

A MATTER OF SPONTANEOUS COMBUSTION

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Earlier this year a conversation with a friend of mine that began nearly half a century ago drifted into silence. It won't revive—we're both too set in our ways. Nothing was said—there was no exchange of wounding remarks, no moment of rupture, not even any divergence of views on anything of importance—just a sudden settling into silence. It happened, I'm convinced, because we eventually realised that we have very different ideas about what good conversation is. So it's something I've been giving careful thought to.

'The grand business of our lives,' the novelist Henry Fielding said, 'the foundation of everything, either useful or pleasant,' is conversation. It's quite a claim. His contemporary Samuel Johnson was hardly less emphatic: 'there is in this world,' he said, 'no real delight (excepting those of sensuality) but the exchange of ideas in conversation.'

Of course, they were 18th century English gentlemen, so their enthusiasm is not surprising: the 18th century was the heyday of conversation in England, and some would say in France as well.

In France we associate conversation with the *salon*, those gatherings of wits and thinkers in the drawing-rooms (originally the bedrooms) of cultivated Parisian hostesses such as Madame Geoffrin, Sophie de Condorcet and Madame du Deffand (Horace Walpole's friend). A *salon* was no mere book group. In the best drawing-rooms, disparate intellects 'fell into harmony like the strings of an instrument touched by an able hand', as the Encyclopédiste Marmontel, who was a regular at one of the most celebrated salons, put it.

In England conversation flourished more in the men's clubs and the dining-rooms of the well-to-do (although English *salons* did exist) and, above all, in the coffeehouses—there were some two thousand coffeehouses in London in the mid-18th century. Some gentlemen—not *quite* so many ladies—spent the whole morning reading the newspapers and conversing in these 'seminaries of sedition', as the High Church Tories called them.

I doubt that many of us would echo Fielding's and Johnson's comments nowadays. Was it an art we've for some reason lost? Was it perhaps something for which you had to have leisure and servants to be able to cultivate and enjoy?

It's tempting to think to ourselves when we read about the pleasures of lively conversation in earlier times at Will's Coffeehouse in London, say, where you might have heard Dryden holding forth, or at Garraway's (a favourite of Pepys's) or the Rainbow (David Hume was a regular there): it's never like that at Starbucks—or even at that smart new place we went to last Sunday with the overpriced Bolivian ratatouille and rude waiters. Never.

And when we read of Virginia Woolf popping into Lady Ottoline's with Rupert Brooke and being swept up in a whirlpool of scintillating gossip—Augustus John holding forth in one corner, Bertie Russell by the window, Churchill darting in and out of the fray on his way to see the King (and apparently sparks flew, the conversation *crackled*)—we can't help thinking that it's never quite like that for us when we drop in to see *anybody*.

Nowadays people either mutter incoherently like Wyatt Earp, their eyes glued to the display on their mobiles, or else they shout at you, taking it in turns to declaim. When it comes to conversation, something seems to have gone badly awry.

But we shouldn't think like that, really. Yes, some things no doubt have changed for the worse, but, apart from anything else, many minds quite as thrilling as Samuel Johnson's, Virginia Woolf's or Bertrand Russell's have had deep reservations about conversation for centuries. The ancient Hebrews don't seem to have put much value on it for a start—at least, there's precious little conversation in the Bible, which is one long

harangue, really: do this, do that, be quiet while I issue a proclamation. And, even though the ancient Athenians were *supposed* to be great talkers (at least compared to the laconic Spartans), the ancient texts tend not to include exchanges we'd nowadays call 'conversations'. Perhaps on a fine morning in the agora in Athens it was different—surely it must have been. Strictly men's business, of course.

Closer to our own time, Jean-Jacques Rousseau considered conversation frivolous. He could only seriously love mankind by living well away from it. Finding sociability irksome, he preferred solitary walks in beautiful surroundings and reverie (too effeminate an occupation for our tastes these days). Romanticism was good for letter-writing, declarations and soliloquies, but not for conversation. Thomas Gray, the poet, preferred lonely crags and sublime prospects to coffee-houses, especially in the Scottish Highlands, where conversation—many have testified to this—was almost non-existent. Presbyterianism has never been good for conversation.

A little later, Thomas De Quincey was also disdainful of conversation, at least when he was young. He spoke rather eloquently of 'caring as little what absurdities men practised in their vast tennis-courts of conversation, where the ball is flying backwards and forwards to no purpose for ever, as what tricks Englishmen might play with the monstrous national debt.' Across the Atlantic, Thoreau believed that conversation made people superficial because it undermined their appreciation of Nature (which is not the same as nature).

You sort of know what these men meant (in their different ways)—solitude, especially in the bosom of Nature (a forest, a desert, an ocean) can give such amplitude to your thoughts and feelings that any kind of human intercourse seems shallow, even pointless, by comparison. But few of us can live like that all the time. And if we're going to live amongst other people, then our conversations with them may as well be *good* ones—pleasurable, at times enriching, refining our sensibilities, refreshing our spirits.

But what is 'good conversation'? Before we get too glum about whether or not conversation is in decline—at least in the Western world—we should first make sure we know what we mean by 'good conversation'.

There are scores of books on the subject—hundreds, probably—after all. Cicero was writing about it two thousand years ago and those with the leisure to indulge in it have been discussing it ever since. Reading a couple of the latest offerings (Theodore Zeldin's *Conversation: how talk can change your life* and Stephen Miller's recent *Conversation: a history of a declining art*), I couldn't help feeling that what 'good conversation' is thought to be still depends very much on who's doing the thinking—and when and where. What I thought several decades ago in Canberra is not what I think now in Hobart.

There's consensus on a few things, though. For example, it's widely agreed that a conversation is an exchange, but not of announcements, monologues or even arguments. As opposed to idle chit-chat, conversation is an exchange—of ideas, insights, information and feelings—that changes the participant. So it's like a fire, a fire that spreads horizontally, refining, reshaping, even scorching and rekindling, everyone present as it goes.

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