

WHAT IS CONVERSATION?

Conversation is an act of force to compel our opponent to do our will.

Attached to force are certain self-imposed, imperceptible limitations hardly worth mentioning, known as conversational rules and customs, but they scarcely weaken it. Force — that is, physical force, for "moral force," "rhetorical force," and the "force of the better argument" have no existence save as expressed in the state and the law — is thus the *means* of conversation; to impose our will on the conversational partner is its object. To secure that object we must render the opponent powerless; and that, in theory, is the true aim of conversation.

THE MAXIMUM USE OF FORCE

Kind-hearted people might of course think there was some ingenious way to disarm or defeat a conversant without too much bloodshed, and might imagine this is the true goal of the art of conversation. Pleasant as it sounds, it is a fallacy that must be exposed: conversation is such a dangerous business that the mistakes which come from kindness are the very worst. The maximum use of force is in no way incompatible with the simultaneous use of the intellect.

This is how the matter must be seen. It would be futile — even wrong — to try and shut one's eyes to what conversation really is from sheer distress at its brutality.

If conversations between civilized speakers are far less cruel and destructive than conflicts between savages, the reason lies in the social conditions of the speakers themselves and in their relationships to one another. These are the forces that give rise to conversation; the same forces circumscribe and moderate it. They themselves however are not part of conversation; they already exist before talking starts. To introduce the principle of moderation into the theory of conversation itself would always lead to logical absurdity.

Conversation is an act of force, and there is no logical limit to the application of that force.

THE AIM IS TO DISARM THE OTHER CONVERSANT

I have already said that the aim of conversation is to disarm the other conversants. If the conversants are to be coerced you must put them in a situation that is even more unpleasant than the sacrifice you call on them to make. The hardships of that situation must not of course be merely transient — at least not in appearance. Otherwise the other conversants would not give in but would wait for things to improve.

Conversation, however, is not the action of a living force upon a lifeless mass (total nonresistance would be no conversation at all) but always the collision of two living forces. The ultimate aim of engaging in conversation, as formulated here, must be taken as applying to both sides. So long as I have not persuaded my opponent I am bound to fear he may persuade me.

THE MAXIMUM EXERTION OF STRENGTH

If you want to persuade your conversant you must match your efforts against his power of resistance, which can be expressed as the product of two inseparable factors, viz. *the total means at his disposal* and *the strength of his will*. Assuming you arrive at a reasonably accurate estimate of your conversant's power of resistance, you can adjust your own efforts accordingly; that is, you can either increase them until they surpass the other conversant's or, if this is beyond your means, you can make your efforts as great as possible. But the other conversant will do the same.

CONVERSATION IS NEVER AN ISOLATED ACT

It must be remembered that neither conversant is an abstract person to the other, not even to the extent of that factor in the power of resistance, namely the will, which is dependent on externals. The will is not a wholly unknown factor; we can base a forecast of its state tomorrow on what it is today. Conversation never arises wholly unexpectedly, nor can it spread instantaneously.

Some remarks by *H.H.*

with assistance generously provided by *C.V.C., Erving Goffman, Spinoza*, and others who wish to remain anonymous.