# Psychological Prelude

I am much less sure of how to open a book than how to open a door or even a conversation. Verbal openings, especially written ones, are likely to be difficult. The words flow slowly and irregularly in the beginning, and the ideas, too, are reticent, as if they are lodged in a place different from that of the words to which they have to become attached before they can be spoken or written. And when the words are still shy or we are too shy to expose them, we make excuses for their absence. Such a difficulty is not, of course, confined to openings, although any great change, especially any great happiness or sadness, opens into a different quality of life and finds us at a loss for words. Our words seem adequate only for the most ordinary experiences at their most usual intensities.

It is true that I can imagine people who will not complain (or boast) of their lack of words. I can imagine a great orator intoxicated with his eloquence or a poet or prophet in the full flight of inspiration. Yet those who show the most artful mastery of words, the poets, often complain, like old Plato, that words are inadequate to express exactly what they would like to say. Nature creates, writes Emily Dickinson, while we name; we pass, while she abides. "We conjugate Her Skill / While She creates and federates / Without a syllable."[1] And we know of the mystics, theologians, and philosophers, some of whose ghosts will emerge on these pages, who are certain that reality, whether named or denied a name, is beyond the reach of words.

How can this certainty be evaluated? In answering, I think it best to begin with a psychological prelude that explains what is known of our nonphilosophical difficulties with words, and only then to take up the difficulties in which the philosophers and theologians have been most interested. So this first chapter is on the shyness of words, their tendency to vanish when we most need them. If I were to use a few catchwords to describe the content of the chapter, I should say that it deals with the

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extent to which the words we use are unshared, insufficient, reluctant, suppressed, forgotten, or (by their very categories) inappropriate. In spite of the inclusiveness of these five catchwords, which give a general indication of the chapter's progress, I will not use them as its explicit headings because the matters we are dealing with are too fluid to be separated so neatly from one another.

## A Summary View of the Psychological Characteristics of Ineffability

The words are coming easily now, but I think I should check their natural flow for a moment. The reason is that I intend to turn to a wide variety of sources and to give many, sometimes extensive examples, so I begin with a brief summary of the main characteristics, as I see them, of psychological ineffability. Naturally, the emphasis will be on what is most relevant for the comparative philosophy that follows; but here, too, I hope to resist a narrow view.

1. The understanding of language depends upon shared experience. The most fundamental experience we share is that of our immediate selves, by which I mean our bodies, modes of perception, emotions, and social needs. When we try to explain unshared experience, we have no choice but to fall back on what has already in fact been shared, and when we fall back on it, the process of explanation is likely to be word-consuming, time-consuming, and not very successful.

2. The meaning of spoken words is enhanced by facial expressions, gestures, shifts of the body, changes in gaze, and the personal and emotional qualities of the words' sounds—their vocal contour. The cooperation and conflict between these means of expression lends the words much of their often ambivalent subtlety.

3. Our attempts to explain ourselves in words prove to be endless. This shows that it is difficult and, beyond a certain point, impossible to say quite exactly what we feel, want, believe, and construe intellectually. Experience and research both teach us that words are not necessarily exact equivalents to underlying thought processes. Likewise, our individual thoughts do not necessarily correspond with what we think in a more complete, dense way, and conscious thoughts are certainly not the

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whole of what we in some sense think. A certain degree of ineffability is therefore inescapable.

4. The silences with which speech alternates and the rhythm and kind of this alternation also convey meanings. The alternation has its personal and social styles, which, we know, make communication fuller.

5. There are also personal and social styles of self-disclosure. What is impossible to disclose to one partner or in one situation may be possible to another partner or in another situation. In this sense, too, ineffability is relative.

6. Especially sensitive listening, of the sort recommended to psychoanalysts and clinical psychologists, is likely to discover messages concealed behind the ordinary meanings of speech and to make what may have been ineffable before, possible to put into words.

7. Both self-revelation and self-concealment are at their extreme in schizophrenics, whose speech is at times an extraordinarily interesting union of the effable and ineffable. Schizophrenic speech can suggest (or even be) poetry, prophecy, revelation, or mysticism.

8. The feeling and the fact of ineffability both depend on our inability to recover our memories fully, as well as on our ability to remember unconsciously what we have consciously forgotten.

9. Our dependence on concealed memories is dramatically accentuated in cases of amnesia and aphasia, when a person's previous knowledge continues to have an effect even though it has become concealed from consciousness.

10. The ability to remember depends upon a variety of types or subtypes of memory and on the relations between them. The complex nature of memory must affect what we can and cannot put into words, whether in general or under particular circumstances.

11. The condition known as synesthesia shows to what an extent our ability to use words depends upon the relationship between perception, shared experience, and memory. Fully synesthetic experience is hard to convey in words because words can give a relatively accurate reflection of only the usual, shared kind of perception.

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12. Like synesthesthia, music has an aura of ineffability, the result of its emotional, structural, and neurological differences from speech. The aura of ineffability surrounds speech itself in that its utterance is by musical means—the intrinsic music of a particular stretch of speech cannot be fully expressed in other words.

13. We get a clue to the nature of ineffability by comparing the experience of persons who see and hear normally with that of the deaf and the blind. The differences in their experience are, of course, reflected in the use and, even more, in the understanding of words. Under favorable circumstances, the lack of one kind of perception can be largely compensated for by a sensitive use of the remaining kinds. With their help, the range of the ineffable can be restricted to a surprising extent.

14. Yet the sensory difference between the blind or deaf and the others is never compensated for completely. As the result of the lack of common experience, a complex gap is created; and because what is unshared is impossible to put into words, it exerts an effect that can never quite be overcome.

If the ideas I have just summarized are plausible, ineffability has different nuances and, considered carefully, is of different kinds. Sometimes, as we will see, it is relative and sometimes perhaps absolute. Understood most generally, it is the receding limit of every attempt to express ourselves, the horizon of language, which always appears when we want to extend our field of expression, but which, horizonlike, recedes just as quickly as we move toward it.

## *The Understanding of Language Depends upon Shared Experience*

Here, still at the beginning of our investigation, the difficulty I feel most keenly is that I do not know just what I share with the reader, yourself, in background, ideas, and interests. Even apart from our strangeness to one another, it is probably not clear in what kind of experience our mutual understanding begins. As I say this, I ask myself what allows complete strangers using the same language to assume that they understand it in much the same way. The answer is, briefly, that we are not abstract linguistic creatures—bodiless angels who communicate by means of an identical, purely logical syntax. On the contrary, our use of language presupposes and reflects the physical structure of our bodies, our

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emotions and appetites, the ways in which we perceive, the kinds of spaces in which we live, and the cultures we assimilate as we become human in their image and in ours.

Let me be more specific. Think first of how our language depends upon the kind of bodies we human beings have in common. It might be too distractingly playful an exercise if we imagined our bodies made differently, but we get some sense of what the result might be when our bodies malfunction. Later, we will encounter the deaf and the blind and consider how their lack affects their understanding. Even now, however, we can try to imagine the degree to which our understanding and ability to communicate would be affected by the loss of any one of our senses. To make the exercise easier, suppose we consider not our experience as such, but only our experience as reflected in the words we use.

Suppose we begin with the words that depend upon the use of our eyes. *See*, we remember, is the most usual of synonyms for *understand*. To understand, we watch, look, perceive, observe, keep an eye on, peek, spy, notice, gaze, peer, contemplate, scrutinize, and witness—I forbear to add words, but Roget has much more. And *blind*, we remember, is a usual synonym for *unable to understand* and *ignorant (of)*. If we were all to lose our ability to see and, with it, all the words meaning *see* or using vision as a metaphor in one sense or another; and if we lost all the literal and metaphorical meanings of *blind*; and if we added to these losses, as we should be forced to, all the other words literally or metaphorically related to *darkness*, *light*, and *color*, we should have lost not only the visual part of our vocabulary but also the corresponding part of our ability to think.

This about vision and its lack is evident enough (*evident* is from *videre, to see*). It is less evident how our experience is made possible—is lent its structure—by the sense of touch; by the sense of balance; by the (so-called proprioceptive) awareness of the position of the body resulting from the testimony of receptors in our muscles, tendons, and joints; and by the union of the testimony of all these with the testimony of sight, hearing, smell, taste, and whatever other senses there may be. And so body is or becomes mind; and so, too, we orient ourselves intellectually, in the first place in relation to our bodies, with opposites such as *near-far*, *left-right*, *front-back*, *toward-away from*, and all the other positional concepts. These spatial relationships—which have their many metaphorical extensions—are extended by others such as *center-periphery*, *part-whole*, *full-empty*, and *closed-open*, each of which is also extended metaphorically.[2]

Furthermore, the resistance of things to movement and the reactions of our bodies to this resistance are essential to our understanding of

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force; and our eyes and proprioceptors—and not they alone—are essential to our ability to understand the concept of motion either in general or in any particular direction. Briefly, if we had souls perpetually divorced from bodies we could think neither literally nor metaphorically of any of these body-related concepts, and it is difficult to imagine how we could think at all.

To begin to get an idea of the extent to which our thought depends on body-related concepts, one need only turn to an edition of *Roget's Thesaurus* organized by its original word categories and see how these categories depend, directly or indirectly, on our experience of our bodies. I do not now mean to suggest that body terms be used to renew the Kantian analysis of what makes experience possible, but only that in the absence of their bodies, human beings could have no experience, not even of the kind that is called *abstract*.

Now if all this is granted, that is, if we grant that we understand one another's words because we have similar bodies and basically similar lives, there remain the misunderstandings that come from our lack of the particular shared experience that, although less basic, remains essential for the meaning the words are intended to convey. Misunderstandings that stem from the lack of shared experience are as common in the most everyday matters as in the most exalted; for a word recalls something we have experienced and can be used efficiently only if the person who uses it and the person who hears or reads it can both relate it to their experience in a similar way.

I think that this little truth is important enough to be driven home with the help of an example or two. Try using nothing more than the definition in a book in order to imagine the taste of an unknown fruit—maybe the guanabana, also known as the soursop and described as the large, dark green, slightly acid, pulpy fruit of a small West Indian tree. Or try to imagine how you might explain the taste of a fruit you know very well, for instance an orange—defined as a globose, reddish yellow, bitter or sweet, edible citrus fruit—to someone who has never tasted it. You will certainly help yourself by naming fruits with a similar taste and texture, but if the person listening to you has never tasted a citrus fruit of any kind, the explanation will be quite difficult. It would surely be an unexpected triumph if, on first tasting an orange, the person would say, "It tastes exactly as I imagined it from your words."

But whether descriptions succeed or fail, shared experience remains indispensable to them. In its absence, words remain mere sounds. When the shared experience is extensive enough, single words can re-

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place complete sentences; and when the shared experience is both extensive and intensive, speech can become sparse and hints—not necessarily verbal—more effective; and then the sheerly abstract information the speech conveys is understood in the light of its intimately personal qualities. Such speech creates the fullest, most natural tie between people, one of idiosyncratic, emotionally colored conceptuality.

## *The Meaning of Spoken Words Is Refined and Extended by Nonverbal Means*

It is plain that the understanding of the abstract content of words is affected by the manner in which we speak them. Because the grammar of actual speech does not conform to the 'official' kind, a person who speaks 'correctly', in complete accord with the official grammar, sounds artificial, as if adhering to the standards of writing instead of those of speech. In fact, writing and speech are rather different means of expression. What speech loses by its grammatical laxness it makes up for by its emotional immediacy, by the quality of the speaking voice, and by the face and gestures that are its accompanying instruments. In a broad sense, then, the meaning of our speech is a union of its abstract content, conversational matrix, vocal quality, and gestural expression. For the most part, we are only marginally aware of the physical ways in which we vary the abstract content of our speech; but actors learn their craft by studying these ways, because they know that speech is not only spoken but performed.[3]

As a performance, gesturally expressive speech, with its coordination of the arms, shifting of the body, and changing facial expression has the quality of a spontaneous dance. This is the more apparent when we think of such speech not as a solo performance but, at the least, a conversational duet; with many persons in the act, it becomes a whole unconsciously danced opera (or operetta). If restrictions are placed on the freedom of this danced talk, they are compensated for—the drama, such as it is, must go on. So when, for experiment's sake, speakers are told to sit with unmoving hands, they pause more and use more words that describe spatial relations; and when the speakers are restrained from making any large gestures, their imagery grows more sparse. The implication is that the very freedom to make large movements, to point out things, to use gestural depth, and to draw spatial contours, suggests the images that can be used to enhance the effect of speaking. To make up for the absence of the large gestures, the speakers make more numerous or more emphatic small ones—of the eyebrows, eyes, mouth, and fingers.[4]

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Then there is the speaker's gaze, which contributes its changing focus to the performance of speech. Normally, it remains fixed for only a few seconds at a time. It is more often fixed at the ends of sentences or long clauses, when the speaker has finished saying something relatively complete and wants to be guided by the listener's reactions (other reasons for pausing will soon be mentioned). Unusually rapid blinking betrays tension, while enlarged pupils betray strong, often sexual, interest. Although we hardly need to be told so, the experimenter observes that pleasure tends to open the eyes rather wide and surround them with wrinkles, pain to close the eyes and arch the eyebrows, fear to freeze the eyes wide open, and anger to narrow them.[5]

Then there is the voice. Every kind of emotional response elicits its own purely vocal contour, and every individual has a characteristic vocal contour and quality. There are, as we easily recognize, happy, friendly voices. The rhythms of such voices are regular and the sounds they make have gentle upward variations of pitch. In contrast, hostile or angry voices are loud, harsh, and fast, and their pitch, which is often lowered, has sharp upward variations. Dominance, likewise, has its characteristic voice; submission has its voice; and so, even, does credibility.[6] And a hollow, exaggeratedly flat, unresonant voice is said to be common to repressed persons, to very retarded ones, and to those who suffer from certain brain diseases.[7]

What happens when a gesture we make, our facial expression, or our tone of voice is in conflict with the literal meaning of the words we use, when, for example, we use our voice or facial expression to reverse the literal meanings of *good* and *bad*? In reversing meanings in such ways, we of course tangle them, express our ambivalence, and, in addition, give clues to our mood and nature. Not surprisingly, a study shows that happy faces making positive statements are regarded as sincere and very positive. More surprisingly, such voices may be taken to suggest dominance and even pride. Happy faces out of which come negative statements are taken to show either great insincerity, great submissiveness, or, often, a joking quality. Angry faces that make positive statements are interpreted as insincere, bitter, and derisive, or, in a single word, sarcastic. And sad faces saying submissive things tend to make listeners sympathetic—or so the experimenter, bound to the conditions of his experiment, tells us.[8]

It appears that in talking we are able to say much more than the dictionary allows; and yet our complaints against words, if we make them, take little account of how subtly we really use them. Recall, as a simple example, the resourceful technique with which a person may say, "I just can't put it into words!"

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## *Our Attempts to Explain Ourselves Leave a Finally Ineffable Residue*

Whether or not we express ourselves clearly, we are often aware that we have to make an effort to explain ourselves or risk being misunderstood. The risk is held in check by our prior agreement on the conventions of conversation and writing.[9] But even so, explaining oneself is an always unfinished process. A serious attempt to give a full explanation would prove intolerably long, I think; but just how much it is best to explain we discover only in imperfect practice. The persons who write manuals of instruction for electronic devices have the same difficulty: they fail to give unambiguous instructions for ordinary users because, it seems, it is not clear to them just what these users know and do not know. The shared context of knowledge turns out to be inadequate, an inadequacy that makes it so hard to say exactly what we want.

Even if we explain ourselves well, if we are reflective, we gradually become aware of a certain mutual impenetrability of speaker and listener: for all kinds of reasons, we cannot grasp other persons as they themselves would like to be grasped. Attentively as we may listen, we often miss the exact point that someone is trying to make. This is not necessarily our fault. It turns out that it is extraordinarily difficult, if not impossible, to speak or write unambiguously for long, even about rather simple practical matters. Speech has the advantage over writing because of its gestural, dancing quality, and because the listener can tell us what is not clear and encourage us to continue explaining as long as need requires and patience allows. But for all of its immediate advantages, speech, too, leaves us only imperfectly understood.

As I have said, our impenetrability is mutual, and it is as difficult for others to understand us to our satisfaction as for us to understand them to theirs. The difference in context of understanding can be blamed, but we do not always really want to know what it is in our words that is unclear to others. One reason is that we often find it difficult to listen carefully to others—difficult because we are much more eager to expound ourselves than to assimilate what, if we take it seriously, might be destructive to our opinions or pride; and difficult because we prefer our own ideas to remain at the center of attention.

Another, maybe embarrassing difficulty: We may in time discover that we find it hard to explain ourselves to others because we do not know ourselves well enough. Our transparency to ourselves is too limited. When we are alert, we are relatively conscious of how we think, and we may then seem to construct our thoughts by a process over which we rule; but if we pay attention to the way in which we think, we

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become aware that many of our thoughts arise in us by means of inward processes we do not understand at all. For in thinking we are always drawing on abilities we have learned that we contain; but we hardly know whether in the final analysis (if there is any truly final analysis) these are fully intellectual, logical processes that are silent, that is, impenetrable to consciousness, or whether they are sublogical, subintellectual processes from which fully intellectual ones emerge, or, as is perhaps more likely, they are both kinds of processes or processes intermediate to both, processes either unstructured enough or flexible enough to fit the needs of a very adaptable organism that is, at once and by turns, emotional, musical, verbal, and mathematical. Why should we assume that these processes—which we must classify as thought and as either knowledge or the precursors of knowledge—are easily and fully translatable into words?[10]

What rules here and how does it rule? Having begun to speak, we do not consciously order the details of the activity of our organs of speech. There is not nearly enough time to choose words consciously (normally we speak two or three per second) let alone choose the sounds (about fifteen per second) we use in articulating them.[11] Nor, as native speakers, do we consciously establish the grammatical order of the words we use. Nor—except when arguing formally, as philosophers, logicians, and the like—are we conscious of the principles of reasoning we use. This is with good reason, because conscious attention paid to the principles of reasoning is just as inhibiting to the natural flow of thought as conscious attention paid to any of our other activities. To think fluently, we have to let ourselves go. Criticism easily kills the skill it is meant to further.

What rules the process of speech, and how and to what purpose does the ruling work? It is easy to ask and hard to answer why we use just the words we do rather than familiar synonyms for them. Is the choice of one synonym rather than another made because of its unique range of meaning, its sound, or its meaning and sound together? And why do the words come out organized in one allowable sequence rather than another equally allowable one? Do the alternative possibilities of words and word sequences increase the possibilities of thought by increasing the range of its possible transformations? Do the independent associations of the sounds and their irrelevance to the meaning they convey create a kind of randomization that allows us to escape mere automatism and reinvent our thought as we are expressing it? Does freedom of intellectual choice therefore depend on freedom of phonetic association or—to choose another possibility—freedom of structural association? Does the translation of thoughts into words externalize them

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and make it easier to change them because they have become hearable or visible structures?[12] And why do we so often have the feeling that we understand what we are saying but find it difficult to explain our meaning in words other than those we have actually used?[13] And what accounts for the whole quirkish path in which our thoughts flow, the sequences deflected as if they were flowing along a particular terrain with its rises and falls, rocks and floating debris, and channels that meander as they can and must?

It is evident that much of the seemingly wayward direction our thoughts take is the result of unconscious 'mechanisms', for consciousness appears only when we are paying attention. Consciousness, we discover, is for learning—we do something consciously in order to learn it well enough to forget how we do it. Consciousness is also for regulating—we need to make thoughts conscious in order to slow them down, expose them to view, and regulate them as we prefer. Words are so helpful for these functions not only because, being external, they are manipulable, but because, like the expressions that contain them, their ranges of meaning are broad and vague enough to invite change.[14]

Our usual ignorance of *how* we think is accompanied by a partial ignorance of *what* we think. We are partially ignorant because, thinking with our whole person and experience, we generate ideas from a substratum that is opaque to consciousness and resists transmutation into concepts. It is true that part of our more abstract thinking may be done in snatches of inner speech, but external speech is not ordinarily generated from preceding speech of any kind. Each of us experiences the appearance of abstract thought from nothing we know that resembles it. We find the same sort of disparity in accounts given by writers, scientists, and even philosophers.[15] Einstein testifies that words seem not to play any role in the mechanism of his scientific invention, the elements of which are "certain signs" and "more or less clear images" that he is able to reproduce and combine. Only at a later, secondary stage, he says, is it necessary to search laboriously for "conventional words or other signs."[16] A young dyslexic mathematician, who can speak easily but has great difficulty in reading and writing, reports that from an early age he found many things were easier to think about without language. Like his father, he says, he creates and manipulates visual images, especially when he is trying to make or to understand an intricate mechanism. In mathematics he never feels he understands something unless he finds a way of visualizing it, although this visualization is not usually a substitute for the mathematical symbols. Sometimes the 'thought' is by way of muscular sensation. He explains:

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> If I am trying to remember a complicated knot when no rope is available, I usually imagine the finger movements involved and the feel of the knot being tied without picturing it in my mind or moving my hands at all. Knots are examples of things that are extremely hard to describe and remember in words, and people who attempt to do so usually forget them very quickly and are poor at spotting similarities between complicated knots.[17]

This mathematician, whose difficulties in reading and writing do not extend to mathematical symbolism, reports that he can usually assimilate a mathematics book by "reading the equations and occasionally looking for key words in the text." He adds that much of his mathematics "is done completely without words of any kind . . Thought is not necessarily hindered by reading and writing difficulties, but the availability of things to think about is."[18]

Speaking in a rather similar vein, Wittgenstein says that there are really

> cases in which the sense of what a person wants to say is much clearer in his mind than he can express in words. (This happens to me very often.) It is as if one saw a dream-picture distinctly, but could not describe it in such a way that someone else, too, could see it.[19]

These are persuasive testimonies to the frequent disjunction between thought and words, and to the view I have adopted, that external speech is not always generated from earlier speech but from its unknown substratum. This evidence makes it easier to grasp why we do not know exactly—cannot explain exactly—what we mean. I am not referring to the changes that occur in our views. If we consider only a period during which the basic lines of our thought remain the same, we discover that, even so, we are incapable of saying with enough clarity and detail exactly what our views are. The more time we take to explain, the more unclear or at least idiosyncratic the explanation is likely to become.

We begin to explain ourselves and in the process draw our thought out of ourselves much as magicians pull long strips of gauze out of their mouths. Drawing thought out so, we slowly explain ourselves not only to others but also to ourselves, the explanation beginning with an opinion, elicited more or less spontaneously, which we then elaborate, possibly in defense. What we are going to draw out of ourselves, even in the immediate future, we cannot predict; and now and then we find that what emerges is genuinely surprising. Even when conveying the 'same' meanings, spontaneous 'sayings'—the way the words actually emerge each time we utter or write them—vary in structure, imagery, and verbal

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detail, although, as I admit, we all repeat characteristic opinions and tell the same old jokes.

Needless to say, I do not know why the process of eliciting our views from ourselves takes so long or why, in effect, it never ends. The only general reason I can propose is that we are internally so complex and personal an environment for the creation of thoughts that the internal 'attitudes' and 'positions' cannot be stated quickly and cannot be fully stated at all; and, furthermore, that personal conditions change their nuances quickly and often, and with each change elicit an at least subtly different verbal response from ourselves and a correspondingly changed response from the listener, so that the whole flow of ostensibly similar thoughts may take a distinctly different path each time.

As we know, the process of eliciting views from anyone follows a fairly fixed pattern of statement and response: After I have finished explaining myself, clearly or not, my interlocutor is apt to respond by paraphrasing what I have said or by indicating in some other way what he takes my meaning to be. He shows that he has made my meaning his own by translating it into his individual language. If the discussion goes on, I am likely to answer that, no, that was not exactly what I had meant; and the process of statement and response and corrective counterstatement and counterresponse continues, dialectically, as some of us say; but it is never really ended, and in its course I not only explain myself further but learn details of my meaning I am not aware of until they are elicited by what I take to be misunderstanding. For that reason, much of my grasp of my own position is developed by means of my responses to the misunderstanding of others.

Yet in a way I know what I have not yet consciously learned about my position. I mean that I never fail to sense the alien quality in another person's paraphrase or extension of my position, a position I am able to enlarge on as soon as I have heard from the other person what it appears to him to be, that is, what he has wrongly taken it to be. Knowing that, like my immune system, I can sense any alien intrusion, I remain confident that I can go on describing my still unexpressed position, as confident as if it were an object I was looking at directly and describing to someone in another room. I am in firm possession of views that I have never yet expressed in detail and, in this sense, contain but do not consciously quite know. This kind of knowing what one does not yet exactly know never changes.

What I have described of my conversation with myself and others is characteristic not only of informal interchanges between individuals but

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also of the larger 'conversations' that make up the history of culture. To show this I cite a persuasive comment on the development of science:

> Science is a conversation with nature, but it is also a conversation with other scientists. Not until scientists publish their views and discover the reaction of other scientists can they possibly appreciate what they have actually said. No matter how much one might write and rewrite one's work in anticipation of public responses, it is impossible to avoid all possible misunderstandings, and not all such misunderstandings are plainly 'misunderstandings'. Frequently scientists do not know what they intended to say until they discover what it is that other scientists have taken them to be saying. Scientists show great facility in retrospective meaning-change.[20]

## *The Meanings of Speech Are Also Conveyed by Its Alternations with Silence*

Silence is obviously necessary to speech because words or phrases are distinguishable by the brief intervals of silence that separate them. When spontaneous, speech is produced in spurts that last on the average about two seconds and consist of about five words. These spurts seem to reflect the rhythm in which consciousness focuses on successive units of words-to-be. Hesitations between the units show us where difficulties arise, where, for instance, one is changing direction or searching one's memory.[21]

But silence is also used to convey meanings that are awkward to put into words. Affected by the awkwardness, a person turns his face away and stops talking, or closes his eyes as his voice trails into a whisper and disappears. It is because we speak that we learn to convey messages by silence and that silence is needed for the sequential eloquence of words. I give the example of the silences that characterized the "inspired confusion" of the French sociologist and anthropologist Marcel Mauss (1872–1950). As one of his students recalls, "His discourse was all articulations and elasticity. Most of his sentences came up empty, but it was an emptiness that invited you to build. That's why I said the most characteristic things were his silences."[22]

In Western culture, silence is easily interpreted as reserve or rudeness and sometimes arouses suspicion—who knows what criticisms are being made or plots hatched in the silent person's mind?[23] It is evident, however, that there are individuals and cultures that do not feel that silence creates an anxious void that ought to be filled with speech, or that one must speak because silence is boring or because one needs to dominate the situation. Among Native Americans, relative silence is inter-

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preted as control, cooperation, and attentiveness to others. Navajos, even when speaking in English, pause longer than non-Navajos are able to tolerate; but the Navajos pause out of inbred politeness, to allow the listener time to digest what has been said and to reflect on an answer.[24] The verbally very different Igbo of Nigeria cultivate oratory, salt their speech with proverbs, and are in general highly verbal and extroverted. The silence they practice for ritual purposes is therefore eloquent by its difference. So, too, is the custom by which they sit in silence when they visit a bereaved person, for they feel that words would only intensify the grief of the mourner. By their silence they also show that they dare to appear before the hovering spirit of the dead person, as they would not if they were in any way responsible for the death.[25]

In accord with their acute social consciousness, the Japanese practice what they call "wordless communication" (*haragei*) because they feel that speech at a particular moment is out of place or likely to lose the essence of what one wants to say. The shared silence implies an intimacy like that of people who are close enough to one another to need only the merest hint in order to hear not so much the spoken words as their overtones. The deliberate refusal of the Japanese to speak assumes this sensitivity to overtones, for silence is interpreted as conveying more than words can. In Japan, we are told, psychotherapists are far more economical with words than are their Western counterparts and expect their patients to understand what, from a Western standpoint, is merely hinted. Because the Japanese are trained from early childhood to be sensitive to the feelings of others, the more emotionally important the message, the less likely it is, even if put into words, to be more than hinted at.[26]

Franz Kafka celebrates the force of silence in his miniature parable-like story, *The Silence of the Sirens*. He imagines that Ulysses put wax in his ears so as not to hear the Sirens' songs, but that Ulysses did not understand that they have "a still more fatal weapon than their song, namely their silence." It was impossible, the text says, to escape from their silence; yet Ulysses triumphed over them because he mistook their silence for singing he could not hear.[27]

Kafka is the philosophical storyteller, but the outright philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty not only praises silence but regards philosophy as a way of joining silence with speech. "We should be sensitive to the thread of silence from which the tissue of speech is woven," he writes. "Philosophy is the reconversion of silence and speech into one another."[28] These remarks need interpretation but, by Merleau-Ponty's own criterion, they are telling enough to deserve not to be interpreted at the moment; but his idea hints at others yet to be expressed.

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## *Self-Disclosure and Therefore Ineffability May Be Relative to One's Partner and Situation*

We recognize that silence, like speech, can both conceal and reveal the self. As it happens, self-disclosure has been a field of psychological research for some time.[29] In contrast to early expectations (but in keeping with experience in other psychological research), self-disclosure has shown itself to be such a complicated matter that it has left us with more questions than answers.[30] As usual, human beings evade a simply formulaic understanding.

Because I have relied and will continue to rely on psychological observations and research, I should like to take a moment to explain how this well-confirmed observation—that human beings evade formulaic understanding—affects my reliance on the research. It has become clear that all scientific data, theories, and research remain perpetually in question. Practical experience joins philosophy in showing that literally nothing in empirical science, however professionally hallowed, can be beyond question. Yet with the exception of physiological psychology, the subject matter of psychology is such that doubt is and should be more general and immediate. Unlike at least some experiments in physics, psychological experiments of any interest can always be immediately faulted. The objects of the experiments—human beings—are so plastic that the experimenters cannot be fully successful in narrowing the possibilities so as to make their conclusions unambiguous.

Even in physics, the inability to repeat the initial conditions of an earlier experiment with complete exactness argues that fully exact repetitions are only an ideal. In psychology, the differences between experimenters, between the experimenters' human subjects, and between the situations of different experiments are such that the difficulties in repeating experiments and in narrowing down the number of immediately plausible explanations are indefinitely greater than in, say, chemistry. There is of course a great, sometimes very great, difference between a competent and an incompetent experiment in psychology; but even the most competent could have been more careful and therefore more convincing than it in fact turns out to be—the possibilities for more care in planning, execution, and interpretation are practically infinite; and once the experiment has been carried out, a practiced critic can always suggest an improvement.

For us, the upshot is that whatever I report as the result of psychological observations or experiments should be regarded as suggestive rather than final; and while I may not use terms implying doubt, the doubt is always there. It stands to reason that none of what I am saying

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should be interpreted as scorn for psychological experiment but only as a reminder of how intrinsically difficult it is in psychology to arrive at conclusions that are even relatively firm. Even so, the experiments have tended to rule out certain possibilities and strengthen others, and have done a great deal to deepen our ability to understand human thought and behavior. When the occasion arises to illuminate philosophical problems by psychological means, it will not be because I assume that psychology, unlike philosophy, is immune to doubt, but because it is able to cast a different, more empirical kind of illumination on a problem that philosophy has not solved convincingly enough.

Now back to self-disclosure. Psychologists have measured this act in terms of two dimensions, the one of breadth—which refers to the range of the matters disclosed—and the other of depth—which refers to the degree of intimacy that is reached. These two dimensions are assumed to go together more often than not. The intensity of the emotion involved has been considered a separate dimension. So has the time, that is, the slowness or quickness with which the disclosure is made, the hesitations or silences with which it is interspersed, and the length of time spent on it—a longer time spent in self-disclosure implies an intensified feeling of intimacy. Psychologists have also identified a dimension of flexibility, the ease with which self-disclosure responds to changed circumstances.[31]

It is natural for one's style of disclosure to adapt itself to different events and partners. Perhaps surprisingly, an open conversational style is not necessarily revealing—one wears a confession as a lifelike mask. That is why, in estimating self-disclosure, authenticity should be taken into consideration. So, too, should the degree of risk that one is willing to take in revealing oneself.[32]

The critical need that prompts self-disclosure, no matter to whom, is surely the need for emotional closeness. Persons who grow up in close, helpful intimacy with their parents anticipate that intimacy will be achieved and disclose themselves unselfconsciously. Unlike them, persons who have suffered from neglect in their childhood or have been painfully cut off from their parents, whether by death or otherwise, regard themselves less favorably, anticipate rejection, and, in fact, are rejected more often. Such persons are apt to go through life afflicted by the feeling that no one wants or is able to understand them. A pathological extreme of self-disapproval and fear of disapproval is a genuine fear of intimacy.[33]

One person's disclosure naturally stimulates that of another. The intimacy that arises between adolescents and adults continues or revives the

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initial intimacy between infant and parents. Having found someone to be intimate with, the person who confesses hopes for sympathy and an equivalent to pardon even though what is confessed is shameful. For most of us, confession of any depth comes hard, and though it sometimes takes place in the excited crowd typical of certain religious or quasi-religious confessions of sin, it is more usually confined to a pair, its two members free of social pressure, matching confession against confession, and taking pleasure in their undivided attention to one another's concerns.[34]

Anyone under heavy emotional pressure either confides in a trusted companion—who may well be under the same kind of pressure—or becomes deeply lonely. But the person who discloses much pain or unhappiness is trapped in a dilemma because the expression of unhappiness annoys those who have to listen to much of it. As we probably know from our own experience and as impersonal evidence shows, people who complain of their suffering inspire dislike.[35] Almost everybody therefore learns to conceal some degree of pain, or to show it in ways that disturb others as little as possible. Egotistical persons exploit those who listen to them by helping themselves at the expense of their listeners' comfort. Less egotistical persons learn to moderate their disclosures.[36]

There are interesting differences in self-disclosure between men and women. The usual view, which is that men are more inhibited than women, is too simple. One study maintains that the most open, deep disclosure is between pairs of women and the least between pairs of men, that paired men and women are intermediate between the two extremes, and that both women and men disclose more to a woman than to a man. Men are said to be more direct, especially when they are expressing their need for power, while women more often influence men's decisions indirectly. But both sexes withhold personal information that might put them under the power of those who learn their secrets.[37]

Marriage can either increase or decrease the depth and frequency with which one reveals oneself. As those who are married discover, it probably does both, in the selective manner that fits the marriage. Styles of self-disclosure in marriage have been given a simple classification. One style is the conservative or traditional. Married persons who live by this style emphasize their positive feelings and limit the kinds of subjects they talk about even in the deepest of confidence. Their morality, implicit and explicit, reduces their expectations of one another and perhaps the friction between them, just as it sets the bounds to what they allow themselves to reveal to one another. Untraditional marriages, those in which the terms of marriage are less clear and must be learned or negotiated as time goes on, allow freer expression of negative feelings and

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greater open dissension. This relative freedom of disclosure may make the marriage more interesting and lend it a more varied intimacy, the result of more open emotional sharing and the seesaw of emotions that go with quarreling and making up. But there are also untraditional marriages that reject intimacy, the partners remaining lone wolves, emotionally separate and carefully guarded in their relations with one another.[38]

### *Especially Sensitive Listening May Allow the Previously Ineffable to Be Put into Words*

The difficulties related to self-disclosure bring us to the threshold of psychiatry, psychoanalysis, and clinical psychology, the professions in which the greatest care is taken to listen to what a person says and, in saying, reveals even involuntarily. In Freudian psychoanalysis, the analyst is supposed to remain as neutral as possible and allow the patient's speech to retain as many of its uncontaminated nuances as possible. The therapist of whatever kind (except the behavioral) believes that the patient's speech expresses more than can be consciously grasped or even intuited, yet hopes to hear enough to be able in the end to strengthen the patient's self-understanding. In principle, the therapist wants to be the self-abnegating listener, one who understands that the patient is struggling to find words to explain, is trying to overcome the shame of self-revelation in the most unflattering of lights, and is afraid that the weakness revealed will become the talk of others. Therapists who themselves become patients also have to struggle for words for the same reasons.[39]

The therapist's own psychological reactions may stand in the way of the analysis. It is all too easy for the therapist to become insecure, especially if the patient is acute enough to invert the relationship by discovering the therapist's weaknesses; and sometimes the therapist in effect silences the patient by talking in an unintelligible jargon or putting words into the patient's mouth.[40] The patient is eager to reveal but cannot avoid hiding as well, so that the therapist has to listen beyond the words to the manner in which they are said, to the form they take as a whole, to the emotion invested in them, to the similes and metaphors used, and to the hesitations, silences, and apparent irrelevancies.

It is because all this is far too much to attend to at once that the therapist's peripheral consciousness and literary sensitivity must be enlisted. For instance, the patient' grammar, such as the use of passive rather than active forms, may be significant; or the patient may use abstract words rather than more immediate, natural ones; and the metaphors that come up both reveal and conceal. Memories recalled speak for themselves and, as well, for the relationship between patient and

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therapist. To fathom as deeply as possible, the therapist has to call on emotion, fantasy, and internal dialogue until the feeling comes—correctly or mistakenly—that the flow of words is now understood.

The assumption is always made that the words of the patient *must* be revealing, if not in their abstract content then in the manner of their saying and their associations.[41] Except for con men and other mythomaniacs, total lying seems impossible—and the con man, the practiced, supreme liar, eventually wants to have his lies become known so that he can take pleasure in the others' recognition of the artistry of his deceptions.

Therapy encounters significant silences, such as mean *I have thoughts but can't tell them to you*, or *I don't want to tell you what I am thinking*, or *My mind is a blank*. In one instance, a therapist reports, a patient sat silently, thumb in mouth, staring at the floor, and now and then letting out an irritated remark or curse. The therapist answered silence with silence, at times for as long as half an hour. Although these sessions went on for over a year, the patient kept coming back. Eventually she confessed that during her silent period she had improved a good deal. As became clear, her silence had been an attempt to return to an 'archaic' relationship in which she had been dominated and made to feel miserable, a relationship in which it seemed wrong to her to speak, so that she would fall silent, holding out, as in the archaic past, against attack. Her silence turned out to be communication more telling than any verbal one.[42]

In another case, an analyst and her patient discovered that the patients's black silence during entire months expressed the need to live out, "without retaliation, his primary hatred of a genuinely powerful mother." He had lost her emotionally to his only brother, born when he was eleven years old, but he had been required by her to love and revere her unstintingly.[43]

The analyst (N. E. C. Coltart) who reported this case said to her audience of analysts:

> Some people *suffer* more from the unthinkable than others, and for these we have to do all in our power to help towards the therapeutic transformation, to bring thoughts to the unthinkable and words to the inexpressible. Gradually the rough beast may, within the framework of the analytic relationship, slouch towards being born, and the new creature emerging from the birth is the increasing happiness and peace of mind of the patient . . . But there is always a mystery at the heart of every person, and therefore in our job as analysts.[44]

A patient may also be silent by drowning the analyst in words that say nothing because the talking, even crying voice is empty of emotion. Or the patient may break off a sequence of ideas in the middle and

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