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On Silence - Findings of Philosophico-Pedagogical Anthropology*

In the past few decades philosophy has been much occupied with language, and this has led to many new insights. One thing, however, that does not appear to have been considered worthy of attention - at least not in Europe - is not speaking, in other words silence. And yet silence is the ground from which all speech emerges and into which it falls back. It is to this silence that I wish to apply myself in this paper.

What strikes us straightaway is that what I am here calling silence is not one thing at all, but something existing in different forms, of which it is doubtful whether they could be grouped together at all. A few preliminary definitions may serve as an approach to this phenomenon.

Silence exists only in relation to speech: it is not simply not speaking, since we can only speak of silence in situations where [41/42] speech is what is expected or where it would be appropriate. Silence is therefore not speaking in contradistinction to speak-ing and is to that extent a phenomenon with positive characteristics, and it is this positive character that we must here bring to the fore.

The implication of all this is that only man can be silent. Fish, for example, cannot be said to be silent, since they cannot talk. To speak of the silence of the forest at night or of isolated spots in the country is possible only insofar as we can attribute to them a language that men might understand (which need necessarily be the same thing as human speech). When Pascal is shaken to the depths of his soul by the silence of the infinite Spaces of the universe, it is because he experiences this soundlessness as a refusal to speak, as a deliberate and as it were aggressive act of not speaking to man. What is implied in these examples of common usage is a specific understanding of nature. But this leads on to other questions of how we understand nature, a line of enquiry that we cannot pursue here. It is advisable therefore to disregard this metaphorical usage and to restrict ourselves to human silence.

Again, silence between individuals can be of many different kinds. To anticipate briefly, there is good and bad silence, a silence that we must respect and even praise, and a silence that is morally distinctly reprehensible, as well as many intermediary forms where right and wrong are difficult to appraise.

To start with, there is dull, brutish silence. A person remains silent because he is not capable of deep emotion. A special form of this is that taciturnity where a person shuns the effort of talking from sheer laziness. This differs from the dull kind of silence in that the taciturn person could speak but is simply not prepared to go to the trouble of doing so.

Another kind of silence is defiant silence, usually to be found among children and adolescents

* Professor O. F. Bollnow dedicated this paper to the Japanese scholar Yukichi Shitahodo on the occasion of his 77th birthday in 1981. Yukichi Shitahodo's work as a philosopher and a pedagogue has brought him an international reputation. He has moreover performed a great service to German scholarship by increasing Japanese awareness of German scholarly publications. (The Editor.)

Rendering this paper into English is to some extent obviated by the absence in English of any verb corresponding to German *schweigen*, Latin *tacere*. Whereas English can only say 'he ceased to talk', 'he fell silent', i. e. can only suggest cessation or absence of speech-activity, German *er schwieg* and Latin *tacuit* imply at least through their active, finite forms, that not speaking is an activity no less than speaking is, and this gives the German language (and the author of the present paper) lexical advantages not available in English. (The Translator.)

who at moments of conflict with their parents or others responsible for their upbringing refuse to communicate at all, e. g. refuse to confess to some transgression, and simply close up. The same is true of the criminal who is not prepared to admit to a crime. There are more harmless cases where a person remains silent about a circum-stance that is unpleasant to him for some reason or other.

In all these cases, whether it is a matter of some precise guilt or whether a person is silent out of timidity or caution, being [42/43] afraid to expose himself by speaking openly, silence has the purpose of self-protection. The person is using silence to shut himself off from the outside world. He loses his living relation-ship with the outside world. Before he can regain this he must 'break' his silence. The criminal must confess to the deed. The person must in a general sense renounce the safety afforded him by silence and become accessible again to his fellow men. It is at this point that we meet with educational problems which emerge with particular acuteness in the realm of rehabilitation of criminals. There is a 'wall of silence' to be penetrated and a 'pedagogical link' (Herman Nohl) to be re-established. But this again leads us into a side-issue. The general lesson that we can learn from this is that speaking freely entails trust; mistrust leads to silence, be it as a result of defiance or of diffidence.

Finally mention must be made of that icy silence that refuses to communicate for reasons of pride or contempt for others.

On the other hand it must not be forgotten that frankness in talking to one another should not be allowed to deteriorate into mere garrulity. Everybody has a right, even a duty, to use silence to preserve a 'secret' region of his soul. I shall return to this point later. But here already the difficulty arises of striking a correct balance in individual cases between speech and silence.

Quite a different realm of silence is that imposed by circum-stances (German *Verschwiegenheit*), the kind of silence that is expected of doctors or diplomatists or indeed of anybody to whom a secret is entrusted 'under the seal of silence'. This kind of silence is a noble virtue that does not come naturally to the naive individual but, implying as it does the suppression of the natural need to communicate, must be acquired through strict self-discipline. Unlike other kinds of silence, this one refers always to a specific individual secret and is therefore fully reconcilable with frankness in other aspects of behaviour.

But not all silence implies closing oneself off, it is not always refusal to communicate: there is also silence by compact. The tacit compact, like the unwritten law, is a simple preliminary form. There are many things that do not need explicit verbal fixation. There are things that can be tacitly tolerated by our giving the other man a certain room to manoeuvre, even if we cannot approve of his behaviour in detail.

But there is also a comprehending silence, a well-intentioned silence; for all kindness takes place in silence. There is a for- [43/44] giving silence like that of the older and riper man observing the vagaries and vicissitudes of a younger, less experienced man. This is not merely silence, but a mode of behaviour that consists in not intervening straightaway, but of simply standing to one side with a certain understanding smile.

But deeper than this is wordless agreement. Where people understand each other's inmost thoughts no words are necessary, they can sit together in silence and precisely in this mutual silence have the Sensation of belonging together. Philemon and Baucis will hardly have spoken to one another much. Indeed, it is possible to measure how close two people are by observing how capable they are of remaining silent together.

And finally, another quite different kind of silence, the silence of shame and the silence of awe. By shame here I do not mean shame in the sense that a person might be ashamed of a wicked deed, but the shame that prevents him from revealing his inner-most life or from interfering tactlessly or from sheer curiosity in another's sphere of intimacy. It is for this reason that we usually

fall silent in the presence of the holy, in church, in a temple or in the religious sphere in general, in the same way as we fall silent in the presence of nature in her overwhelming grandeur. We dare not speak aloud. Though it might also be that sheer fear silences us. In all such cases it is perhaps more correct to talk of being Struck dumb rather than of falling silent, since what we have here is not so much something we do, in the sense that falling silent, being a refusal to speak, is an activity, as something that happens to us against our will, something that we are powerless to fight. It is not that we do not wish to or may not speak, but that we cannot, because some dimly felt power prevents us from doing so. I have spoken in greater detail about this silence of shame or of awe in my book *Die Ehrfurcht* (1947, 2nd impr. 1958), so these brief allusions here must suffice.

But I should like to pursue these reflexions further in another direction. I said at the beginning, perhaps a little prematurely, that all speech emerges from silence and falls back into silence. This process, or, to be more accurate, these two processes, we must now look at more closely. Speech rises out of silence. Here I am excluding the cases so far mentioned, where in a sudden decision a person breaks his silence, and turn to those cases where something implied by life itself demands to be spoken about and is spoken about, i. e. where something is expressed [44/45] which itself demanded expression. From among the various possibilities that offer themselves here I shall choose the highest form, conversation in the actual sense of the word, especially a conversation of a reflective, profound nature such as occurs between friends.

It has often been observed how a conversation is engaged in, how it often evolves out of the most unpromising beginnings, even without any prior intention, and gradually gains in profundity. Things are articulated in conversation that had previously been obscure to those concerned, and by being given expression they gain clarity and definition. Conversation is a creative process to the extent that (comparable in this respect to poetry) something shapeless that is crying out to be given shape is given shape in conversation. But here too I exceed my brief.

What has been given less consideration is how a conversation comes to an end. Not pertinent to my line of enquiry here are those cases where a conversation is abruptly terminated by external circumstances or where the available time has expired. There are also cases in which a conversation has reached a natural conclusion', where the questions it has thrown up have been satisfactorily answered so that to that extent at least a tangible conclusion has been reached. But this is probably rarely the case. It is more usual for a conversation, like the hyperbolic orbit of a comet, to reach a stage of highest intensity at which it approaches more closely to the truth that is being sought, and then simply fizzles out, either because new ideas imperceptibly detract it from its original goal or at least lead no further, or because attention begins to flag because a general feeling emerges that no progress is being made. The give-and-take of ideas slows down, longer pauses occur, until finally the conversation lapses into silence, in the hope that it will be taken up again later and yet with a sense of satisfaction that the truth has been felt to be in it. This truth, however, that is present in the conversation is not the same thing as a conclusion; for it is present only as long as the conversation lasts and slips away again as soon as the conversation falls back into silence.

But here the question arises as to whether speech really does slip away into nothing like a passing shadow as soon as the conversation is at an end. Is silence really nothing more than no longer speaking? Let us look more closely at how the silence comes about. The very pauses that occur in conversation are [45/46] not empty but are filled with reflexion on what has been said and on what remains to be said, even merely with a feeling of gratitude for the profundity achieved in the conversation. And when the conversation finally does sink into silence, it is no empty silence, but a fulfilled silence. The truth, not only of the insight that has been acquired, but the truth of life, the State of being in truth that has been achieved in the conversation, continues to make itself felt, indeed becomes deeper, in the course of this silence.

Hence it was careless of me to say that conversation rises out of silence and sinks back again into silence. Even if before the beginning of the conversation there is a State of non-speaking, and even if man - a terrifying thought - does not speak for the major part of his life, nevertheless not-speaking cannot be de-scribed as silence. Genuine fulfilled silence only sets in after an intensively conducted conversation; for the inwardness that is essential to silence is only achieved through conversation — though admittedly there are other ways of achieving this inwardness, for example through exercises in self-oblivion or quiet meditation, even if this kind of quietness could hardly be called silence. A person when alone is not silent. One can only remain silent in Company with another or (even though this is more difficult) with several others. But it would be wrong to describe this silence as a deficient form of speech, i. e. as a lack of some-thing, whilst genuine silence means a fulfilment that transcends speech.

But if silence is supposed to be fulfilment, it cannot be striven for as such directly. A prerequisite is the effort of speech that has preceded it in the form of struggling to find the right word and in the form of the insight contained in this word. It is only when we have extracted the last possibility of what can be said from what appears inconceivable that in the fulfilled silence the undertone of that which can no longer be said becomes audible.

So now we can take up again with deeper understanding a turn of phrase that I used a moment ago as a provisional statement in casual language when I said that speech fades away in nothingness. It is indeed a nothingness, but a nothingness in the deeper sense in which Japanese thinkers have used this word, nothingness as the shapeless primal ground that is struggling for shape and from which all shaping emerges and in which [46/47] all shaping remains rooted, insofar as it does remove itself from this primal ground of its own accord, and into which all shaping falls back. But that is wisdom of the East of which we may have an inkling but which I do not wish to debase with the inadequate tools of western thought. I must be on my guard against taking owls, the symbol of wisdom, to Athens, where there are plenty already.

But I should like to take the idea a stage further in yet another direction. I described a genuine, reflective conversation as giving shape to the (relatively) shapeless. In this regard there are points of contact between conversation and the art of the poet or the painter or, to refer to our own life's work, the written and printed word of the philosopher. Every poem, though it is able to put into words something previously unsaid so that others may comprehend it, leaves a remainder unsaid, and this too should be thought of, not as a deficiency, but as the expression of its perfection, an expression in which what is left unsaid lingers on in the ears in a kind of silence akin to conversation.

Painting too Springs to mind, especially Chinese and Japanese ink-drawings of the kind perfected in monastic tradition. What is expressed in these drawings can only be extracted with difficulty from the white surface of the sheet, and this white surface itself, so far from being something empty, is the true reality of the picture, the unchanging ground from which the figures emerge like fleeting shapes. I do not think it is going too far to compare this white background with silence. There is something similar in European painting, for instance in Tizian, Tintoretto, Rembrandt and many minor masters, above all in the work of their later years. Here too everything that is being moulded into shape detaches itself only gradually from a dark background without ever being given solid shape by means of a sharp outline, always remaining attached to the background. The difference here is that the underlying surface in European painting is not white but warm and dark and often also mysterious. This difference obviously has deep roots in a whole attitude to life, though what this difference implies I dare not venture here to enquire.