

Conclusion

A Note on Conversations

Conversations are hard to have!

Imagine the feeling you get in your gut when someone says to you: “We need to talk.” The words sound like an indictment. Immediately, you feel transported into a dark, cramped room with one dimmed light and a hundred possibilities in your head for why this person needs to converse with you. Your thoughts race, and your heart thumps, jumps, and refuses to calm down until the person explains what’s on their mind. The longer you have to wait, the more intense the pain. “Why am I in trouble?” you wonder. Needing to have a conversation signals a serious situation. You could have gotten the silent treatment. They could have gotten over it. But no! Your failings are so great that only a conversation will do.

Initiating a conversation is not easy either. When you’re the one to confront someone, and make them sit down with you to have a Serious Talk, you risk being perceived as irrational, sensitive, or insecure. “I feel” statements are supposed to make your conversation partner lower their defenses—at least that’s what my twelfth-grade conflict resolution teacher told me—but they can expose you, and make you feel dangerously vulnerable in the process. Who knows how it will all turn out anyway? You may spark the conversation in hope of being understood or resolving an issue, only to be dismissed or ignored in the end.

Then there's the conversation that springs forth—somewhat unexpectedly—from our everyday interactions with each other. No one in the group is in trouble, at least not initially. A gathering that was meant to celebrate Kareem's engagement or Faza's birthday can easily turn into a panel discussion about Palestine, Black Lives Matter, heteronormativity, or health care. Do we participate or exit? Do we hold back or speak our minds? If we do share what we think, how much can we say? How far can we go? And at what cost will it be to our friendships, social calendars, and overall flourishing?

Having conversations is a way for our social, linguistic species to express and explain, correct and collaborate, make sense of things and make things happen. Anything that can do all of these things will never be easy.

In this book, I engaged in thirty-one conversations with folks from a variety of backgrounds and social positions—who also have PhDs in philosophy. We talked about prejudice, oppression, and social justice. We also talked about monogamy and polygamy, love and hope, money and distrust. As a result, I now know more about any of these issues than I ever did before. I also understand my interviewees more—as people and thinkers—and have more insight on the wider world as well.

But what only a couple of people know is that I was *always* nervous before each conversation. The uncertainty, I must admit, frightened me. I had no idea how the conversations would actually go. I also wondered: Would they take me seriously? Would our conversations be productive? Would the philosophers I talked to be as interesting in person as their written work was? When I did not understand something, I had to push myself to ask for clarity at the risk of sounding stupid. When I disagreed with something, I had to find the balance between being a passive listener on the one hand and an obnoxious academic on the other.

At times, they challenged me to revise or restate questions that I thought were initially brilliant and clear. Most of the time, they made me question my own "wokeness," forcing me to get over myself and do it quickly. These conversations led to other ones, this time with listeners online and in person. Not all of these conversations were teeming with praise. There was disagreement and criticism. No one said conversations would be easy!

By prompting and leading the conversations that air on UnMute, I've made myself vulnerable, and in this book I'm doing that yet again, but promoting conversations is worth it to me. It's something we all need to do more of. Why? We live in a world in which conversations are happening less, superficially, or not at all. We all know that couple who

sits at the restaurant across from one another with forks in one hand, cellphones in the other, making no effort whatsoever to make eye contact. Or the person who randomly appears on your social media feed with the purpose of being Super Rational Man—whose sole mission is to save the day by demolishing every comment that does not have the proper logical structure or spelling. Or the person at a water cooler near you who wants to have conversations only on her own terms. Or the person who doesn't really care about a particular issue at all but only uses the conversation to prove that he has a liberal arts degree from the University of Judith Butler and Ta-Nehisi Coates. He has all the post-modern terms and ambiguous liberation phrases to prove it, too. These everyday phenomena discourage conversation, right when we need it the most.

In our current political climate, many have emphasized the importance of talking to the other side. The belief is that we are “politically divided like never before.” I must admit that this always sounds like an exaggeration to me, similar to when I hear people call a recent game “the greatest upset in sports history.” Usually in these cases, the speaker has no working knowledge of sports history and no standard of comparison. They just mean they're worked up. So when people say that we are politically divided *like never before*, it makes me wonder if they're missing the historical context and just making a dramatic statement. What do they think was happening when the country was about to divide in two over the issue of slavery, or when the Vietnam War brought the country to a vicious cultural war whose traces still influence politics today? People were plenty divided then as well. But hey, how can you properly measure division anyway? I digress.

The solution to the current political divide, many believe, is conversation. But the conversations that people promote, in answer to the divided political climate, tend to look like either listening to understand or arguing to learn or win. (If it seems paradoxical to “argue to learn,” wait and see what I mean.)

The first kind of conversation, listening to understand, is an approach to conversation that many vouch for as a way to comprehend why others think, act, or vote the way they do. The objective seems to be to get at the heart of their concerns in an effort to address them and reconsider our assumptions and labels. “Not all red voters are racist and here's why,” they say. Having empathetic understanding for others is important for deliberation, collaboration, and connection. My concern is not with the conversation per se, but the discretion used when calling for it. Unfortunately, *this call* for understanding is often one-sided. It is often not directed the other way around. It tends to be a call only when

certain groups are misunderstood. This sends the message that only certain people are worth our understanding, while others are not. But conversations are, by definition, not meant to be one-sided. That is to say, in our conversations there is not supposed to be one speaker who soliloquizes and an audience who draws conclusions. Conversations are about engagement, exchange, and empathy on both sides.

Then there's the view that conversations are arguments. This has three faces. Joshua Knobe and colleagues (2015) make a distinction between arguing to learn and arguing to win. When we argue to learn, we present an argument, listen to the other, and move forward to an agreement. When we argue to win, we present an argument so that we can score points and defeat the other. They suggest we do the former.

Social psychologist Robb Willer thinks that a way to have better political conversations is to understand the moral values of the other side and then appeal to those values in our arguments. If purity is a conservative value, for example, then Willer recommends that we use that term and not "climate change" in our attempts at persuading them to take care of the planet.

These researchers' suggestions are insightful. But they tend to treat all conversations as arguments. I do not think that they all are. Nor do I think that the purpose of all of our conversations is agreement. Often times, our most fruitful discussions are those where we discover we disagree. These conversations are not unproductive. I will refrain from making a judgment on what should be the end goal of conversations here. These suggestions, however, do bring us closer to my own recommendation. And what better way to introduce it than to provide an example of a somewhat "horrible" example of the argument model.

I present to you Socrates: the Athenian founder of Western philosophy. By asking what is piety, justice, and love, Socrates placed humans and human affairs under philosophical investigation for the first time in the West. In comparison to his Eastern and African philosophical neighbors, he was late to the party. But when he arrived, he was off and running, chatting with everyone. Throughout the work of his student Plato, we learn of Socrates's wise words and observations, such as, probably the most famous, "The unexamined life is not worth living." He also made himself known for engaging everyone around him in dialogue. He was the gadfly of Athens, whose ideas—judged to be corruptive to the youth and disrespectful to the gods—lead to his death by hemlock poisoning. He started too many conversations, you might say, but in doing so, he changed Western philosophy forever. He left us with ideas that pervade thousands of years later and showed great character when, for example, he refused to escape prison to save his own life.

But I ask you, would you have wanted to have a conversation with Socrates? Would you have wanted to examine life with *him*?

Let's assume the role of a fly on a Grecian wall as Socrates converses with others. From a fly's-eye view, we can see him beginning to spark a philosophical conversation after leading in with talk about more ordinary things. He then isolates a key term and presumes ignorance. But he only does it so that after many efforts by his expert interlocutors, their own ignorance is revealed (and often publicly). Socrates constantly pushes back and at each turn offers no insights, only counterexamples, one after the other. So it's not surprising that the end result is always the same: his interlocutors find a reason to end the conversation and then leave. We are made to feel sad for Socrates, perhaps even pity him because no one has the tough skin needed to seek out truth with him. However, if Socrates wasn't so arrogant at his worst, and dismissive at his best, his interlocutors probably would have continued to speak with him. While one might argue that Socrates is a poster boy for what happens when our conversations aim at winning, I think he is a perfect example of something else that is wrong with our conversations: Us.

What if I told you that conversations are not our most pressing problem? (Ok, I am telling you that.) The problem is who we are in our conversations. Despite our differences with each other, we are often—like Socrates—not the kind of person with whom others can or would want to have difficult conversations. If you suddenly feel that you have been transported into a dark, cramped room with one dimmed light and a hundred defenses for why I cannot be talking about you, breathe. Let me explain.

We cannot isolate conversations and their content from the people who engage in them. It's hard to digest advice from a hypocrite, share with someone who makes you feel insignificant, or correct someone who thinks he knows it all. This is because character matters in our conversations. I believe if we aim to be a certain kind of conversation partner by exercising particular virtues, our conversations will be better regardless of the topic or the disagreement.

Epistemologists and ethicists like José Medina, Linda Zagzebski, and Aristotle have offered up insights on virtues we can have as knowers and moral creatures. I do not profess to add anything novel to their contributions, so I will only appropriate them for our purposes here. Together they remind us of the beauty of traits like humility, sincerity, and tactfulness. These character traits are “conversation starters” in that they allow us to be the kind of person others can begin and continue to converse with. I note in brief just a few here to convey my point. I leave it up to you to add others to the list.

Humility is when a person recognizes their epistemic limitations. A person who has “conversational” humility can admit that they do not know it all. They have what Medina calls a “humble and self-questioning attitude.” Those who are humble are not self-righteous. They recognize that at any moment, anyone (including themselves) could be wrong. *Curiosity* is an interest and willingness to know. People who are curious have a motivation to gain knowledge, and it doesn’t matter from what body that knowledge reveals itself. They are not naive. They are simply indiscriminate in whom they talk to, believing that anyone is bound to teach them something. Being *diligent* helps a person keep their curiosity in times in which dialogue with others is either shut down or difficult to have.

A person who is *open-minded* acknowledges and respects alternative perspectives. Being open-minded entails being willing to consider new ideas. Open-minded conversationalists are not quick to reject what others have to say. They are likely to see the beauty in disagreement. This eye allows them to be more accepting and less controlling. *Moral courage* is the fortitude to move beyond one’s comfort zone. A person who is courageous faces the fear of the unknown. She is also willing to face criticism or misunderstanding. She knows that this is often the risk one takes when talking with others. When a person is *sincere* in a conversation, she is herself. She is not playing a character in order to get approval. Sincere conversationalists do not come to conversations with ulterior motives or masked as something more accepting. They are unpretentious.

Conversation partners who are *generous* are not quick to judge or speak. They are willing to give their partner the benefit of the doubt. They are not so enamored by their own voice that they never let others share. A generous person is often quite *patient*. When talking with them, others often feel that they can be heard and finish a sentence without being interrupted with the infamous preface, “not to cut you off, but . . .” Patient conversationalists do not think their thoughts are more important than the thoughts presently being spoken by others. Therefore, they often wait their turn. Their patience also helps them keep their composure when others are not as virtuous.

Tactful people are experts in tonality and linguistics. They know what to say, how to say it, and what context to say it in. They do not force others to always have thick skin when talking with them. (It is often uncomfortable and doesn’t fit them anyway.) Tactful conversationalists do not allow their vices to drive the bus and so it is rare that they justify their tactlessness with “I’m just keeping it real” or “This is who I am.”

We can add other virtues to this list such as honesty, discretion, security, and self-awareness. As I have mentioned, the list is not exhaustive. There is an assortment of virtues waiting for us to put in practice. I have tried to practice these virtues in the conversations in this book. But I have also been challenged to be and do better beyond academic discourses. Here are some questions I am constantly asking myself: How can I extend the same curiosity and humility to ordinary folks on Main Street that I have shown to professors on College Road? How can I have the same moral courage in conversations with my friends, peers, or supervisors as when I have conversations with philosophers; when there's everything at stake just as much as when there's very little at stake? How can I be more sincere and honest when I stand to lose so much? How can I be less defensive and more self-aware when the people I care about muster up the courage to say to me that "We need to talk"? Socrates was right. The unexamined life is not worth living.

Let me offer a word of caution. In our technological age, we use texts, audio messaging, live video chats, and social media threads as ways to engage in conversations. There's no need for us to wait until we are in the same city or even know each other's real name to converse. But the very innovations that facilitate our exchanges can also distort the aforementioned virtues and thus disrupt our conversations. People can mistake the tone of our texts, misinterpreting what was intended as a kind response as a mean rant. (A skit entitled "Text Message Confusion" from the sketch comedy show *Key and Peele* illustrates this perfectly!) Our dismissive zingers and not our open-minded replies are often rewarded with likes and follows, and our brains recognize this. It's hard to practice courage when death threats loom in your Twitter mentions and the Internet never forgets. While social media brings so many advantages, if I never have to be in your presence or know you to "talk" with you, then some might ask, "What do I owe you or myself when we engage in discussion?"

Even if we are able to jump over these technological hurdles and see the virtues of others, I cannot guarantee that conversations will instantly become easy. It is hard enough to talk about moral and political issues. Topics like prejudice, oppression, and social justice are the elephants in the room—they are what many people think about but few dare to discuss. Some topics are hard to talk about because we have prolonged the conversation for so long; they can implicate us; or obligate us to do something we probably do not want to do. I don't think talking about controversial topics will undermine our democracy. Yes, conversations are hard, but they could be had if only we weren't so hardened.

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By saying that we have to practice virtues, and improve our character, in order to improve our conversations, I don't mean to say that only perfect people have what it takes to be worthy conversation partners. What I am claiming is that we cannot separate conversations from the people that engage in them. Be the person that you want to have a conversation with. This has nothing to do with being smart, progressive, or right. It has everything to do with being a person with a character that makes conversing a human experience, for the people on both sides.