

2. Conversation as a Whole

Computers and communications have already blended so far that they are one activity, still without a verb to express what it does. We don't even have a word for the nervous activity in the body – it's not "thinking," "sensing," or "talking." All the chemical and energy activities in a body (or a society) have a word for their sum action – "metabolism" – but there's no equivalent word for the sum of communications in a system. The lack of a word signals a deeper ignorance. We don't know what constitutes healthy communications.

Stewart Brand, *The Media Lab: Inventing the Future at MIT*

Conversation, as we'll use this word, most definitely includes but vastly generalizes from its usual meaning. This generalization is crucial to our argument, because if we begin with too narrow an idea of what people are doing when they talk to each other, we end with a stunted conception of reason and its possibilities:

- If we begin (as do some idealist philosophers) by thinking of conversation as a purely mental process, creating a physical world rather than driven by it, then it becomes impossible to understand how words could refer to anything beyond themselves. Under these circumstances, the notions of reason and reasoning become abstract and formal (as in mathematics), but also fantastical – concerned merely with phantoms of the mind's own making.
- If we begin (with the structuralists) by thinking of conversation as an affair of signs and words, an exchange of conventional tokens, we end by thinking of discourse as chatter without content – a "rustle of language", in Barthes' phrase. Here too, the roots of discourse in praxis and pre-articulate experience are lost from sight, and reasoning comes to look like a word game, with no apparent reference or relevance to a physical world. We forget how it is possible to deal with persons from another culture, or even with persons of the opposite sex. Cross-cultural conversation comes to seem either an impossibility or an inexplicable mystery, if conversation is conceived as depending on the pre-existence of common language and rules.
- If we begin by thinking of conversation as primarily an exchange of propositional description of actual events, then its other uses – for signalling, for expression, asking, commanding, begging, promising, and so forth – will seem peripheral. Whereas, both for the species and the individual, such vital applications seem to develop first.

- Finally, if we begin by thinking of conversation as a purely human gift, then it becomes impossible to understand how language could have evolved: what we share and do not share with the other animals, what fabric of cognition and sympathy connects us with other life forms, and with the biosphere as a whole. Neither have we any way to think about the problem of opening dialogue with another sentient species.

Without imagining the speech of other creatures, and of the world as a whole, it becomes impossible to personify that world imaginatively, or to populate it with nodes of intention and spiritual power – to conceive of these as interlocutors that speak, and can be spoken to. In this case, human mythic traditions are unintelligible except as superstition; and it becomes impossible to engage these traditions as carriers of authentic teaching.

Of course, our understanding of conversation is itself a matter of interpretation; and we have begun by assuming that everyone is entitled to his own. Yet some interpretations lead to better understandings than others – even if the final judgment of what is “better” remains a personal prerogative. At all events, what follows is itself no more than a closely argued suggestion. There is no basis, and no need, for any stronger claim.

2.1 Conversation in General Terms

To avoid artificial restrictions down the road, we need an idea of conversation as pure engagement – mutual *intrusion* and *response*. “Intrusion” is not exactly the right word, but I am at a loss for a better one. We want a term that lacks the connotation of rudeness or violence, but includes every form of manifest self-assertion and entry into another’s personal space. Eye contact with a stranger, the mutual probing of swordsmen or boxers, the seduction of a drowsy spouse, an infant’s cry, its mother’s nursing behaviours, are paradigmatic examples of “intrusion” in the sense meant here. In the development of the individual as in the evolution of species, proto-conversations like these must precede the use of language, since it is only from well-established patterns of intrusion and response that meaningful gestures and (eventually) language could have evolved.

The notion of engagement is linked with *rhythm*. In a martial art this is very clear: One learns to respond to an attack by matching and dominating its rhythm: avoiding the attack and launching a counter so as to avoid direct encounter with the opponent’s power. The same phenomenon is exploited in pushing a child on a swing. For that matter, not only gross motor behaviour, but all organic processes are organized in rhythmic patterns. Necessarily, the primary conversation of any living creature lies in the responsiveness and matching of its organic rhythms to the natural rhythms of its world: to the daily

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rhythm of light and darkness, to the 28-day lunar rhythm, to the annual rhythm of the seasons. The earliest *learned* conversational adaptation must be to the vital rhythms of another creature. Think of the matching of an infant's hunger to its mother's milk production.

Such learned adaptation need not be conscious: The mother's milk supply adapts automatically, in quantity and timing, to her infant's appetite. Women living together will find themselves menstruating at the same time – typically, with the subordinate females pulled onto the dominant female's cycle. The sex act itself is a reciprocal rhythmic crescendo leading to climax. Clearly, these are not semiotic exchanges; but they are full-fledged conversations all the same – biologically pre-requisite for the evolution of symbolic conversation, and then of language.

For it seems clear that body-language, gesturing, and finally articulate speech itself, evolved from, and remain continuous with the phenomena of sympathetic rhythm. Many animal species use rhythmic sound or movement to communicate. Primordially, drumming, chanting and dancing were everywhere practised by humans as means for propagating and sharing emotion, and they remain techniques of choice for doing so. Phenomena of rhythm are basic to all organic and mental life; and I would venture that sentient machines, when we learn to build them, will have rhythmic engagement rather than binary logic as the basis of their design.

From the most general perspective, conversation may be conceived as an exchange of *suggestions* – transmissions that modify their recipient's disposition to respond in a certain way. Here it is important to emphasize that suggestions are more primitive than signs, and need not involve a use of signs. *All signs suggest, but not all suggestions sign.* What we can say is that a pattern of events (or its sensory trace) becomes a suggestion, a message that carries meaning, through being received and interpreted as such – as indicating or cuing some course of action. A suggestion is always a suggestion to *do* something. It may be emitted by anything, may take any form whatever, and need not be backed by any intention at all. Thus, we may think of carpentry, pottery-making, or any craft whatever as a form of conversation with the material on a workbench, insofar as the craftsman's hand is guided by a flux of suggestions from the changing work itself. We may think of the driver as engaged in conversation with his car, the road, and the traffic. This said, in speaking of suggestion we'll usually have in mind the attempt by one creature to influence the intentions (or attention) of another. When precision is needed, we'll use the term *suggestion-signal* for the physical means (a perturbation is

some medium) by which a suggestion is conveyed to a nervous system that will receive and act (or decline to act) upon it. When no confusion seems likely, we'll ignore this distinction, but will use the word *suggestion* both for the signal that prompts and for the prompt itself, as a receiver understands it.

We also coin the word *sugger* – a bit silly-sounding, but handy – for self-maintaining (i.e. *homeostatic*) systems of every description that control their activities by receiving, evaluating and selectively acting upon suggestions. Suggers are endowed with what we call “minds,” however primitive these may be. As Daniel Dennett puts it,¹ they do things for reasons, rather than causes. Such systems are proverbially common and fertile: We ourselves, and all other living creatures, are systems of this type. So are human organizations. So will be the first artificial intelligence device that can pass the Turing test, if and when engineers succeed in building it. So are any sentient creatures that exist on other planets throughout the universe. *Suggers* are born (or hatched, or manufactured, or otherwise configured) every minute, as P. T. Barnum told us.

2.2 In the Flow of Suggestions

In ordinary language, the word *suggestion* carries two distinct meanings, both of which are intended here: First, it has a connotation of free interpretation and judgment. The recipient must understand a suggestion as best he can, and then decide whether to go along with it as understood. But there is a sinister connotation as well. A well-framed suggestion seems to cast a little “spell.” Usually this “hypnotic” effect can be rejected with some effort, but there is a bias toward compliance. Other things being equal, it's easier to go along than to resist. Actors, priests and politicians, poets and philosophers use this effect to sway an audience. Salesmen exploit it to close a sale. Simple suggestion is the prime modality of social control, even before bribes, threats and arguments enhance its power.

People who have been trained to reject imagination in themselves attribute sinister powers of suggestion to others. Thus, we find a superstitious terror of “magic” in societies where the powers of imagination have been monopolized to the service of a social order that is crumbling. In the 17th century, people feared witches. In the late 20th, we feared words. Such fears are dispelled when people can re-appropriate the powers of imagination, and make them their own.

In all seriousness, therefore, we can say that the logic of conversation is neither *inductive*, nor *deductive*, but *seductive*. As participants of conversation, we are constantly evaluating suggestions, and deciding which to

¹ e.g. in *Kinds of Minds*.

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accept and which to turn down. We are constantly framing suggestions of our own, in hope of seducing others to our purposes; and we might see conversation as a kind of “marketplace,” a cognitive economy, where suggestions are looked over, compared and weighed, then bought or put aside.

The metaphor of the suggestion “marketplace” is apt, because suggestions carry price tags and pay-offs, and because they really are in competition: Acceptance of one suggestion may compel rejection of others, either logically or practically, because time and human energy and material resources are limited. Conversely, to grow, or even sustain itself, every suggestion-pattern must constantly gain new followers, or exact higher levels of involvement from followers it already has. Thus, suggestion-patterns² are in constant competition for followers and potential recruits.

The notion of *suggestion* is more fundamental than that of *information*, or that of *sign*. Before introducing a theory of conversation and reason based on the exchange of suggestions, we must spend a few pages to show why neither *information* nor *sign* are adequate as primitives of the conversation process, and why some more fundamental concept is needed.

The word “information” has been appropriated by engineers and programmers as a technical term for what communications channels carry, and what computers process. The unit of information (in this sense) is the binary digit or *bit*, the data content in the answer to a single yes/no question. The information content of a message is measured by its length (the number of characters) times the logarithm base two of the size of the alphabet from which those characters are drawn.

Transmitted as a bit-mapped image, and ignoring any resemblance to a familiar English word,

yes

has just the information content of the ink dots on a page – which will depend on “resolution,” the dimensions of tiny squares on the page which have either been blackened or not. As a transmission of ASCII characters in some indeterminate language, “yes” means nothing in particular; and its information content is 3 bytes, or 24 bits.³ As an English word, “yes” (as opposed to “no”)

² Anthropologists have coined the term *meme* (by analogy with *gene*) for the fundamental suggestion patterns of cultural transmission.

³ 1 byte = 8 bits. It represents the answer to 8 yes/no questions, and so allows for 2⁸ or 256 possibilities. Thus, 1 byte of information corresponds to the choice of a single character from the 256 character ASCII code set.

indicates agreement with some proposition or suggestion and its information content is only 1 bit. We can see that the concept of information is relative to a common “culture” – a set of pre-existing conventions – between the sender of a message and its recipient.

The same is true for *signs*, as these too are elements of a conventional system. This is the case even for so-called “natural” signs, which become such through repeated association with what they are thought to signify. For example, the cloudy sky is considered a natural sign of rain, because of the repeated association of the (conventional) distinction “rainy/dry” with the (conventional) distinction “cloudy/clear.” But such categories and distinctions have to be learned, and they could be mis-learned, or learned differently.

According to semiotic theory, it is the system of distinctions – or, more precisely, the mapping of one system of distinctions onto another – that constitutes a sign system. It is only the sharing of such conventional distinctions through joint participation in a common culture that makes sign communication possible. But a requirement of common culture for the opening of communication is unacceptable, and for an obvious reason: If the primal stuff of conversational exchange were a matter of cultural convention, it would be impossible to understand how an infant could learn its parents’ language, or how language could have evolved. It would be impossible to see how the language-based elements of human cognition are related to cognitive elements that clearly cannot be language-based because we have them in common with speakers of other languages, and with other species. Finally, it would be impossible to see how semiotic communication, and creatures capable of it, could have evolved. The toddler can learn to talk only because there is already a very rich conversation going on around and with him – as every parent knows.⁴

Thus, to describe the most primitive conversations – like the ones that get started during the first few minutes of life, we need a word for carriers of meaning that are not (or not yet) elements of a natural or conventional sign-system. These we call *suggestions*. For language to be possible, at least some suggestions must be intelligible in the absence of any pre-agreed semiotic system.⁵ We are left with two questions: First, how is it possible for events not

⁴ The infant, responds to your handling of its body long before it has words at all – either cooperating with or fighting your attempts to dress it. Indeed, both possibilities are suggested to it at the same time; and whether the baby resists or cooperates will depend on pre-verbal judgments that in turn depend on its mood and general temperament, and on the temper of your relationship.

⁵ It can be shown experimentally that quality of movement, facial expression, tone of voice, direction of gaze, and many other things have suggestive power even for very young humans who have not

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part of some conventional sign system to carry suggestive force? Second, given such primitive suggestions, how are full-fledged sign systems evolved and maintained?

Suggestive Force

The crucial point about suggestions is that they draw a patterned *response* in excess of any merely physical *effect*. For example, the tug of a child on your finger, or of a dog on its leash, suggests a certain direction of movement. It also exerts mechanical force on your body, but this effect is usually of less importance than your *cognitive* response of cooperation or resistance. You respond to the child's volition and persistence more than to the actual tug, but do not rely on words to understand what is being "said." Similarly, an infant understands the handling of its body by a care-giver as a suggestion that it may go along with or resist.

We can think of the infant, or any suggester, as a production system generating streams of typical behaviour by combining primitive and learned behaviour patterns from whatever repertoire it has available. The suggestion is a cue that influences such a system in the selection, shaping, and recombination of its behaviour patterns; and we can see at once how it might be possible for certain suggestions to require a fairly predictable response, before any kind of learning (even the biological species-learning called *natural selection*) occurs. Consider suggestions to pay attention, for example. An abrupt change or sudden movement in the field of vision, should draw the attention of any creature that relies appreciably on a sense of sight. Creatures who do not respond to sudden movements as suggestions to pay attention will not survive. More generally, the principle of exception reporting must be an almost universal design feature of sensory systems because attention would be a scarce resource for any suggester endowed with senses capable of direction or focus. In such cases, we might say the necessary convention has been arranged by evolution – but then parallel evolution and convention are not the same thing. It is no mere convention that makes change suggest attention, but rather a kind of *logical necessity*⁶ – the need to evaluate all change in terms of its implications for survival. This necessity applies to suggesters of every description here on Earth,

yet learned to speak. Again, one mental image can suggest others by the process we call association, presumably without the need for pre-established conventions.

⁶ The logic at point here is that of conversation, as will be suggested in Chapter 6. The tautologous logic of evolution was nicely formulated by Gregory Bateson: "Longer lasting patterns last longer than patterns which last not so long."

and we may expect it to apply to suggests right across the universe.

Accordingly, the answer to the first question – how is it possible for events to carry suggestive force? – is that events can act on creatures in some reliable fashion, thereby preparing nervous systems configured to respond to them. Whether this configuration is accomplished through cultural learning, or biological evolution, or systems design, the general principle is the same. Primordially, the suggestion acts as such because it “fits” with certain behaviour patterns waiting to be released by it, the way a key fits a certain lock. Indeed, this seems to be the typical mechanism of suggestion, right down to the molecular level. The immune system, and the senses of smell and taste, all depend on molecular receivers “keyed” to respond to a certain chemical presence.

Just here, by the way, is the connection between suggestion and rhythm: One of the simplest and most versatile ways of contriving precise, selective fit between two patterns or systems involves a matching of their rhythms. “I know you’re what I’ve been waiting for, because I dig your beat . . .”

In conclusion then: What a given suggestion suggests, and whether it carries suggestive force at all, will depend on the configuration of the nervous system that receives it, i.e. the responses this receiver has learned (or is built) to produce, and any learned or built-in factors that might excite or inhibit these possible responses. To a kitten, a rolling ball suggests a game of pounce-and-kill. To a puppy, it suggests a game of catch-and-fetch. In both cases, the element of intentionality is clearly present; but for the young animal of either species, there no question of a learned convention. There is, rather, an evolved pre-disposition to treat a small moving object in a species-appropriate way. Nor is there any sense that our pets feel deceived or cheated when the ball turns out not to be a live animal. That is why it seems appropriate to speak of *suggestion* and *play* in these cases: The ball is not a *sign* of prey or game; it merely conveys an intelligible suggestion that sometimes (but not mechanically or always) elicits playful hunting behaviour.

Signs and Information

Every sign conveys a suggestion; but, as we’ve just seen, there are many suggestions that are not signs. Accordingly, we turn to the second question: Given the possibility of elementary suggestions, how do true sign systems become possible?

We can follow the structuralists in conceiving the sign as an element of some code system which is itself defined as the mapping of one structure of conventionally established distinctions onto another such structure. Language, of course, is the system of ultimate interest, but even the traffic light code is already a system of signs under the definition just given. It is defined by a

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certain mapping of conventional colour distinctions “green/yellow/red” onto to the motion distinctions “go confidently/go cautiously/stop.” A large man in my path, making threatening gestures with his fists might convey a *suggestion* to stop – or fight, or turn around and run, depending on my natural or learned disposition – but the red light is more than this. It is a sign (in structural contrast with the green and amber) that has come to signify *stopping*.

True signs become possible when suggestions suggest each other’s absence or exclusion, in addition to any positive suggestion they convey of themselves. Thus, the red traffic light does more than suggest *stopping*. It also suggests the absence of two other suggestive colours, and blocks the responses these would suggest. Mutual exclusivity on the signifying side enables correspondingly crisp classification of the signified – the sorting of a continuum into tidy non-overlapping boxes. The classification of the colour continuum into named colours would be a paradigmatic example. The reverse is also true: Mutual exclusivity on the side of the signified supports the evolution of crisp, unambiguous signs.

For abstract ideas, a further development is needed – the development of a nervous system with powers of abstraction, symbolic representation and memory. The suggester must have some faculty of what we call *imagination* – the ability to call up and hold before a “mind’s eye” something that is not there.⁷ Such a creature will be capable of entertaining and responding to an entirely new kind of suggestion: not just a suggestion to **do** something, but a suggestion to **think** something. It will find certain types of suggestion advantageous, not because they propose rewarding lines of action, but because they propose (and help sustain) pleasant and/or rewarding lines of thought. Of these, among the most rewarding types of suggestion (because they allow the suggester to represent and transmit experience) are those of category and membership.

The logic of category construction – the question of why a given conversation classifies similarities and differences in a particular way⁸ – will be considered briefly in Chapter 6. For now, we only note that signs, symbols, grammatical sentences and whole books are only developments of a basic capability of suggestivity and responsiveness already present in the amoeba.

⁷ And perhaps could not possibly be there. Thus, we can easily imagine a flying horse, though we have never seen one and know quite well that a horse, even with beautiful wings, would be too heavy to lift itself off the ground.

⁸ So that we decide, for example that a wine glass and a water glass are both glasses, while a coffee mug is significantly different from a coffee cup.

Summary

Several results from the foregoing will have importance for us later on: The first point is that suggestions are in the eye of the beholder. An event is a suggestion because it suggests a certain response to a responsive entity (a *suggester*). Its *meaning* (to such an entity) is what it suggests. It may suggest an action (immediate, deferred, or possible – or even not possible, but merely imaginable); it may suggest a memory; it may suggest a concept – the abstracted, stripped-down, iconic representation of a whole family of memories. It may ramify and suggest many further suggestions. In itself, a suggestion is a primitive cognitive event – or rather, first a physical event, and then a cognitive one. The physical event acquires suggestive force and meaning by virtue of its resonance for a suggester, whose nervous system (or functional analog thereof) receives it, and generates some (hopefully appropriate) response.

Second, although information and signs can be seen as special cases of suggestion, suggestions are not necessarily comprised of signs, and may be conveyed by events that have no measurable information content. A paradigmatic example would be the mood conveyed to an infant, by the adult holding it, or that conveyed to the adult by the infant. It follows that some form of conversation is possible in the absence of any pre-arranged code structure. In fact, some form of conversation and, in the long run, some common “culture” are predictable whenever suggesters are constrained to share a common environment – however little they have in common at the outset. Culture always comes to include a repertoire of artifacts and transactions to mediate and channel conversation. Culture seems durable to us, because it recursively suggests itself – it maintains a degree of stylistic self-consistency or continuity as conversation unfolds. At the same time, conversation always overflows the existing cultural channels, and cuts new channels as it goes along.

A third conclusion is that a mature semiotics will base itself on the concepts of suggestion and suggestivity, and not on the derivative ones of signs and information; a mature anthropology is more appropriately conceived as the (dynamic) study of human conversation than as the (static) study of culture. The fruitful direction of analysis runs from suggestion to conversation and then to culture and its sign system, not the other way round. The ongoing flux of suggestions in conversation evolves an appropriate structure of material, cognitive and institutional artifacts – in short, a culture. Of course, culture and its sign systems influence the course of conversation also, so that the relationship of a conversation to its culture is always reciprocal and continuous.

Conversation takes priority, however. Putting culture and the sign system upstream of suggestion and conversation leads to a static, parochial, and

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ultimately untenable model. Conversation is always larger than culture. It flows along, cutting its own channels, creating and obliterating cultures to suit itself; while every bubble of culture – every particular structure of custom and artifact – outgrows itself and bursts sooner or later. For those who live by a culture and love it, there is always this tragic dilemma: Leaving it exposed to alien influences obliterates it all the sooner, transforming it over time into something alien to itself. Building walls against such influence makes it rigid and, finally, helpless against the more adaptable cultures around it.

2.3 The Climate of Reason

The notion of conversation as the totality of intercourse among entities that produce and respond to suggestions is needed in several ways for this book's discussion:

To begin with, it provides a context for our treatment of reason and the sharing of realities. It is not quite correct to say that reality is construed in conversation. Reality (if we admit such a concept) is *Reality* – the *Ayn Sof*, the *Am that Am*. The trouble is that of this reality we know nothing except what we construe of it, in our conversations with it and with each other. This artifact of conversation might be called “The World,” to distinguish it from “reality.” “Reality” itself might be defined (from one perspective) as that which conversation is ultimately *about*. Many philosophers today – for technical reasons, internal to the game of philosophy – are tempted to dispense with this hypothesis of an unknowable reality, and to think instead of a conversation that refers only to itself and its own constructions. Economical and elegant as this move appears, it incurs the unacceptable cost of depriving conversation of a topic, or target. When we speak of *this coffee mug*, we are talking about the mug, not the conversation about the mug. People may see the mug quite differently; and, admittedly, we and they know nothing about the “real” mug, the mug-in-itself, apart from what conversation tells us (including, of course, that of our own senses with the thing). Notwithstanding, the working hypothesis of a “mug-in-itself” more than pays its way, because our conversation would be aimless without it. More on this later.

Second, the idea of conversation as a system – a self-organized flux of suggestions – is also needed if we are to give due weight (but not excessive weight) to our sense of subjectivity. All human valuing, knowing and doing may be understood as a kind of local precipitate in a conversational field of unimaginable richness and complexity. Everything I think or do is the crystallization of a global conversation that can be traced backward in time, and

in all directions, from my present cognitive state. As such, my thoughts and actions may be conceived as determined by that conversation, the consequence of events and circumstances wholly beyond my control, and hardly my personal responsibility. But from an equally valid perspective, every one of my utterances and actions is a pebble cast into this same pool of conversation. By definition, by its very nature, each sugger represents a locus for the gathering and weighting of ambient suggestions, and for the production of suggestions to others. That is what it means to be an intentional suggestion processor, and a node of conversation.

Thus, the controversy between determinism and free will represents a legitimate divergence of interpretations, within the scope of our central problem. It is possible to think of the sugger as a locus of experience and volition. It is equally possible to think of him or her (or it) as a production system, whose productions are essentially determinate from a knowledge of its design and its input history. Only by preserving this double vision can we do justice to our demand for freedom and responsibility on one hand, but for self-understanding and a scientific psychology on the other. Essentially it is a question of interpretation, not a true/false question at all – as we'll see in the next chapter. Which view you prefer is a matter of choice, unless you prefer to think of it as forced upon you by your life history and your position in life.

Our discussion has its own imperatives, however. The concept of reason seems to require *reasoners*: nodes of autonomous witness, judgment and action who can be held responsible – who hold themselves responsible – for their outputs of suggestion and activity. As advertising people know and exploit, I give credence and weight to suggestions at least partly because they are backed and vouched for by persons whom I respect and wish to emulate. As we will learn to say later on, I *should* give credence to suggestions because they issue from an individual or conversation whose *integrity* I respect, and which I believe to have my best interests as a sincere concern. Not that I should necessarily follow such suggestions; but I should at least regard them as worthy of serious consideration. Without the elements of trust, and of personal (or conversational) integrity, it is hard to see why anyone's suggestions could be relevant to anyone else, except as attempts at self-interested influence that would be best shrugged off and ignored. At the same time, reasoners must be actuated by suggestions they themselves receive, and must be capable (when it suits them) of passing on to others the suggestions from (hypothetical) Reality as they experience it. If no principle of *integrity* – of personal responsibility and fidelity to experience – governs the linkage between suggestions received and those transmitted, it is hard to see how the latter could have value as bearing witness to real states of affairs.

It will be seen that the intelligibility of any sugger's behaviour depends

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on a double presumption of *both* determinism *and* freedom. As a predictable agent and reliable witness, the sugger is treated under determinist, causal assumptions: What it reports is somehow caused by what it experiences. As a being capable of judgment, initiative and responsibility we cannot help but attribute to it a measure of autonomy and freedom. To understand what it reports we must treat as an autonomous being, whose actions express volition in some fashion. Thus, if there has been no food in my cat's dish for several hours, I interpret her miauling as her way of passing on to me what her own body is suggesting to her: that she wants food. If she hesitates on the threshold of an open door, waving her tail and sniffing the air, I understand her to be exercising her feline autonomy in making a difficult decision: to go outside or stay indoors. I cannot make sense of my own behaviour, nor my cat's, nor my government's, nor that of any sugger, without invoking causality and free will by turns.

Third, the ideas of conversation and suggestion are needed to get a handle on the anthropologist's notion of *culture*, now used so broadly as to be almost incoherent. Any individual today probably belongs to, and tries to keep up membership in half a dozen of them or more – an ethnic culture, a political (civic and national) culture, a religious or ideological culture, a professional culture, a family culture, a business culture, a local workplace culture, and others. At the same time, we may also become cultural dissidents or evaders or innovators, when one of these postures suits us better. Given the combinatorial explosion of possible affiliations, we see that the culture of any individual today is essentially unique!

The idea of conversation helps us see culture in perspective.

Conversation is the process; conversations (rather than cultures, properly speaking) are what people belong to, and keep up their memberships in. Culture is best understood as a kind of exoskeleton that a conversation builds around itself to give itself structure and shape, much the way a lobster builds its shell. And conversations constantly outgrow their cultural boundaries to form new and larger conversations which grow appropriate cultures in their turn. Thus, the idea that games are determined by their rules, and that conversation always and necessarily takes place within the context of some particular culture is flatly wrong. Time out of mind, Scotsmen batted stones with walking sticks. From this amusement, the game of golf evolved and was eventually regulated for tournament play. Every business and profession has its own standards of quality and codes of ethics, that serve to enhance its reputability and lucrativity. But the business comes first; the codes come later. In general, rules are

formulated, and then obeyed (more or less) because they make a game more playable and more rewarding. In the case of “language games” this should have been especially obvious: Dictionaries and grammar books were invented long after language, not before it; and, however purists may be irritated, actual usage always makes such books obsolete before they are published. Thus it is a great mistake to follow Wittgenstein and the structuralists too literally in thinking of conversation as taking place under the sponsorship and within the framework of some cultural rule-set. While conversations do indeed take place by and through the available cultural facilities, they break or evade or alter the cultural rules almost as much as they abide by them, borrowing or inventing new cultural facilities as needed. The structural rules of conversation are made to be broken.

Finally, we need the idea of conversation to save a worthwhile notion of reason. Culture, in and of itself, runs on habit; it has no need of reason and leaves no room for it to exist. Reason, by contrast, needs freedom and elbow room: areas that culture leaves open to trial-and-error and critical judgment.

We can think of reason as something that the members of a conversation do or make between them, in the same way that they “do business,” or make love or war. It is a pattern they weave among themselves through their actions and utterances. Reason is not like a tool that can be put to good or bad use. It is more like *climate*, which encourages certain forms of growth and discourages others – or like the mood at a party, which conduces to some, but not to other forms of expression. A climate of reason encourages people to think and behave reasonably. It is a self-reinforcing climate of sobriety, reflectiveness, enlightened self-interest and mutual accommodation that conduces to more of the same. Being *reasonable*, on this view, simply means participating in and contributing toward a climate of reason.

The quality of being reasonable is approached most easily from the negative side. Here, unfortunately, the concept is often abused. We often say that someone is being unreasonable when we only mean that he or she is not behaving as we would wish. So we must begin by protesting against the shabby practice of waving charges of unreason at obstinate persons who refuse to subordinate their preferences to our own. We need the notion of “being reasonable” as a guide to fruitful dialogue and negotiation. Instead we use it as a moral weapon, to cow our adversaries into submission. The tactic seldom works, but it gives reason a bad name.

When we call someone “unreasonable” in any precise sense, we mean that person is not available to be reasoned with – that he or she not available for conversation in a climate of reason. We have other words like

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“irresponsible” and “unaccountable” which more specifically mean “incapable of answering for, or being held to answer for one’s acts.” But to say that someone is being *unreasonable* is roughly to say that no social person is present to the situation at hand – that the individual in question is so egocentric as to be out of touch with the other parties, and their motives and intentions – i.e. with their reasons.

For a first cut, then, being reasonable means remaining available (though not necessarily obedient) to the reasons of others. We might say that the basis of *reasonableness* is respect – including “a healthy respect” both for the nature of things and for sheer power: Being reasonable takes account of all the ways that life is apt to become difficult when crucial factors, including the vital concerns and intentions of others, are ignored. Reason does not require anyone to surrender his own interests, nor to stay within the bounds of custom in pursuing them. It can thrive very nicely in a climate of honest subjectivity, where clashing interests and perceptions are acknowledged and respected. It does not need precise, denotative language and objective facts, and can do much better without the sham objectivity that masks substantial divergence. Thus, one can be reasonable and still offend others in one’s tastes and opinions and choices. One can be reasonable and criminal, even – so long as one remains aware of, and knowingly risks the likely consequences of transgressing the law. But one cannot be reasonable and insolent, or reasonable and deceitful, since insolence and deceit inevitably pollute the climate of reason. In short, reason is not an instrument of manipulation or intimidation. It is an environment in which differing viewpoints and interests can become mutually intelligible, and available for mutual accommodation – nothing more, but nothing less.

Thus understood, the notions of reason and reasonableness are not affected greatly by the post-modern scandal. On the other hand, the concept of *reasoning*, and all epistemological notions that depend from it must alter radically if they are to keep any meaning:

- Truth must become perspectivist and polyphonic, as we shall see in the next chapter.
- Beliefs become “cognitive commitments”, which are far more personal in nature, and relate to the beliefs of others in an entirely different way.
- Argument becomes dialogue or negotiation, and (insofar as it wants much to do with reason) loses interest in the game of debate. Although it can still swallow and dish out sharp criticism (the critical spirit remains at the core of reason, as we shall see), the techniques and goals of reasoned criticism are themselves shifted.

- Public knowledge then becomes a forum and common resource pool – a kind of secretariat – for the jostling of distinctive cultures of local knowledge and practice.
- A “rational” public choice cannot be understood as one which optimizes (or satisfices) the public interest, since “public interest,” understood as a structure of argument, will not be measurable on a numerical scale. “Rational” public choice will have to mean something like, “an outcome of politics and/or negotiation conducted in a climate of reason.”

With these changes, reason retains its role as a climate for trustworthy knowledge and civilized politics. But the price is a renunciation of reason’s “will to power.” Reason can govern nothing. It lacks not only the necessary coercive power, but also the coercive moral and intellectual force that philosophers had traditionally assigned it.

This, perhaps, was the crucial error of the Idealist thinkers, from Kant onward, who tried to defend reason against the scepticism of Hume. Attempting to salvage the ancient conception of reason’s sovereign authority, they ended (with Nietzsche) by sacrificing every other aspect of reason to their worship of sovereignty itself. In Kant, reason preserves its power by discarding classical metaphysics. In Fichte, reason saves its power through an unholy alliance with the State (for him, the Prussian state). In Hegel, reason gains more power than ever, re-defined as a process of self-actualizing Mind, on which all merely material things depend for their being. In Nietzsche, the concept of reason is lost, and only Power remains. But with the advantage of hindsight, we can discern that Nietzsche’s end was already present in Plato’s beginning. For it was Plato who wanted to entrust government to the men of reason – to make reason sovereign above all sovereigns, so to speak. The preferable alternative is to surrender reason’s pretention to sovereignty and universal dominion. That fantasy may be hard to relinquish; but when we accept that people can be actuated by competing reasons, even by mortally conflicting ones, without thereby ceasing to be reasonable, the cause of reason is strengthened if anything.

To repeat then: reason is not a process of conclusive argument but a climate amongst competing viewpoints. It combines civility, rhetorical and listening skills, self-restraint, critical judgment, and other virtues associated with the conduct of affairs. There is, too, a culture of reason which is not, however, just one culture among many. Like the climate and culture of war, that of reason occupies a canonical place in the scheme of things. Warfare – the climate of threat and organized violence – is conversation’s default, or lowest common denominator: the language that adversaries must speak who can find no better way to settle their differences. Reason – the climate of mutual

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respect, critical argument and negotiation is the necessary atmosphere when people wish to deal intelligibly and peaceably across a boundary of competing paradigms and interests. As such, it is pre-eminently an urban and commercial climate and, push come to shove, a lawyerly one.

At the extreme of intellectual flexibility, reason is a philosophical climate – taking philosophy in its classic role as critic and adjudicator of rival mythologies. In Socrates' time, every tribe and city-state lived by its own gods and customs. How then to handle the numerous issues of practice and understanding that arise with all this diversity living side by side and doing business together? Clearly some form of culture-neutral discourse was needed to resolve problems of business ethics as they arose, and to regulate the daily brushing of shoulders and lifestyles on urban sidewalks. Thus it was no accident that philosophy came to be invented at the height of a maritime empire, just when the tight little polis was being supplanted by the world-city. And it was no accident that philosophy, in its attempts to define itself, promoted the reason as a central principle and method. However, it was perhaps an accident – Plato's misunderstanding of his teacher, if that is what happened – that philosophy at once became a secular faith that the fundamental questions of social life could be resolved with absolute Truth, if men inquired and reasoned in the right way.

At all events, though we can no longer share Plato's faith in absolutes, reason continues to mean just what Socrates demanded: a willingness to follow conversation of integrity wherever it goes. However, it has become necessary to abandon the faith that such conversation must converge. For many urgent questions, argument does not lead to any clear-cut statement, but only to . . . a structure of argument. Whatever answer individuals may prefer for themselves, the public answer can only be the argument itself. We want to ask: what kind of truth, and what theory of knowledge apply to questions of this kind?