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CONVERSATION AS A DISCOVERY PROCEDURE:  
AN INITIAL PROVOCATION<sup>i</sup>

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On March 29, 1968, Friedrich Hayek addressed the Philadelphia Society on “Competition as a Discovery Procedure.”<sup>ii</sup> I will briefly outline a part of Hayek’s argument as a foundation for my comments on conversation. Hayek’s analysis was based on two premises: 1) if one man or group knew all of the relevant economic data, then “competition would . . . be a very wasteful method of securing adjustment to these facts.” 2) “*Whenever* the use of competition is rationally justified, it is on the ground that we do not know in advance the facts that determine the actions of competitors.”<sup>iii</sup>

The bulk of Hayek’s lecture was devoted to a consideration of competition “as a procedure for the discovery of such facts as, without resort to it, would not be known to anyone . . .”<sup>iv</sup> One of his preliminary conclusions is that competition is valuable “because . . . its results are unpredictable and on the whole different from those which anyone has, or could have, deliberately aimed at.”<sup>v</sup>

The spontaneous order or perhaps better, the spontaneous ordering, of the market is different than that of an economy. “An economy, in the strict sense of the word, is an organization or arrangement in which someone deliberately allocates resources to a unitary order of ends. Spontaneous order produced by the market is nothing of the kind; and in important respects it does not behave like an economy proper. In particular, such spontaneous order differs because it does not ensure that what general opinion regards as more important needs are always satisfied before the less important ones.”<sup>vi</sup>

Because the market is not oriented by a “unitary order of ends” it does not have “particular ends” as its goal. “The fact is, that, though the existence of a spontaneous order not made for a particular purpose cannot be properly said to have a purpose, it may yet be highly conducive to the achievement of many different individual purposes not know as a whole to any single person . . .”<sup>vii</sup> Hayek emphasized that market results “cannot be assessed in terms of a single scale of values.”<sup>viii</sup>

Now I will turn to Michael Oakeshott’s discussion of conversation and will suggest that, however unlikely it might appear at first glance, Oakeshott’s understanding of conversation has a least a few important elements in common with Hayek’s model of competitive spontaneous order. In an early essay entitled “The Voice of Conversation in the Education of Mankind,”<sup>ix</sup> Oakeshott draws a clear line of demarcation between conversation and other forms of human talk—conversation differs from enquiry, argument, debate, and is neither a symposium nor a colloquy.<sup>x</sup> He also catalogs the many enemies of conversation, including those who always and only “talk to win” and those who “won’t be silent until refuted.”<sup>xi</sup>

Oakeshott argues that conversation is the most civilized of arts, but not necessarily the highest art. But conversation, which appears at times to be merely frivolous, is potent enough to civilize philosophy, to civilize politics, and to neutralize ideological rage.<sup>xii</sup>

Conversation is representative of a particular intellectual orientation which leads to a civil and playful engagement both externally with others and internally with oneself. Wrote Oakeshott, "Those who are disposed to think conversationally will use the voice of conversation even when they are alone and speak only to themselves. Indeed, all the characteristics of conversational talk—the readiness of sympathy, the forbearance from dogmatism, the naive pleasure in the exchange of ideas, the generosity in giving and taking, the intoxicating blend of the consequential and the inconsequential, the internal discipline combined with the absence of a route to be taken or a conclusion to be reached—these characteristics are only the images of a certain manner of thinking, of a certain intellectual temperament which does not require the presence of others in order to be active."<sup>xiii</sup>

How is it that we can know that we don't know? In some cases it may be obvious that we lack knowledge because we fail a test, whether it be a classroom test or whether it be a test in the world of practical affairs—we uncover the fact that there are things we do not know when we can find no solution to a problem that confronts us.

But I am thinking more broadly than this type of personal or social ignorance. Is there a realm that humankind doesn't know about, that humankind doesn't even know exists? How can man gain a purchase on that realm we don't know about and don't even know we don't know about? Pierre Goodrich writes about man's "impressive ignorance" concerning "his origin, nature, and destiny."<sup>xiv</sup> But while man's ignorance may be impressive, it is not necessarily impenetrable or invincible.

In the laboratory entry into the unknown often occurs through serendipity or through accident. The pursuit of anomalies and irregularities may uncover unknown variables or relationships. In other areas of human life conversation may lead to these discoveries.

"The material which the art of conversation has for its own is the possible and the probable," writes Oakeshott.<sup>xv</sup> Thus, in Aristotelian terms, conversation deals with contingent things, rather than the "necessary things" that are the focus of theoretical science. For Aristotle, contingent things are the realm of the practical sciences, ethics and politics.<sup>xvi</sup> But, let me hasten to emphasize, Oakeshottian conversation is not a scientific enterprise.

I suggest that conversation as Oakeshott describes it may give us an entry into those realms unknown. Before turning to Oakeshott's more mature and better known essay, "The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind," I want to commend to you a talk by Robert Frost, "Education By Poetry." Says Frost, "I have wanted in late years to go further and further in making metaphor the whole of thinking."<sup>xvii</sup> Metaphor allows us to make previously unseen connections, to see relationships we never saw before. As Frost illustrates, the use of metaphor permeates almost every area of life. As Frost warns us, "Unless you are at home in the metaphor . . . you are not safe anywhere."<sup>xviii</sup>

Now listen to the mature Oakeshott on conversation:

In a conversation the participants are not engaged in an inquiry or debate; there is no “truth” to be discovered, no proposition to be proved, no conclusion sought. They are not concerned to inform, to persuade, or to refute one another, and therefore the cogency of their utterances does not depend upon their all speaking in the same idiom; they may differ without disagreeing. Of course, a conversation may have passages of argument and a speaker is not forbidden to be demonstrative; but reasoning is neither sovereign nor alone, and the conversation itself does not compose an argument. . . . In conversation, “facts” appear only to be resolved once more into the possibilities from which they were made; “certainties” are shown to be combustible, not by being brought in contact with other “certainties” or with doubt, but by being kindled by the presence of ideas of another order; approximations are revealed between notions normally remote from one another. Thoughts of different species take wing and play round one another, responding to each other’s movements and provoking one another to fresh exertions. Nobody asks where they have come from or on what authority they are present; nobody cares what will become of them when they have played their part. There is no symposiarch or arbiter; not even a doorkeeper to examine credentials. Every entrant is taken at its face-value and everything is permitted which can get itself accepted into the flow of speculation. And voices which speak in conversation do not compose a hierarchy. Conversation is not an enterprise designed to yield an extrinsic profit, a contest where a winner gets a prize, nor is it an activity of exegesis; it is an unrehearsed intellectual adventure. It is with conversation as with gambling, its significance lies neither in winning nor in losing, but in wagering. Properly speaking, it is impossible in the absence of a diversity of voices: in it different universes of discourse meet, acknowledge each other and enjoy an oblique relationship which neither requires nor forecasts their being assimilated to one another.<sup>xix</sup>

I note three similarities between Oakeshott’s conversation and Hayek’s competition: 1) each houses a diversity of goals or modes, 2) neither is subject to a unitary hierarchy of values, and 3) both may lead to unexpected and unpredictable results.

In the interplay of divergent voices the reflected light may shine on old areas of study in such a way as to expose new facets. This is often due to the naive “emperor's clothes” questions asked of experts by a novice—those questions allow the expert to reorient herself and delve into hitherto unsuspected depths of her subject of study. In conversation we may discover a hidden piece of a puzzle we didn't even know as missing, and further discover that that missing piece fits into many different puzzles and makes them all more complete—thus the philosopher, historian, sociologist, economist, student of religion, lawyer, and poet may all appropriate the newly uncovered piece and apply it to their interests without hindering others from doing the same. Imagine conversation as a cloud chamber that allows us to see traces of previously unimagined relationships, entities, and concerns.

Oakeshott observed that conversation can be external, conversation between individuals, or internal, conversation with oneself. Robert Frost touched on this inner dialog in commencement remarks made at Sarah Lawrence College in 1956. Frost challenged his listeners to have a number of important interests which they would “treat . . . as knitting you keep to pick up at odd moments in the rest of your lives. Not just to pick up with uncertainty, but to pick up to knit, to have ideas about. Not to opionate about. That's something more.” How is it something more? “Opinion is just pro and con, having your nose counted. . . . I believe that if I have an idea about it, it isn't just an opinion.”<sup>xx</sup>

Frost then generously shared with his listeners some of his recent knitting about America and the American dream. “The word is, “the dream.” I wonder how much you have encountered it? I have it thrown in my face every little while, and always by somebody who thinks the dream has not come true. And then the next time I pick it up to knit I wonder what the dream is, or why. And the next time I pick it up, I wonder who dreamed it. Did Tom Paine dream it, did Thomas Jefferson dream it, did George Washington dream it? Gouverneur Morris? And lately I've decided the best dreamer of it was Madison. I have been reading the Federalist papers. . . . Now I know—I think I know, as of today—what Madison's dream was. It was just a dream of a new land to fulfill with people in self-control. In self-control. That is all through his thinking. And let me say that again to you. To fulfill this land—a new land—with people in self-control. And do I think that dream has failed? Has come to nothing, or has materialized too much? It is always the fear. We live in constant fear, of course. To cross the road we live in fear of cars. But we can live in fear, if we want to, of too much education, too little education, too much of this, too little of that. But the thing is, the measure.”<sup>xxi</sup>

To conclude these very preliminary reflections on conversation, ignorance, and knowledge, and as we turn to our panel on “The Pursuit of Wisdom in the Age of the Internet,” I offer two bits of advice. First, to use David Hume's words, attempt to be both “learned” and “conversable.”<sup>xxii</sup> And second, whatever else you do in your life, always tend to your knitting.

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<sup>i</sup> Delivered as introductory remarks for “The Pursuit of Wisdom in the Age of the Internet,” a panel at the Fall Regional Meeting of The Philadelphia Society on the theme “Pursuit of Truth: Inside and Outside the Academy,” held in Indianapolis, IN, October 23-24, 2009.

<sup>ii</sup> Published in expanded form as “Competition as a Discovery Procedure,” in F. A. Hayek, *New Studies in Philosophy, Politics, Economics and the History of Ideas* (The University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 179-190.

<sup>iii</sup> Hayek, p. 179. Italics in original.

<sup>iv</sup> Hayek, p. 179.

<sup>v</sup> Hayek, p. 180.

<sup>vi</sup> Hayek, p. 183.

<sup>vii</sup> Hayek, p. 183.

<sup>viii</sup> Hayek, p. 186.

<sup>ix</sup> Michael Oakeshott, “The Voice of Conversation in the Education of Mankind,” in Michael Oakeshott, *What is History? and other essays*, edited by Luke O'Sullivan (Exeter, UK: Imprint Academic, 2004), pp. 187-199.

<sup>x</sup> Oakeshott, 2004, p. 187.

<sup>xi</sup> Oakeshott, 2004, p. 189.

<sup>xii</sup> Oakeshott, 2004, pp. 191, 193-195.

<sup>xiii</sup> Oakeshott, 2004, p. 193.

<sup>xiv</sup> Pierre F. Goodrich, Liberty Fund Basic Memorandum (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1961), p. 21.

<sup>xv</sup> Oakeshott, 2004, p. 191.

<sup>xvi</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Martin Ostwald trans. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Library of Liberal Arts, 1962), pp. 4-6, 295-302.

<sup>xvii</sup> “Education By Poetry: A Meditative Monologue,” in Robert Frost, *Collected Poems, Prose, and Plays*, Richard Poirier and Mark Richardson, eds. (New York: Library of America, 1995), p. 720.

<sup>xviii</sup> Frost, 1995, p. 721.

<sup>xix</sup> “The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind,” in Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, Timothy Fuller, ed. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991), pp. 489-90.

<sup>xx</sup> Robert Frost, “A Talk for Students: An extemporaneous talk at the twenty-eighth annual Commencement of Sarah Lawrence College, Bronxville, New York, June 7<sup>t</sup>, 1956,” (New York: The Fund for the Republic, 1956), pp. 3-4.

<sup>xxi</sup> Frost, 1956, pp. 5, 7-8.

<sup>xxii</sup> See “Of Essay Writing” in David Hume, *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, Revised Edition, Eugene F. Miller, ed. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1985), pp. 533-37.