I speak I do not hear the words I speak internally; I hear them through the outside. And this hearing follows the speaking.

When we speak to ourselves, do we hear after we speak? Does hearing follow speech in the case of internal hearing? Often it is difficult to distinguish between speaking and hearing when we do it internally. It is the same as the difficulty in distinguishing between thought and its verbalisation since our thoughts always seem to arise in us as linguistic terms. Thus, in the phenomenology of the speaking self, hearing and speaking are not necessarily sequential.

Another way of understanding this is illustrated by the act of listening externally. In this case, we cannot know what we will hear and we have to wait till something is spoken before hearing it. Thus, hearing is about the act of anticipation, of extending oneself (not one's senses!) in order to hear the as yet unspoken. It is this character of hearing that captures our capacity to be involved in conversations because conversation embodies this basic character of careful hearing: anticipating and extending oneself to the unspoken.

How is this accomplished in self-conversation? Does the self pause in moments of speech and anticipate what it is going to say? Does it extend itself, waiting to hear the unspoken? Can there be such modes in the activities of the self?

It might seem that we can, in principle, never wait to hear ourselves. It might seem odd to say that we are waiting to hear what we are going to say. In listening to another, I am in the state of waiting to hear what the other person is going to say. The other person perhaps knows what he or she is going to say but I don't. It is this pause between what the person has said and what she is going to say that leads to anticipation. The implication is not that speech does not proceed in a continuum. There can be uninterrupted speech—we can imagine a non-ending tape of a collection of words with no pause in between. But such speech cannot be an element of a conversation. Therefore, it is not in speech alone that one finds the character of conversation but in the spaces between speech utterances. Discontinuities, therefore, mark conversation.

This notion of anticipation is a problematical issue in the case of self-conversation. Since the speaker is also the listener, what does it mean to say that I am waiting to hear what I am going to say? Let me consider two potential responses to this problem. One is to say that such a problem does not arise at all since I do not wait to hear what I might be saying later on. Saying just happens and since saying and hearing are contiguous when talking to oneself there is really no waiting to hear what the next words are. However, this means that the notion of anticipation, so integral to conversation and to listening to others, is not recovered in the same way in talking to oneself as in talking to others. Moreover, we do experience anticipation related to our own thoughts and actions. It is not only that we anticipate others in the sense that we can guess at what others do but we anticipate ourselves too. So both in this meaning of anticipation as well as in the meaning of waiting, we do have an experience of anticipation within ourselves.

The other response would be to say that we can in principle not know what we are going to say and that we should and do in fact wait and anticipate what we are going to tell ourselves. Such a view would normally be based on a presupposition that there is some notion of self which is in some sense related to conscious

