# Conversation and the Life of the Mind

**by** Samuel Hux (December 2018)

*Friday at the French Artists' Salon*, Jules-Alexandre Grün, 1911

**Among the gifts I received** from Hannah Arendt's *On Revolution* was an introduction to John Adams's *Discourses on Davila* (1790). Enrico Davila was a 17th century Italian historian, not a writer for one's casual reading. There was a time when American presidents were learned gentlemen, philosophers in fact, as Adams, Jefferson, and Lincoln were. Adams proposed a question I have thought about for years. If Crusoe on his island had at his disposal something as vast as the library of Alexandria, and a certainty that he'd never see another human face, would he read a book? One's immediate answer of is yes-of-course, what else would he do? Adams's clear implication is

something else. Perhaps Crusoe would pick up a few books, but it would not become a habit, for who—condemned to solitude—would he have to talk to about what he'd read? He could talk to himself, I suppose, but is that *conversation*, which implies at least two minds?

Adams's question was relevant to Arendt with her bias that proper politics is people talking before it's anything else. But I'm not doing political philosophy here. I'm convinced (confession here) that a major reason lit-crit types, philosophers, and historians gravitate to teaching is not merely for financial compensation and security but for reasons John Adams would well understand (he could talk to his brilliant wife Abigail when not conversing through the mails with Jefferson).

But what of people in the township of "Hogswallow Junction," my image of a locale not characterized by cultural vitality? Saul Bellow years ago speculating on life in the vast stretches beyond centers of cultural institutions imagined a nice woman who checked out serious novels from the library but wondered if she had anyone to talk to about them. Certainly, there are book clubs, but they tend to discuss assigned readings, not what the nice woman chose on her own. And there were book clubs I'm sure in Greenville where I grew up but not in Hogswallow Junction where I was born. But focusing on books is misleading and limiting. There simply is no vital tradition in the States defined here as a *kind of gathering, when at regular intervals people with a shared interest or passion meet at a familiar place for conversation. The gathering aided by food or beverage, and the attendees devoting their attention to that interest or passion that all recognize as a special and necessary part of their lives.* Spain, for example, does have that tradition, *la tertulia*: literary,

philosophical, historical, political, athletic, scientific, or whatever the shared interest or passion might be.

When I was younger I spent periods of time on Mallorca, the longest stretch for about a year and a half—during which "exile" I stumbled upon without remembering how, someone must have invited me, an English language literary *tertulia* in Palma de Mallorca, an hour's drive or so from the seaside village where I resided and wrote. I remember few of the *contertulios* (participants) by name. An American novelist for instance of no reputation then, although perhaps later, who told me he'd never before met anyone smart enough to publish in *The New Republic*. "You exaggerate the requirements," I assured him. He was trying to finish a novel he hoped would provide for his family before he descended into blindness, naming the specific disease. Perhaps that fact obliterates, somehow, his name—as it was the disease my young son had been diagnosed with. More memorable—as a novelist—was the Australian Mark McShane, whose *Séance on a Wet Afternoon* was filmed in 1963 starring Kim Stanley and Richard Attenborough. "Great movie" I told him while confessing I'd not yet read the book. "That film must have set you up for life. Congratulations!" "Not bloody likely," he said; "Not knowing better I sold the rights outright," naming some forgettable number of pounds.

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More memorable was a conversation with a Finnish writer who practically pinned me to the wall. "You're German! What are

you doing here? There are enough places for Germans on this island." "What are you talking about? I'm American." "You have a German name," he insisted, obviously hearing it as *HUCHS.* "What you're hearing," I informed him, "is spelled in America H-U-X." Then I said to him with a big smile and a sort of test, "Your accent sounds German to me." I did not know him long enough to fathom his devious sense of humor. "*Nicht wahr, absolut*! I am Finnish," and then introduced himself as "Martens, or *von* Martens if we must." Peter von Martens—coincidentally married to a Finnish movie star—was a prolific writer in his brief fifty years: ten books, including *Solen pa Mallorca*, which must mean something like "Sun over Mallorca" although I'm not sure, being illiterate in Finnish.

I've made no mention of a specific topic or agenda; there wasn't one. Nothing instructive was happening. The *tertulia* was simply fun: people with basically shared values enjoying one another's presence.

This all took place at tables in the rear of a bar in a not select neighborhood in Palma. As the gathering more or less broke up I drifted to the bar proper, curious about a beautiful American woman "of a certain age" who had flitted around the edges of the *tertulia*.

She looked vaguely familiar as I tried to peel a few years away. She was very pleasant and responsive to my respectable conversation—two Americans on Mallorca, no hint of a pick-up attempt. Suddenly I *knew:* "My God! You're a movie star! You're Faye Emerson! What are you doing here?" "I own this bar," she said, "along with Mark." "Mark? Mark who?" She pointed to an extraordinarily handsome, completely bald man at the end of the bar. "Am I supposed to know him?" "Imagine him with dark

hair.” I did, click: below the Stewart-Grant-Cooper level of leading men, Mark Stevens, like Faye Emerson a steady Hollywood presence of the 1940s and ‘50s. I remember nothing more of the conversation except being star-struck. I assumed they were a couple (as they had never been in film). Maybe they were for a while, but Stevens was moving on to the continent for a post-Hollywood career before dying on the Spanish mainland.

Emerson remained on Mallorca until she died at 65 in the beautiful coastal-mountain village of Deyá. I’d like to think she met her neighbor the British poet Robert Graves—surely someone would have introduced them, the town’s two luminaries. I’d love to know what they talked about. He was very approachable; I know, although our brief “conversation” was strictly via post: a mutual friend was willing to introduce me, but since his health was delicate I avoided a fan’s invasion. Graves was looking forward to renewing certain friendships in the next life. I failed out of good manners to demand “Who?”—thus denying literary history a footnote. I shared the earliest published poems I’d discovered of Evelyn Hooven, now a frequent contributor to *New English Review.* “Indeed a poet,’ he wrote, “the authentic thing!”

So ends, in a meandering way and with an appropriately casually conversational tone, my recollection of my introduction to and attendance at my first *tertulia.* But not my last.

Six years ago I was selected by a committee of my colleagues to be “Convocation Professor” and the president of the college approved the selection. The Convocation Professor gives a keynote address at (you guessed it) the Convocation kicking

off the academic year. My address was entitled (you guessed it again) “Conversation and the Life of the Mind.” Edited slightly, here is what I said:

> Two of my intellectual heroes are Plato and Sigmund Freud. What have they in common, genius aside? Well, they both imagined a tripartite psyche: for Freud the Id, the Ego, and the Super-Ego; for Plato, the Appetitive part, the Rational part, and, in Greek, the *Thumos*, too often rendered in English as “Spiritedness,” too easily confused by students with “spiritual,” quite a different thing altogether. The political philosopher Harvey Mansfield suggests, instead of “spiritedness,” *Manliness,* thereby offending half of humankind. In any case, while Plato’s and Freud’s conceptions of a three-part soul have a degree of overlap, they are hardly the same system. But I digress. What the two really have in common, for my purposes, is that both Plato and Freud practiced and encouraged the art of conversation. By the way, Freud’s so-called “talking cure” was never considered a cure by Freud himself: he said somewhere that his intention was to bring the patient’s condition down to the level of merely ordinary human misery. Nonetheless, Freud made a medical science out of the practice of conversation. Plato’s teacher and spokesman Socrates, one could say, conversed himself right into a death sentence. Do I seem to be merely chatting? I know I do. But there is logic to my madness, for *chatting* is another name for conversing. And the exercise of conversation is my theme today, or one of them; the other theme is my hesitation to retire although I am by age eligible.

> What precisely do I mean by *conversation*? One of my favorite uses of the word follows. The English philosopher

Michael Oakeshott called the liberal arts and sciences "The Great Conversation," and argued that a college education is or should be "the invitation to disentangle oneself, for a while, from the urgencies of the here and now and to listen to the conversation in which human beings forever seek to understand themselves." (For too many people the undergraduate years are the last chance to do that.) So, the Great Conversation is the history and experience of human thought and creation, and the invitation to undergraduates to join the conversation amounts to the curriculum. I do not intend to talk about the curriculum, however, for I doubt that many would put up with my view that a proper general education curriculum would be an intense and comprehensive four-year affair. Nor do I intend to talk about teaching, although the conversational mode often called the "Socratic method" is what many academics are assumed to aspire to.

No, the kind of conversation I wish to talk about is nothing so grand and world-historical as Oakeshott's Great Conversation, and nothing so goal-oriented as the Socratic method or the Freudian psychoanalytic enterprise. Socrates or the Socratic teacher is trying to make a point; the psychoanalyst is prodding his talkative patient to make a psychologically helpful discovery. But ordinary conversation, everyday chatting, does not have to be and usually isn't oriented toward some goal or discovery; it's a self-justifying verbal activity, or, to strike a more conversational tone, it's something we do just for the hell of it. Now, conversation as a method of discovery, as an educational technique, would seem to be the more appropriate subject for consideration in a university environment. By the same logic, conversation for its own sake, the rather desultory or even aimless kind of conversation-chatting would seem inappropriate for that

environment. But I profoundly disagree. In fact, I think we need more of it.

The recognized academic duties of a college professor are, like the Platonic and Freudian psyches, tripartite: teaching, scholarship and/or creativity, and service. For the fulfillment of these duties one is rewarded. I would add a fourth, although I do not expect it to be rewarded and cannot imagine how it could be: conversation. I mean outside the classroom, not as question-and-answer after a scholarly presentation, not shop-talk at a committee or department meeting, but conversation between faculty members (broadly conceived) over lunch or coffee, conversation preferably not exclusively and excludingly hyper-specialized chatter between scholars within a narrowly conceived academic field, but conversation between smart people curious as to what other smart people from this field or that are thinking about. What is gained by such so-to-speak “extracurricular” conversation? Wrong question. What is happening is that the life of the mind is being lived. If I hear one more time someone say after a spirited exchange in the cafeteria, “This has been very nice, but I have to get back to real work,” I shall become violent. I take seriously the idea of a scholarly community: in a community communicants communicate. Cafeterias are not just for eating.

Of course, I realize that indeed something may be gained from this desultory and casual sort of encounter. We may pick up something that can be used, used, say, in a classroom. I have no formal training in science, but I have picked up in the faculty cafeteria enough layman’s grasp of quantum mechanics, aiding my scattered reading in the subject, that I might use the notion of a quantum leap

as a metaphor to elucidate some apparent disconnect in a difficult poetic or metaphysical passage. But I insist that the possible gain is not why we have this kind of encounter. We do it because when we do it we are being who we are. Reward or no reward, just as truly as we are being who we are when giving instruction in a classroom.

There is yet another reason to encourage this kind of conversational exercise of the mind: we do not wish to be what Thorstein Veblen called a “learned ignoramus,” that is, learned in one’s own field but in all others the mental equivalent of a box of hair. I once knew an historian who knew all there was to know about medieval municipal charters and, as far as I could tell, nothing else. An old friend of mine told me a story of when he was teaching philosophy at San Francisco State. He threw a party and invited a colleague, an ichthyologist whom I shall call Algernon, and sensing Algernon’s hesitation because he’d have no one to talk to promised he would invite another fish specialist from across the Bay. The day after the party my friend asked Algernon if he’d had a good time, and Algernon confessed he had not really because while he was fresh-water the other guy was salt-water. This conveniently leads me to my final reason, which I must introduce by an analogy.

The linguist John McWhorter in *The Power of Babel* reproduces a sequence of five sentences in each the Swabian and Swiss dialects of German. The least familiarity with the way German looks will assure you that the sentences are indeed German, but unless you are proficient in both dialects, not very likely; there is no way that you would know the two sequences are identical in meaning. This is not like the differences between American

regional dialects: a New Yorker and a North Carolinian understand one another if the former says “Would you give me a lift to the city?” and the latter says “Would you carry me downtown?” But the Swabian speaking his dialect and the Swiss speaking his could only look at one another with the faintest glimmer of comprehension and say “Hunh?” or however you say “Hunh” in German. Of course, they would ultimately communicate by dropping dialects and speaking to one another in *Hochdeutsch*, the common language of cultivated discourse in German. How does this analogy work?

Well, there are several academic “dialects” which are in danger of ceasing to be dialects in the American-regional sense and becoming dialects in the German sense. A philosopher may not readily grasp what a literary scholar means by referring to the “Eliotic dissociation of sensibility,” and the literary type may have no idea what the philosopher is saying when latter wonders if he’s just heard a “Husserlian phenomenological reduction.” What they both need is more practice in High German, so to speak; I mean more practice in the language of conversational discourse, which can best be gained in, of course, conversation. Now, I know that one response to what I’ve just said is that various disciplinary academic dialects are necessary given the immense proliferation of knowledge as the years pass, to which I have a response that follows.

I can hardly think of a discipline more demanding of rigor and precision than physics. When quantum theory was being developed, physicists discovered that the laws of classical physics, and consequently its terminology, were really inadequate to describe the goings-on in the sub-

atomic universe, that the predictability of events in the macro-world had to yield in the micro-world to a probabilistic calculus; mathematical formulae were more precise in this probabilistic universe than were the classical concepts. Yet according to the great Niels Bohr, as Werner Heisenberg recalled a conversation, we must retain as much as possible the classical vocabulary simply because it is the extension of ordinary discourse into scientific realms, the verbal representation of the thinking that leads us to physical experimentation in the first place, and "it is one of the basic presuppositions of science that we speak of measurements in a language that has basically the same structure as the one in which we speak of everyday experience." If this means an imperfect description of sub-atomic events, then that is the paradox we pay, for "Science is the observation of phenomena and *the communication of results to others*." If this is true of the natural sciences (and it must be, for Niels Bohr is God) then it is more so of the humanities and social sciences.

But enough generalizing. Let me recall in foreshortened fashion an actual conversation, fictionalized to a small degree for dramatic effect. I do not share this with you because I expect everyone to find this conversation so fixating as those engaged in the interchange did: it's just that I think that generalizations are more meaningful when grounded in particularized occasions. I shall not identify the speakers, but I assume you'll hear different voices.

"I read something interesting in Charles Péguy the other night. You know him?"

“The name, that’s all.”

“He was a French poet and philosopher, killed in World War I, an idiosyncratic combination of socialist and traditionalist conservative. And very fiercely Catholic. In those days of course being an intellectual and being a believer was not the anomaly it so often seems to be today.”

“Oh? You’re not religious yourself, are you?”

“Not . . . really. Maybe. Well . . . I refuse to call myself an atheist. In my experience atheists are people who say ‘Since I don’t believe in God he can’t possibly exist!”

“O.K. smart guy. But what did Péguy say that caught your interest?”

“Well, remember his religiosity. He said that God’s grace cannot be received by someone who has never suffered great pain, that God’s grace cannot penetrate to a soul that has not been wounded. I am not sure why that moves me so much.”

“Listen you two. That reminds me of a song by Leonard Cohen. You know Leonard Cohen? Yes? There’s a song about a

kind of lucky imperfection. Goes something like ‘There’s a crack, a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.’ It’s not the same sentiment. But it’s not *not* either.”

“Interesting association. Myself, I was thinking about an idea you find in Greek tragedy, especially in Aeschylus as I recall. ‘Wisdom comes alone through suffering.’ Not just wisdom in a general sort of way, but a kind of certainty of who and what you are, as if Aeschylus were really saying ‘One suffers, therefore one is.’”

“Ha! Like Descartes’ ‘I think, therefore I am.’ Descartes was a smart fellow, a genius you know, but if I can change the subject a bit. . . he was pretty dumb about dumb animals, thinking they were flesh and blood machines. I was reading the other night a book about the emotional lives of dogs . . .”

“I know that book. And yes, Descartes was wrong. But, by God, he was right about so much else. Y’ know what I mean: the dualism. Argues that there are two kinds of being, each of them equally ‘Being’—physical being . . . and non-physical, mental so to speak, spiritual being I want to say. Your friend here has colleagues, you know them too, who think all being is just matter—and a piss-poor, unimaginative, simple-minded, embarrassingly inane concept of ‘matter’ in the first place. Sometimes academics drive me up the wall . . .”

And on this conversation went, finally ending up, if I

recall correctly, in a direction that seemed natural at the time: thoughts on the designated hitter in the American League. (I'm only kidding.)

Was this, academically speaking, a waste of time? Would we have been more dutifully engaged if we had been sitting in our offices revising lesson plans? I will never believe it. To do so I would have to desert my idea of a faculty as an on-going interdisciplinary symposium.

There is an honored Spanish tradition called the *tertulia.* Friends meet on a regular basis in a bar, café, wherever for conversation. There are literary *tertulias*, political, and so on. I was a member of a literary one in Spain years ago. And I have been a member of a kind of general *tertulia* here at the college for the past few years. Every Wednesday at 5PM we meet for pre-class dinner in an academic conference room and talk. The topic is always different but never shop-talk. No one may ask "What happened in your department meeting last week?" Sitting around the table are, besides me, the regulars: a rhetorician and literary scholar, a philosopher, a musicologist, a social worker, a geologist, a musician, an historian, a sexologist, a security guard. And schedules permitting in any given semester, the occasionals and semi-regulars: a painter, two more geologists, a physicist, a mathematician, another rhetorician, another historian, another philosopher, an actor, a singer, another literary scholar, a retired colonel/economist, and, when he is on leave, a recent philosophy graduate making a career in Air force special operations. Anyone who thinks the life of the mind is not both exciting and convivial is out of his or her mind.

> I have not the forgotten my second theme. Let me give it a formal cognomen: retirement-hesitation. Consider again the tripartite responsibilities of faculty. Teaching: I would miss it, but all good things . . . Service: I would find it easy to do without committee meetings. Scholarship: in retirement I would have more time for more essays. So, not a single one of the three really accounts for my hesitation. But just how important to me is cross-disciplinary conversation? Did my Wednesday *tertulia* cease to be, my retirement-hesitation would be retired.

So ended my convocation address, which was nicely received: a fair number of compliments, and even a letter from my pal the philosopher Howard Ruttenberg likening it—I forget how—to some musings of the Jewish philosopher-theologian Franz Rosenzweig, which gave me a pleasant big head. Nice reception is one thing. Effect is something else. Within a few months the faculty cafeteria (where, remember, community is built as communicants communicate) was closed, the space to be used for more practical purposes. Well, I shouldn't complain, because there wasn't enough business to justify it, most faculty brown-bagging their lunches in their offices doing work too serious to be interrupted by chatter.

But perhaps I exaggerate the reception anyway. At my retirement party a couple of years later the president, with typical doubtful graciousness, confessed she'd found my address a bit too philosophical. But no matter, as there were compensating encomia, among them: an already retired chemistry professor recalled our luncheon conversations over the years and gave me a retirement present, a CD of "Bob and Ray" routines, a mutual enthusiasm of ours—and, as it turns out, so

appropriate. The secret of the Bob and Ray humor is that whether they were discussing “the possibility of Olympic status for the low jump—not the high jump—for in the latter one jumps from a lower level to a higher level, while in the low jump one jumps from a high place to a lower place, with the record being forty-nine feet,” or if they were discussing dining out not at the IHOP (the International House of Pancakes) but at the “IHOIL (the International House of Iceberg Lettuce),” they never told jokes or worked up to a punch-line. Rather, the best characterization of the art of these two (unfortunately) late geniuses is *conversational* comedy.

Eventually, I did retire after all. Turns out not even my beloved *tertulia* was enough to keep me there beyond a year of adjunct teaching to avoid cold-turkey. The atmosphere of the academy had less and less to do with the life of the mind. A final image I will call this:

My last official duty as a faculty member was to serve, my last semester, as chief faculty marshal at commencement. (Shakespeare would have called it what my better half does: The Herald.) I welcomed all and declared the exercises open. I sat next to guest speaker (and 24/7 campaigner) Senator Chuck Schumer, who announced that his speech would be brief as he tore up what I saw was a blank sheet of paper to the students’ applause. (The habitual commencement guest Congressman Anthony Weiner was absent that year, given the scandal of his exposed weenie.)

As Herald I had a clear view of everything. I think it was the great Vince Lombardi who discouraged end-zone victory dances as undignified (“Act like you’ve been there before”). If there

is a graduation analogy to spiking a football, sizeable numbers of students when handed their diplomas, oblivious to the solemnity of the occasion, were seeking it: practically everything short of cartwheels. And a clear and overwhelming majority did not return to their seats to show respect to other students or to the occasion; they simply exited the dais degree in hand and left the premises. When the final rituals took place, including the traditional moving of tassel from right side of mortarboard to left, I estimate no more than a fifth of the new B.A.s and B.S.s were present. The majority had what they came for and departed with their loot.

Well . . . let’s just say I was speechless.

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