

## *Conversing with my Father*

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Before I contribute my thoughts and comments about my father's work and about his style of conversation, let me make clear that my discipline is music rather than philosophy or phenomenology. I teach my discipline at a high school in Toronto and publicly practice my craft in various ways. I can therefore claim no expertise in either phenomenology or psychology and my knowledge of these fields derives essentially from a lifetime of conversations with my father.

I note, however, that my father's style of thought is particularly well suited to conversation. Dialogue, not only with texts but with persons, is central to his thinking. I have been very privileged to engage with him in countless and often sheer endless conversations, and often have been baffled by his willingness to engage in serious talk at pretty much every waking moment of his life.

Thought as it is generally practiced by my father, however, is of a different tenor than what is loosely understood by that term. Rather than being a series of logical steps undertaken with the purpose of reaching a conclusion of some sort, thinking alongside my father is more akin to a slow and deliberate mystification, a type of wondering aloud that magnifies a problem rather than solves it. Generally, a conversation will start with an impression of some sort, with something that has struck or moved him in some way.

It is important to mention that being struck by an impression or being moved, in my father's parlance, is the same as being approached: it is a gesture from the outside world that asks for a response. His style of discourse is distinguished at the outset by his being moved by something from outside himself, his being troubled by something that beckons to him, be it a text, an impression, a statement, or a work of art. There is never a question of his being autonomous or somehow detached from the object of his attention. Rather, he always begins with the central mystery of being part of a world and of being addressed by something that is both irrevocably other than himself but also forms a part of his world.

My father makes a fundamental distinction that underlies every aspect of his thought. He always maintains that there are two distinct and fundamentally different approaches to the world that reveal the self and the world in a different way. As materialists and pragmatists, we are generally disinclined to believe this. Within that perspective, the world appears independent of our approach and it makes little difference whether we decide to scream at it or ignore it completely. Seen from a phenomenological perspective, the world opens up to us in ways that depend on how we answer the call and respond to the invitation.

The first of the two approaches we might refer to as a scientific and technological approach, in which the world is viewed in a detached and objective manner and under carefully controlled circumstances. The aim appears to be to master the underlying material logic of the appearance and to determine how this objectified world functions. In this approach, practiced in the research laboratories of the natural or “hard” sciences, the lived world of the observer is held distant and does not come directly into play. In fact, it forms a direct obstacle to this method of knowing since it interferes with its effective application. A surgeon will not likely perform at the height of his skills if the patient he is operating on happens to be his wife, his child, or a dear friend. His close relationship to the patient is likely to interfere with the detached and purely technical outlook required of the procedure.

Technical excellence and scientific rationality demand that we take a distance from the intimate and familial world of interpersonal relations. The language that accompanies and supports this approach to the world is didactic and technical. It establishes tightly controlled systems of meaning that are amended only with a paradigm shift or when irrefutable new evidence demands it. The ultimate aim of such a technical and scientific approach is that of manipulating and controlling a material world. We see the power of this approach reflected in the forward march of modern medicine, in the building of skyscrapers and hydroelectric dams, in the creation of new information networks, and so forth.

A very important distinction must be added here. In our struggle with a material world, we come across many obstacles that must be overcome. The enormous boulder that stands in the way to our completion of a hydroelectric dam is something that happens to be there and that must be removed as efficiently as possible if the project is to proceed. Praying to the boulder, admiring its shape, or thanking it for being there pulls us out of the technoscientific sphere and makes it difficult to complete the job at hand. The project of removing the boulder does not require poetry or myth; it demands some dynamite, together with a detached and calculating attitude that knows how to properly place the explosives and remove it.

A purely technological approach to the world precludes the idea of natural things as intentional presences, as something that can either approach or receive us. Technology reveals a material world that happens to be here (along with us), and the meaning we ascribe to any part of it depends strictly on our plans of action in regards to it. Nature, under the purview of this particular approach, is essentially a collection of raw material things that acquire meaning and importance only in accordance to what we can extract or build out of them.

The second approach, the one in which my father conducts the whole of his thought, yields what could be called the “lived world,” or the world of interpersonal relationships, or, in his shorthand term, the “cosmos.” This world is built around our relationships with others and forms the very basis of a civilization. This approach manifests itself whenever we gather

around a dinner table, celebrate a memorial or a rite of passage, engage in religious ritual, tell a story, or stand in front of a work of art.

Unlike the precise and delineated language of the natural sciences, the language of this world is elusive and difficult to grasp, full of allusions and symbols that are open to ever-shifting points of reference and interpretation. The beauty and richness of a social gathering, a ritual, or a work of art are predicated on its power to evoke many strands of meaning that can be elaborated in various ways. Myth and religion, unlike scientific theory, demand to be freely elaborated and embroidered upon, with each successive generation adding its own version and apocrypha. Myths are present to celebrate the endless fecundity of the world. There are thousands of creation myths, but there are only two laws of thermodynamics.

Unlike the material world that remains unintentional and lifeless in the first approach, the world of the second approach is essentially responsive and alive. It beckons, invites and refuses us, asks us to play or tells us to go away. When a poet regards a tree or a boulder, he must necessarily regard it not only as wanting to be there, but as something that addresses and responds to him in some way. In this second approach, all relations become intentional indeed, and every movement or observed change has the potential of being understood as a gesture. All interactions with the world tend to take here the form of conversation. The world is fully engaging not because it gives us a faint promise of abstract transcendence (through technological mastery of one form or another), but because it is intentional, personal, and corporeal.

Thought begins, for my father, as an answer to this invitation to become directly rather than abstractly engaged with the world. He believes that basic human questions are best addressed when we find ourselves in a hospitable place and surrounded by friends and people of goodwill. The purpose of his thoughtful inquiry is to draw closer to creation and to live a more meaningful life. According to him, it is far worse to suffer from a lack of meaning than it is to suffer from a lack of comfort or material want.

A large part of my father's writing is concerned with the encroachment of the first—or technoscientific—approach upon the world of myth, art, poetry, and ritual. Human science often frames psychological and cultural phenomena as if they were no different from the objective natural phenomena measured and analyzed by the natural sciences. The age-old problems of human suffering and death, of love and sexuality, of religious belief and meaninglessness are often approached as if they were so many boulders standing in the way of the next hydroelectric dam. He watches the retreat of the second approach and the intrepid advance of the first with growing alarm.

During his lifetime, totalitarian regimes, presenting themselves as founded on scientific principles, implemented disastrous economic and eugenic schemas while touting them as the best and most progressive solution to perennial human problems. Contemporary

psychiatrists and psychologists have at times proposed that human love and desire be understood as mere surface phenomena arising from underlying biochemical or evolutionary processes. In the works of several prominent nineteenth and twentieth-century scientists and thinkers, human society can be best described as a system where the forms and uses of institutional power exploit and sublimate the baser instincts of the general populace. In their clumsiest and crassest formulations, these forms of scientism and materialism have undermined our understanding of ourselves and impoverished our culture. Instead of seeing our cultural heritage as a priceless storehouse of ideas concerning the age-old challenges of human life, they see but an endless catalogue of abuse, superstition, and error. Thus the complex realities of marriage, friendship, and neighborly relations are no longer seen as forms of love that are ordered by tradition, but as mere arbitrary social constructs created by fear, ignorance, and economic scarcity.

My father would never maintain that the meaner and more brutish aspects of human suffering (such as hunger and leprosy) are not urgent problems that must be solved by technical and scientific means. The world of technology and science forms a vital and indispensable part of human civilization. Yet to approach the fundamental problems of human existence as merely technical problems belittles and demeans human suffering. Our ability to live with our suffering, to stay rooted in the vulnerable human condition while transcending it with the help of the time-honored institutions of art, myth, and religious worship, remains our most fundamental human task. This remains particularly true in an age where an increasing number of people seem to believe that they are fundamentally unhappy, not due to the general erosion of culture, but due to a lack of serotonin.

Distinguishing between two basic worldviews sounds like a task that would preoccupy a philosopher rather than a psychologist. Hence I should stress that my father is not a philosopher but a psychologist and psychotherapist, and that he is much more invested in a pragmatic ethics than in constructing an elaborate teleology. His insights are provisional answers to the ancient Greek philosophical question about how to live well.

Over the years, my father has distanced himself from those schools of psychology that have concluded that the radical restructuring of societal institutions or the reconfiguration of our neurochemistry are important and desirable goals to be pursued. Instead he has come away with the insight that whereas animals belong to a natural and unitary world, human beings are inherently compelled to live in a dual cosmos in which one's own perspective is always countered and complemented by the different perspective of one's neighbor. A human world is one in which the profane world of science and technology is in constant dialogue with a festive world of poetry, art, ritual, and worship.

He also understands the permanent human temptation to break down the dividing lines that hold the cosmic order together. We constantly dream of a new kind of totally unified world where we might settle in the comfortable knowledge that we will never again be confronted and opposed by a different way of being, seeing, and understanding.

We all secretly wish for a world in which we would be relieved of the never-ending cultural task of bridging differences with our neighbors. Yet recent history has once more demonstrated that we do not ease the burdens of cultural life by erasing borders, excluding dissidents, or breaking down the doors of our neighbors' houses. Totalitarian violence simplifies the world, but it also makes our world inhuman and meaningless.

Because of my father's fascination with the more ancient, cosmic, and dual view of the world, he is naturally fascinated by ancient creation myths. He sees, reflected in these narratives, the unending struggle to maintain the thresholds that divide the domains of neighbors and that guard the difference and distance that separate heaven from earth, man from God, man from woman, and neighbor from neighbor.

Over the last several years, my father has reflected on the storytelling of the founding of the city of Uruk and the education of its king. The epic of Gilgamesh also describes how the first cities were built and how various roaming tribal people, often once sworn enemies, came to be reconciled and to accept living together embraced by the walls of the city.

It is the story of how mankind learned to inhabit the earth by honoring the differences and distinctions that are fundamental to civilized life. I think that his love for this story stems from his interest in the birth of the city and from his desire to develop a psychology that regards the ability to dwell and to honor thresholds as fundamental and irreducible traits of our humanity.

It further speaks covertly of his distancing himself from psychologies that insist on the radical continuity between human and animal life and that wish to erase the distinction between humanity and divinity. Returning to the earliest poetic, literary, and religious texts of mankind, he has rediscovered that human dwelling cannot be reduced to a series of problems that can be solved, but that it constitutes a never-ending cultural task of building bridges. It is this imperfect and never-ending pursuit that gives form and content to our humanity.