

The habit of talking

The chief difficulty for most people, as it soon appeared, was the habit of talking. No one saw this habit in himself [sic]... because it was always connected with some characteristic which the man considered to be positive in himself... The struggle with the habit of talking, of speaking, in general, more than is necessary, could become the centre of gravity of work on oneself because this habit touched everything and was for many people the least noticed... If we limited ourselves to what is actually necessary, this alone would be keeping silence.

PD Ouspensky [1]

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I am interested in those habits we may not recognise or describe as such. Other actions that might less commonly be viewed as habits include listening, being attentive, getting angry, becoming jealous, and so on. Some of these habits are helpful, others less so.

From where does the '*habit of talking*' arise, and why? How might we break this habit if we so wished? Ouspensky highlights the importance and difficulty here, as it touches everything and is '*for many people the least noticed*'.

I came to notice the habit of talking while working as a teacher, both in my practice and in that of others. I found it helpful as a teacher to question whether what I was about to say was actually necessary.

This question filtered into my personal life. I found myself presenting too much of myself - or aspects of myself - in conversation, and still do. I am learning to *rest* in conversation, although if the other is not forthcoming there is still the urge to 'fill' the silence.

And then there is the inner conversation that is happening most, if not all, of the time.

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In another passage from *In Search of the Miraculous*, Ouspensky writes:

'Many people find it very difficult to refrain from expressing their feelings about bad weather. It is still more difficult for people not to express unpleasant emotions when they feel that something or someone is violating what they conceive to be order or justice... It is very useful to try to struggle with the habit of giving immediate expression to one's unpleasant emotions.'

Since reading this passage, I have become very aware of other people's 'expressions of unpleasant emotions' - particularly regarding the weather since moving to Orkney.

More importantly, I have become very aware of teachers readiness to express unpleasant emotions concerning the students they teach.

Setting oneself to notice this in others has made me more sensitive to my desire to express my own unpleasant emotions. Sometimes I have enough awareness to stop myself just before, or in the process of, moaning.

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There are many reasons for speaking. If we 'limited ourselves to what is necessary', what would we say? Beyond speaking for practical purposes, how might I decide whether what I have to say is necessary?

Two possibly relevant things to note about speaking are that it often feels as though we are speaking automatically, and that we speak with different vocabularies and intonations in different situations.

JG Bennett [2] suggests this is a result of having numerous *personalities*. Our personalities, which do most of our speaking - both externally and internally - are the selves that we have formed to function in the world, and are in contrast to one's *essence*, which is 'one's own'.

Diminishing the predominance of our personalities and allowing our *essence* to be heard may be what Ouspensky means by '*limiting ourselves to what is necessary*', and 'keeping silence'.

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Through breaking the habit of talking, we become more located in our essence, and a deeper connection might be possible: this is the premise of Quaker meetings.

In the quiet of a Quaker meeting, people may be moved to 'minister' (speak). This presents the question of whether to minister, and plenty of time to consider one's reasons for doing so.

George Gorman [3] suggests members of a Quaker meeting should ask questions of themselves before ministering, such as: '*Is the experience or idea I am about to share such that it will contribute to the sensitivity of the life of the meeting and help it reach an awareness of transcendence?*'

What questions might we ask ourselves before speaking in other situations?

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At certain events I have attended recently, there has been post-session reflection, in which participants gather in a circle and are invited to offer some awareness they have reached to the group.

As I think about what I want to say, my mind races and heart beats faster. Often I repeatedly rephrase what I am about to say, sometimes at the expense of not hearing what others are saying, thus defeating the object of the reflection. (This, of course, happens also in the normal course of conversation.)

There is always the conflict between really wanting to speak and not thinking what I have to say is of any interest to, or even comprehensible to, the others present. As I speak, I often become somehow unaware of what I am saying, perhaps because my attention is placed in what others are thinking of me and what I am saying.

I found a similar phenomenon when being observed as a teacher, an 'over-awareness' of (my interpretation of) the observer's perspective. This belief that others are judging me so critically must, I suspect, come from an overly critical judgement of others - even though I tell myself that I suspend judgement as far as possible.

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When speaking (and writing!), I have a strong sense of *wanting the approval of others* - some sign that they have found what I said interesting, or even just listened to what I said. Sometimes (just) a smile is enough for me to think what I have said has been well received. (Might we trace this smile back to the parent's smile of approval?)

The habit of talking, and many other habits which I have become aware of in myself, are, I feel, connected with the need, or what Gattegno [4] calls the *greed*, for approval:

The greed for approval, so prevalent in the world, is one of the distorters of everyday life that affects most of our societies, even though it sounds innocuous. Not trained at home and school to have inner criteria in areas where they actually exist, most people act with only one outside criterion in mind: approval from others. Every day, in many activities, the self accepts as normal what would be intolerable to a responsible self at work, and it merges with the psyche in (1) waiting for approval before taking further steps, and (2) making approval a prerequisite for happiness.

To free a person from this calamitous situation, the self, with the help of wiser selves if they are available, must act on its expectations, starving them one by one while generating inner criteria where they exist, and must receive feedback from reality rather than from people. It is a long but not impossible road: the lessons learned on travelling it may extend beyond the limited scope of each exercise and help the self to become freer more rapidly in other areas of behaviours as well. (If I were to give assistance in this area, it would be by providing exercises in which the self concentrates on finding the criteria that make a person capable of approving, so that one becomes the approving master as well as the expectant apprentice.)

Upon reading this, as with reading much of Gattegno's writing, we are left with more questions than answers, most notably: *What are these 'inner criteria', and what exercises might help me to find them?*

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I started this piece of writing by questioning the 'habit of talking', which identified the need for approval, and has led to further questions concerning 'inner criteria'. As we begin to question ourselves, other questions reveal themselves.

How might we, practically, start work on answering these questions?

The first step in this case might be to observe the need to talk arising in oneself, and the various personalities we present when doing so, with as much honesty and as little judgement as is possible. Gattegno describes this as observing the energy within:

Anyone who becomes acquainted with this energy and its movements learns to follow it, to meet it settling into places or in movement from place to place...

After studying these inner movements it may become more clear how to re-direct the energies we use for talking, 'starving' those habits that are unnecessary or unhelpful.

As for inner criteria, I suspect they will be revealed along the way, as suggested by the poet Maria Rainer Rilke [5]:

Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves... Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given to you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.

References

[1] PD Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*

[2] JG Bennett, *Talking: Sherborne House Themed Talk, 26 November 1973*

[3] George Gorman, *The Amazing Fact of Quaker Worship*

[4] Caleb Gattegno, *On Being Freer*

[5] Maria Rainer Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*