

## Chapter 11

# Conversing confidentially on our challenges: two practitioners reflect on their experiences of confiding themselves in conversation

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### Abstract:

Confidential conversation on one's existential and ethical issues is an ancient practice of philosophy and a modern technique of psychology. However, studies by practitioners on their own experiences of confiding themselves in conversation are rare. In this unique study, two philosophical counsellors and professors of philosophy reflect on their experiences of seeking to deepen not only their understanding of themselves but also their understanding of understanding ourselves in confidential conversations. The chapter proceeds from their experiences of confidential conversations to reflections on those experiences and assessments of related research on confidential conversations. It shows that conversing confidentially involves a mutual mood of sharing private matters in private manners. Conversing confidentially is neither “inner” nor “outer,” but behaviour expressive of being confidential. This chapter is significant not only for understanding confidential conversations and training in conversational professions but also for understanding ourselves as human beings.

### Keywords

confidentiality; understanding; conversational therapy; psychotherapy; counselling; philosophical practice.

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## **Confidential conversation**

Both of us are honoured to host confidential conversations with people on their existential and ethical challenges each week. We also have the privilege to train healthcare professionals and, especially, to supervise prospective philosophical counsellors in confidential conversation each year. We are ourselves philosophical counsellors and professors of philosophy, and we too have our challenges in life and living. But what enables us all to confide in another with the challenges to our existence and ethos? That is not easily answered. There are many studies on the relation between those talking about private matters in private manners (e.g. Wampold, 2015; Flückiger, Del Re, Wampold, & Horvath, 2018) and on the training for conversational professions (e.g. Boele, 1995; Fydrich & Fehm, 2018; Murphy, Irfan, Barnett, Castledine, & Enescu, 2018; Raabe, 2014, p. 231-259; Rocco, Gennaro, Filugelli, Squarcina, & Antonelli, 2019; Svare, 2006), including a few on the trainee's mandatory counselling and the practitioner's continuing counselling for personal and professional development (e.g. Kumari, 2011; 2017; Orlinsky, 2022, p. 148-167). But in contrast to the last decades of research establishing the preeminent role relational factors have on outcome, most training programs continue to emphasize specific treatment models (De Bei, Rocco, & Salcuni, 2019), and there are hardly any studies by practitioners themselves on their own experiences of confiding themselves in conversation (though there are brief exceptions in e.g. Yalom, 1980, p. 44-45; 2010, p. 41-42; 2017). There is role play in training, but not personal and professional reflection on the practice of entrusting oneself in conversation. That is what we need.

In order to better understand ourselves, those that guest our practices and those that study with us, we two regularly talk privately with each other on issues in our lives and living. This chapter builds on two years of meeting almost every week on a digital platform. Each session lasts for at least ninety minutes, and on every other occasion we exchange positions. During the first sixty minutes, we enquire together into a personal challenge that one of us presents, and during the last thirty minutes, we talk about our talking. We exchange confidences on issues such as aging and death, loneliness and fellowship, conduct and character, virtue and vice, meditation and action, anxiety and tranquillity, parents and partners, work and leisure, identity and convention, the perishable and the imperishable. Although our cooperation seems unique – not to say special – both in terms of conversational professionals and fairly grown-up boys conversing confidentially, this practice allows us to reflect on ourselves, on our own conversational experience and on those of others when talking about existential and ethical issues.

Thus, “Talk for you is good discipline,” as a rather severe Lady Reason says to Lucy Snowe in Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette* (1853 II. xxi).

In this chapter, we call what we do confidential conversation. We do so in order not to use technical terms associated with theories – such as psychotherapy, conversational therapy, counselling, philosophical practice and so forth – but to use colloquial terms associated with practice.<sup>2</sup> For to converse and to be confidential are not theories but practices: not what we do after an exam but what we grow up into. For instance, Elizabeth Gaskell charmingly describes our human practice of confidential conversation in *Wives and Daughters*: “Molly took her little griefs and pleasures, and poured them into her papa’s ears, sooner even than into Betty’s, that kind-hearted termagant. The child grew to understand her father well, and the two had the most delightful intercourse together – half banter, half seriousness, but altogether confidential friendship.” (1866 III) Perhaps our ordinary use of “conversation” was best expressed already by the lexicographer Samuel Johnson: “To convey the thoughts reciprocally in talk.” In conversing, we speak in turn with regard to each other, communicating and interchanging what we care about. Here, conversation is akin to an interview, where people meet face-to-face to confer together. In ordinary life, moreover, we human beings converse confidentially. We converse confidentially when we tell private matters in private manners with someone we trust. The matters and the manners are closely personal, even intimate, and the conversation is private from the public and secret from others. We feel confident to share our feeling, perceiving, remembering, thinking, imagining, acting and wanting, and with slight hesitation, talk boldly with little or no doubt in others of what stands against our life and living. So, whatever theories there may be of our practices, there could not be any such theories without those practices, and our theories as well as our trainings will go berserk with us unless we stay in touch with what we are practicing. We human beings practice confidential conversation in order to humanely handle ourselves together.

We can deepen this understanding of our practice by attending to the extensive vocabulary that surrounds it. For to briefly survey this is to clarify the human life and living it expresses. Let us plot the practice with our verbal, adverbial, adjectival and substantive constructions. To confide is, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, to trust, have faith and feel assured enough to speak or write secrets and communicate in confidence.

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<sup>2</sup> We assume but do not argue in this chapter that existential and ethical issues are not as such issues of health or illness. We believe though nothing depends on that in this chapter.

Thus, Molly pleads with her father to trust her whereabouts, and Lord Hollingford confides to Molly “his reluctance at having to dance at all.” To confide is to take a person into one’s confidence and converse confidentially with the other, namely, to communicate matters of intimacy in manners of place, time, person, and demeanour. So, the old butler Robinson speaks “confidentially” to Osborne separately about his father’s improper anger. To confidently communicate confidentially is also to converse in confident ways, namely in assured, trusted or bold ways, as Molly and Mrs. Hamley tell each other secrets. For one is bold to share because one trusts the other, and a person of confidence is a trustworthy person – someone in whom one has confidence, namely, trust, reliance or faith. We use then confidence both subjectively of the one confiding, trusting, relying on and feeling sure or assured, and objectively of the person who gives confidence, its object or ground, from which arises assurance, boldness or even fearlessness. Consequently, “confidence” is used both of the relation of intimacy or trust between persons and of the matter communicated between them, and both conversations and persons to whom secrets are entrusted are called “confident.” But the many adjectives and adverbs signifying relative degrees and intentions of confidence – confident, confidently, confidentially and confiding – are nearly unsurveyable. Yet, all these interconnected uses express the importance of trust in human relations and the need for confidential conversation of private matters in private manners.

In this chapter, we also use everyday terms for us that converse confidentially. In everyday conversations, one person often confides in another person, so that one receives and entertains in private manners the private matters of the other. Professional conversations adhere to this everyday practice as one hosts the conversation and the other guests the conversation. Since we aim to engage the subject matter on equal terms in fellow enquiry, we do not dub the other “patient”, “client” or even “confidant” but “guest”, and label ourselves accordingly “hosts” of the confidential conversation. Just as we attribute the leading of the orchestra to the guest conductor and the performance of the piece to the guest soloist, so as hosts we honour the subject matter of guests in fellow enquiry. Although there is an asymmetry between the receiving of the host and the being received of the guest, we pursue symmetry in conversing about the entrusted topic. This enables not only the challenge of the guest to be entertained by the host but enables us also to change position every other conversation.

The following chapter is devoted to our practice of exchanging confidences with each other. (The next chapter deals with self-reflection through expressive journaling (Rehman, 2023).) Scholarship on confidential conversations typically focuses on legal issues of (not) disclosing

classified information (e.g. Mosher & Berman, 2015; Sommers-Flanagan, 2015, p. 135-159; Tantam, 2002, p. 111-114, p. 287-295) rather than on personal issues of furthering entrusted cooperation. For instance, one guidebook maintains that “confidentiality is of utmost importance” but does not hint at how it occurs and is maintained (Eichler, 2010, p. 23-24, p. 36-38), while another starts on “confidence and trust” and then quickly devotes the chapter on confidentiality to legal issues (Willer, 2014, p. 103).<sup>3</sup> In this chapter, we instead begin with a section where we proceed from our invaluable experiences of conversing confidentially on each other’s life and living or (in the jargon that may mislead us from what is at stake) existential and ethical issues. In the next section, we continue to reflect on those relevant experiences in order to understand our practice more thoroughly. The telling of our experiences of confidential conversations shows that our reciprocate behavioural manifestations, including verbal ones, facilitate our being mutually confidential in conversation. We end with a section that relates our reflections on our experiences to experimental research that would account for confidential conversations in terms of an “inner” ability behind the “outer” behaviour. Our reflective practice shows that being confidential is neither “inner” nor “outer” but expressive behaviour, including verbal behaviour, in relation to one another. This makes a unique and important contribution to understanding confidential conversation, training in the practice of confidential conversation, and understanding ourselves as human beings. Thus, our experiential and conceptual investigations will not only improve but also inspire further developments for conversing confidentially on existential and ethical issues.

## Relating Experiences of Confidential Conversation

In this section, we seek to recount some particular personal experiences that we deem typical of our confidential conversations. Here we use “experience” broadly for what we felt, perceived, thought, remembered, imagined, acted and wanted in our personal dialogues with one another. Experiences entail experiencers, and thus we begin with the experience voiced by the guest and continue with the experience voiced by the host, since we assume that the voices collaborate for the sake of the former. We

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<sup>3</sup> Willer explains that emails, social media and public places are not “confidential” and counsels that “clients [can] feel more comfortable and confident in their work with you if you can make a few minor and inexpensive adjustments to the office environment.” (Willer, 2014, p. 83, 89, 97, 27). This seems to us to express a rather shallow understanding of being confidential.

relate experiences both of what we wanted to achieve and what we did not want to achieve in our confidential conversations. Since we write confidentially about what we said confidentially, we omit details and organize the section around what we did and underwent as guest and host alike in conversation. We use pronouns in this section irrespective of which of us or both of us they point to beyond our telling. We do not pretend that the story exhausts our experiences, but we aim to express the essential meaning of some of our experiences in apt words.<sup>4</sup>

As guest, I talk in various ways. Mainly, I fumble for words. For instance, I have this grave experience of aging and can foretell that something unsaid needs to be said but cannot foretell what it is. I grope about increasingly becoming aware of my signs of old age and the end of my life, and of near and dear falling ill and dying unexpectedly or expectedly. I need to tell something about myself, my desires and worries in my circumstances, but my experience is complex and unclear. My words for growing old hint at and give me an inkling that something else is at stake, but I cannot yet express the particulars. Pausing, it dawns on me that when everything and everyone perishes, I am lonely, but also that in the experience of loneliness, there is the experience of continuity, and that in my aging, something does not perish. I acknowledge continuous aims and achievements in my life; I recognize the experience of the imperishable, particularly in meditation, and I realize that this is a difficult religious theme I have never spoken about before. This is the unsaid that had to be said. I did not know where the telling was going and do not know where it will end; I only knew where to begin, or almost. I dare tell and enter into my story; I dare to present myself and be present in the telling, when I experience that you dare to listen attentively, be sincerely moved and respond openly to my story. This experience gives me courage to stumble towards answers for my questions, partly through talking and exploring, partly through remaining still and silently pondering what I have said and what I have not said, partly through breathing and reflecting on your brief but rare contributions. Thus, I talk confidently and confidentially.

As host, I talk in various kinds of ways. I express what I understand of and feel for you by attuning myself to the telling of growing old. Perhaps I most frequently utter what I feel or understand of what is coming to expression with “m-m”, “oh?”, “hm”, “ah!” or “I see” between your utterances. To bring out the sense of your experience, I briefly restate what

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<sup>4</sup> We have talked about writing twelve thick volumes under the title *The Truth*, but we have come to our senses by thankful remembrance of Laurence Sterne’s *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*.

I heard either in your own formulations or in my own formulations when they seem to clarify the issue, but I always want the wording to be suited to your goal and our fellow enquiry. I repeatedly ask to pursue further meanings of aging, continuity and imperishability, and ponder occasionally the suffering and dying of near and dear to enlarge upon particulars in order to elucidate the essence of your subject. Sometimes I divide parts of the experience of aging that I think may be fruitful to explore separately or suggest opposites and/or add further alternatives, but I always allow you to decide what to develop. To explicate and elaborate your experience, I ask after a while whether I may share a personal experience, but, although my experience of illness was not conducive to your exploration, you say that it allowed you to breathe and reflect as well as to experience participation and fellowship. In all our ways of talking, I seek to dwell on the immediate and specific, clarifying and deepening the particulars of your story with the generalities of philosophy, history, art and literature. I conceive asking and wondering to be the verbal form of openness and receptivity, so that you can articulate yourself in fellowship. Thus, I explore with you private matters in private manners.

As guest, I feel variously about our confidential conversation. Most basically, I feel welcome being allowed and not disallowed to tell my story of growing old. But my feelings are mixed, not only in that I am more comfortable and cognizant with some than with others, but also in that there are different kinds of feeling and that one kind may sometimes change into another kind. Most of what I feel concerns what I experience of our conversation and of ourselves. I would not converse confidentially unless I felt the setting secure, but I go through a lot more in our trusted talk. Occasionally, conversing about aging, loneliness, continuity and imperishability, amazes, confuses, delights, disconcerts, discomfits, disturbs, excites, surprises, thrills or unsettles me, and such kinds of feelings may hinder me from saying what I want to say. But another kind of feeling is more common: hope in getting to understand myself and my experience better; glad or relieved in being received; fear of losing your or my own esteem; worry over my coming loneliness; gratitude for your attention; embarrassment of my ignorance; pride in my achievements; and shame or guilt for impatience with others. Still further, I feel cheerful, irritated, jolly, confident, bored or serene by our exchange over age, illness and death, and dejected by my circumstances or collecting myself in setting words to my challenge. Yet, I know I am welcome, since I do not fear that my story will be resisted but venture in the hope of being supported. So, my feelings as guest in a confidential conversation are diverse between hesitation and determination, and diverging between what hinders me, what I value and

do not value, and what pervades my mind. They divide primarily into agitations, emotions and moods.

As host, my feelings take many forms when and where we meet, greet and seat. Overall, my feelings are ambiguous: I experience one kind as disturbances, another as values and another as suffusions, and these kinds may blend. For example, in talking of meditation, I suddenly become distracted by recalling the composed posture, mild face, tranquil gesture and keen eyes of – what? Well – Mona Lisa. Else I feel honour, joy, embarrassment and humility in conversing of aging, but also shame that I may be presumptuous or conceited of suffering and dying. I worry that I may not live up to your confidence but feel reverence for the lives we embody. I am confident that silence may speak to us and desire us to trust stillness for our topic. I am ashamed when I hear that you expect me to know what I do not know, and while I strive to stay with your communication, I realize a bit of vanity, that I fear or hate not to live up to the expectations of my age and profession but feel simultaneously honoured in being entrusted. Sometimes I feel bored, irritated or discomforted; sometimes jovial, pleased, excited, comfortable or uncomfortable. In all these kinds of feelings, I want to be true to myself, so that you can be true to yourself. To receive and become receptive of you, of myself and of our lives that are coming to expression, I briefly meditate before sessions in order to receive your challenge, representing confidence and courage in seeking to experience what is at stake. In case you do not dare to tread the path of the subject, we will pursue it together for the broadest possible experience by allowing your expressions to make impressions on me. So, my feelings as host of confidential conversations also contain agitations, emotions and moods.

As guest, my experience of talking about aging, continuity, loneliness and imperishability takes many forms of expressions. Being received and accepted, I feel less tense: eyebrows relax, gaze becomes steadier, breathing deepens, (possible) throbbing weakens and hands tend to sweat less. When I am cheerfully conversing, I calmly fold my hands in lap or open my arms in delight, lean slightly forward with smiling face, talk with clear tone, full volume and firm speed of utterance. Occasionally, I slightly blush, smirk shyly or purse my lips hesitantly, and my voice becomes unsteady in embarrassment and/or shame of my topic. I am hardly aware of this at first, but when I attempt to cover, the feeling only increases and that unsettles us. But on other occasions, I become conscious that in bracing myself, my joy takes the form of a smile or a light tone of voice, and that encourages me. My joy also seems to be infectious on you, or I see you sharing my joy in your smiling face, swaying the upper part of your body and exclaiming, “Ah!” When I hear you point out the sight of my insight in

moistened eyes and relaxed or lit up face, then tears fill my eyes, my voice sounds delight or my entire face smiles. My talking relies on whether your expressions sincerely agree or not. All these bodily demeanours express that I converse confidentially.

As host, my experience of conversing takes many forms of expressions. I am attentive and eager to be open to what you will express, so I sit with open hands in lap, and with an encouraging smile, I lean slightly forward, bend head somewhat to shoulder, lightly raise neck, seek to meet your eyes in mild expectation and await your talking. If I see you hesitate about death, I nod reassuringly, part my lips as if to encourage you to do the same in speech, but if not, I ask gently with clear tone what you would like to share here now. While we talk, I seek not to interfere in the telling on dear ones and allow your expressions make impressions on me, so that I can appropriately support you in raised eyebrows of curiosity, open mouth of wonder, cheeks pressed together in pity, hearty giggle, nodding or shaking head, open arms of delight, shown palms of prompting, jaws dropped in astonishment, and so forth. When I feel we must sort out misunderstanding on the imperishable, I may raise my index finger or in surprise, open my hands to talk with keen eyes and humble voice. I share your joy of self-understanding with tilted face, confident smile and warm tone, but may also yawn with the boredom of experienced repetition. In all this, I show that I am receptive and responding to our confidential conversation.

In this section, we have related some of our typical experiences in confidential conversing. To converse confidentially is daring to take on the challenge of entrusting another with what stands against one's life and living. Talking about private matters in private manners takes multiple expressions. We fumble and rumble for words in exchanging confidences on existential and ethical issues; we may feel diverse agitations that may hinder our conversations; many emotions of what we value or do not value in our conversations; various moods evoke during our conversations, and we show this in our verbal and bodily behaviour in profuse ways. During our dialogues, our respective bodily and verbal expressions, together with our feelings, are our mutual doing and undergoing. Thus, our fellow enquiry into existential and ethical issues embodies confidentiality.

## **Reflecting on Experiences of Confidential Conversation**

In this section, we seek to learn from our personal experiences of confidential conversation. We reflect on our experiences in order to improve our practice, becoming better at conversing confidentially by reflecting on our confidential conversations both as guests and hosts. We reflect on

three themes that emerge from our experiences by elucidating the concepts involved. This section proceeds from reflections on the concept of confidentiality over the concept of receptivity to the concept of idiography in these conversations. Thus, we further reflective practice.

We begin to reflect that we are confidential together. It is generally assumed that in existential and ethical conversations, the guest confides in the host, but we take it that the host also confides in the guest. Although the conversations are of course confidential for the sake of the guest, we experience that they are also confidential on the part of the host. We hardly need to reflect on the guest being confidential in disclosure to the host, but a little reflection shows the host being confidential as well. For the host is receiving the secrets of the guest in the belief that the other is sincere, is working to enable the guest to be sincere with himself and is (occasionally) sharing some private matters of his own in order to strengthen the guest in conversation as well as challenge. If the host would discover pretension, insincerity or even dissemblance in the guest, then the host would be wounded, saddened, deceived or angry, and that would undermine or even destroy the host's confidence in conversing with the guest. The guest primarily becomes and remains confident that the host is able to receive private matters in private manners, but the host trusts that the challenge of receiving the other's challenge is not apparent but real. Although they may not comment on their mutual confidentiality in the topic of conversation, the reciprocity in being confidential affects them both. So, the conversation is confidential both on the part of the guest and on the part of the host. As we trust in each other, breach of confidence may not be one-sided.

What we both are confidential about in conversation seems, on reflection, to have (at least) three constituents. Perhaps we predicate the meaning of "confidential" essentially to the meaning of "conversation" in three interconnected ways: we are confidential *of* our conversation, we are feeling confidential *in* conversing, and we are confidential *for* our own sake in conversation. We will proceed to reflect on each of these constituents in our confidential conversations and elaborate on the state of those conversing confidentially.

In our common everyday practice, we obviously predicate "confidential" of "conversation." We attribute the adjective "confidential" to the noun "conversation" as the source or possessor of confidentiality. What one encounters in the presence of another ensures one that the conversation is, can be or become confidential. Yet it may not need to be anything in particular that makes the conversation confidential. For it must not be one's doing *this* or undergoing *that* or the other's doing *this* or undergoing *that* that makes the conversation confidential. For instance, although one

may have the secure setting, the other's welcoming posture, friendly mien, encouraging gesticulations or supportive utterances and/or one's own relaxed posture, composed mien, easy gestures, firm utterances, changes of confidences and so forth as one's object, it need not be anything special that keeps the conversation confidential. The conversation rather remains confidential by all our mutual doings and undergoings (at least) during it. We are grasped by the experience of everything that is given to us and the conversation as a whole shows itself to be confidential. This does not mean that the object of confidentiality is general but that the experience of confidentiality is general. It is what the conversation as a whole means to us through or throughout – or even before and after – that makes it confidential. Confidentiality is rather the tenor than the object.

However, not only are we confidential of the conversation, but we are also being confidential in conversing. The phrase “confidential conversation” may lead us to assume that there is a thing named “conversation” that is the source or possessor of confidentiality. Yet it is not the conversation but *we* that are enjoying, feeling or being confidential in conversing. Our being confidential is manifest in various ways. For instance, we believe we can trust and entrust one another with our secrets, are inclined to openly pursue them and enjoy enquiring together. We feel confidential by each other's apt responses, we sit straight but not tensed, our faces are light, eyes warm, voices strong, we are conscious of and rely on our capabilities. We are being confidential in what we feel, perceive, think, remember, imagine, do, want, in short, in everything we experience. It is each other's behaviour, including verbal behaviour, that inspires confidence, and our confidence and confidentiality are shown in the ways we are conversing in our mutual doings and undergoings. Being confidential is not strictly predicated of the conversation but of those conversing since there cannot be a conversation without those conversing. We are being confidential in mutually hoping and feeling confident that the fellow enquiry responds seriously to an existential or ethical challenge. So, we tune confidently into the confidential conversation by attending to how we are affected.

We need, third, to reflect on why we are being confidential in conversing. All human beings face challenges to their life and living, and many meet those challenges by talking with another. Although it is challenging to confide another with one's secrets, one converses in order to deal with one's life and living. For we are being confidential of our conversations mounting challenges. We entrust each other with our aging and death, loneliness and fellowship, conduct and character, virtue and vice, meditation and action, anxiety and tranquillity, parents and partners, work

and leisure, identity and convention, the perishable and the imperishable, and so forth. These are all challenges to our lives and living, but the conversation shows why we can be or are being confidential. Our reciprocal doing and undergoing makes us confidential that we can surmount not only the challenge of sharing challenges but possibly also surmount the challenges themselves. Our existence and ethos are at stake in the issues of the conversation, and we are or become confidential for our existence and ethos, namely confidential for ourselves. That we are being confidential of the conversation for our own sake can be elaborated in two ways.

First, one is especially being confidential for one's own sake because one is enabled to tell one's own particular story. One is not confidential of general issues in general circumstances. Rather, one talks of one's private matters in private manners in order to better understand one's life and living, that is, one's particular person with one's particular experience in one's particular situation. One is or becomes and remains confidential when and where one is allowed to dwell on one's particulars in one's own ways, and the other dwells on one's particulars in one's own ways. For example, one is not confidential for one's own sake because many people struggle with aging, but because we venture to explore my aging on my terms. One is not confidential because all humans perish and desire what is imperishable, but because we two dare to dwell on my experience of the perishable and the imperishable. For one is then assured of the importance of one's subject and hearing one developing that as one may not have developed it earlier to an attentive respondent increases that assurance. It is important to hear oneself and be heard by the other, to experience that we both dare to ask what is at stake for one and describe one's particulars without being explained in general terms. So, one is confidential for one's own sake because one feels that we are mutually answerable to account for one's particularities in their particularities.

Second, one is especially being confidential for one's own sake because of how the other receives and responds to one's particular story. We experience that we need to talk and make the other part of the talking, not to be explained and cleared, but to express and hear ourselves as well as to be heard, namely, to encounter the other's conduct in entertaining and answering one's telling. We are being confidential for our own sake not just by the other's words, but also by his intonation, mien, gestures and postures. For instance, the other's warm eyes when telling of my sorrow, the other's raised brows when telling of my mother's tenderness, and the other's half-open mouth when telling of my relations. The other expresses he understands and feels with one in his postures, gestures, mien, eyebrows, gaze, lips and words. We are confidential in ourselves by this responsiveness and receptivity that

embodies the other's embedded understanding of and feeling with one's story. One is being confidential for one's own sake by how the other takes in and meet with one's telling.

So, we are confidential for ourselves in the conversation as a whole because of our mutual response to our particular topic. We feel confidential generally in conversing and mean that the entirety of the conversation is confidential. Perhaps our confidence underlies all our doings and under-goings, including the words that we use. We can elaborate on this tenor of our confidential conversations and note several characteristics. Our confidential conversation is not momentary but lasts for a while. We may feel confidential in conversing now, were conversing an hour ago, or will be conversing next week. This may last for weeks or months. Yet, to converse confidentially not only takes time but also changes over time. Our confidence in conversing may moreover be strong or weak and may grow or diminish. We would not enter confidential conversation unless there was a degree of confidence, and we would not continue the conversation without a degree of confidence. But as long as we are confidential, we are inclined to converse. Saying "I feel for talking" to oneself or the other does not give one a reason for talking or one's reason for talking but expresses one's inclination and inclines one to talking rather than not talking. This inclination to converse confidentially shows itself in our facial and vocal expressions, and our manifest inclination to converse lasts as long as we are confidential and is as strong as our degree of being confidential. Thus, the tenor of our confidential conversations may be called a state or frame of mind.

Conversing confidentially is a state or frame of mind in that it is both conscious and pervasive. We are not confidential of our conversing when we are asleep or drowsy, but when and where we are alert, our confidentiality suffuses the conversation in the sense that it pervades us that converse. Although there are various forms of response in our experiences of conversing and we may each or both feel, say, tranquil or upset, cheerful or morose, jovial or bored, irritable, dejected or relaxed, the responsive experience that we mutually want to attune (at least) during a conversation is obviously confidential. We are affected by what we have felt or are feeling, what we have perceived or are perceiving, what we have thought or are thinking, what we have remembered or are remembering, what we have imagined or are imagining, what we have done or are doing, and what we wanted or wants, but confidentiality colours our entire experience. Feeling confidential may but need not have anything in particular as object in the conversation, and we show it in the private manners in which we share private matters, because our entire experience is affected at least through or throughout the conversation. Thus, our state or frame of mind, with our

lasting inclination to converse confidently as response to our experience, is a mood. We respond as guest and host alike to our experience of the conversation with a confidential mood.

In this section, we have reflected on our story of our fellow enquires into existential and ethical challenges. We have explicated conceptual connections to conclude that to converse confidently is to be in a trustful mood. For to converse confidentially is for a while to be affected and inclined to share private matters in private manners with a trusted other, and that which affects and inclines us for a while is a mood. We are affected and inclined to converse confidentially for the sake of mounting a challenge to our existence or ethos because of our mutual response to the particular topic. Our trustful mood may but need not have anything in particular in the conversation as object. It is what the conversation as a whole means to us through our mutual doings and undergoings. It is what we say and do or undergo together that maintains confidential conversation. It is not only our words but also our intonations, miens, gestures and postures that are confidential. Conversing confidentially is the outlook that prevails our fellow enquiry.

## **Researching Experiences of Confidential Conversation**

Our experiences and reflections above show that we mutually converse confidentially on questions raised by our life and living. In this section, we wonder how we account for our becoming and remaining jointly confidential in existential and ethical conversation. We relate our reflections on our experiences of confidential conversation to the experimental theories that predominate among colleagues in conversational professions. Philosophical practitioners have hitherto paid scant attention to this (e.g. Raabe, 2014, p. 189-191), while experimental psychologists and psychotherapists standardly account for mutual feeling and understanding by an “inner” capacity behind “outer” behaviour. This “inner” ability to be confidential is either understood as the mind or as the brain. We thus arrive at two accounts in research related to confidential conversation, namely a theory of mind and a theory of mirror neurons. We argue in this section that these accounts misconceive being confidential into something “inner” behind “outer” conversation. We argue that conversing confidentially is neither “inner” nor “outer” but expressive behaviour. Thus, we clarify our practice of conversing confidentially on existential and ethical issues, and explain what colleagues have not understood or misunderstood of confidential conversation.

According to the first experimental account, the “inner” behind the “outer” behaviour is the mind (e.g. Premack & Woodruff, 1978; Frith, 2004;

Bateman & Fonagy, 2019).<sup>5</sup> The mind is our specific human “capacity to imagine that others think, feel, and suffer just as we do.” (Bateman & Fonagy, 2019, p. xvi) But minds are “inner,” the “emotions” and “understandings” of others are “hidden,” and so “we humans cannot know for sure” the mind of others (Bateman & Fonagy, 2019, *passim*). Instead, we infer that others have minds, and such “mentalizing” or set of inferences is a “theory of mind.” Thus, “individuals can be aware of other people’s thoughts” and “feelings.” (Bateman & Fonagy, 2019, p. 373) One starts to “access” one’s “own internal and external states,” and then proceeds to “making inferences on the basis of the external indicators of a person’s mental states” (Bateman & Fonagy, 2019, p. 10). For example, when I am curious, my eyes are wide, when I am accepting, my brows are relaxed, and when I am considerate, my mouth is curved, so when his eyes are wide, he is curious, when his brows are relaxed, he is accepting, and when his mouth is curved, he is considerate. To be confidential, one must first be able to mentalize oneself, and then explain the movements of the other by one’s hypothesis that the other has a trustworthy mind. So, guests talk privately because they infer that hosts have thoughts and feelings, and hosts respond personally because they infer that guests have thoughts and feelings. In confidential conversation, adequate mentalizing provides the “link between inner and outer reality” (Bateman, Fonagy, & Campbell, 2019a, p. 327), enables “collectively agreed imagination” and “in turn makes human cooperation possible” (Bateman, Fonagy, & Campbell, 2019b, p. 73). By mutually mentalizing one another sufficiently, we are able to trust one another and converse confidentially. Thus, our theories of inner minds behind outer behaviour enable us to talk on private matters in private manners.

According to the second experimental account, the “inner” behind the “outer” behaviour is the brain (e.g. G. Rizzolatti, Fadiga, Gallese, & Fogassi, 1996; Giacomo Rizzolatti & Sinigaglia, 2016; Mathon, 2013; Shafir,

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<sup>5</sup> In opposition to “behaviorism” and in favor of “mentalism”, psychologist David Premack and primatologist Guy Woodruff first developed this account on chimpanzees and then extended it to all kinds of “higher animals”. Their now within psychological, behavioural, social and humanistic disciplines widely accepted theory of mind, they define as follows: “In saying that an individual has a theory of mind, we mean that the individual imputes mental states to himself and to others (either to conspecifics or to other species as well). A system of inferences of this kind is properly viewed as a theory, first, because such states are not directly observable, and second, because the system can be used to make predictions, specifically about the behavior of other organisms.” Premack 1978, p. 515; compare Call 2008.

2016).<sup>6</sup> “There is a growing consensus that addressing” brain processes such as mirror neurons is “a productive therapeutic approach.” (Willer, 2014, p. 379) Mirror neurons are nerve cells that discharge when one performs an action or perceives another performing the same or similar kind of action. “The discovery of mirror neurons provides a new empirically based notion of intersubjectivity” namely “shared neural circuits.” (Gallese, 2009, p. 523; similarly Gallese, 2011, p. 197) For instance, watching someone smile reassuringly, nod appreciatively or speak soothingly, “activates the same neurons of our brain that would fire if we were doing the same.” (Gallese, 2009, p. 522; Iacoboni et al., 2005; Tettamanti et al., 2005) It is likewise “thanks to our mirror neurons we reproduce” another’s “gesture in order to know it” (Gianni Falvo, 2018, p. xxxi). The mirroring mechanisms of our brains enable us “to share the meaning of actions, intentions, feelings, and emotions with others, thus grounding our identification with and connectedness to others.” (Gallese, 2009, p. 520) So, in conversing confidentially, we entrust one another with private manners in private manners because the same neural circuits in the premotor cortex mirror each other’s feelings, perceptions, thoughts, actions and intentions. One confides in the other because one’s neurons mirror the other’s being trustworthy, and the other’s neurons mirror one’s experience of being confidential. Thus, the brain knows that one can trust in and be confidential with the other.

Whether we account for the “inner” ability of confidential conversation in terms of the brain or of the mind, we will on both accounts maintain that the behaviour is “outer.” The “inner” can trust and be confidential, while the “outer” conversation happens to be connected to the mind or the brain. To those espousing theories of mind or mentalizing, bodily postures, manual gesticulations and facial expressions are “external states” or “external

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<sup>6</sup> Mirror neurons were first discovered by neurophysiologists Giacomo Rizzolatti, Vittorio Gallese and Leonardo Fogassi in the early 1990s. This type of sensory-motor cell fires in the macaque monkey premotor cortex both when the monkey performs an action and when it observes a similar action made by another monkey or by an experimenter Rizzolatti 1996. The theory was later extended to other species. “Mirror neurons are a distinct class of neurons that discharge both when individuals perform a given motor act and when individuals observe another person performing a motor act with a similar goal. [...] This statement becomes less surprising once it is acknowledged that the brain acts, first and foremost, as a planning and control system for organisms [...] what is common to all kinds of mirror-based processing is that they may provide a route to knowledge of others, one which can be taken just by capitalizing on one’s own motor or visceromotor representations.” Rizzolatti 2016

indicators of a person's mental states" (Bateman & Fonagy, 2019, p. 10, similarly p. 330), while to those espousing a theory of mirror neurons, they are "just bodily movements" (Giacomo Rizzolatti & Sinigaglia, 2016, p. 758) as observed movements of another are "devoid of meaning for the observer." (Gallese, 2009a, p. 520-1) The utterances, tones, mouths, brows, eyes, gestures and carriage of those conversing are external indicators to which the internal designates meaning. The movements are causally related to the mind or the brain, but in themselves, they are mere motions from which another can reproduce or induce that one is confidential in conversing. The conversation happens to be connected to the "inner" capacity, but the "outer" behaviour is best explained by feeling confidential. The exchanges of confidences are outer effects of inner causes.

However, these accounts of an "inner" ability of being confidential do not cohere. First, both commit the fallacy – already identified by Aristotle (Aristotle, *DA* 408b11-14) – of predicating to a part what can only be predicated to a whole. It does not make sense to affirm or deny the meaning of "confiding," "trusting," "knowing," "understanding," "feeling," "responding" and so forth to the meaning of "brain" or "mind" but only to the meaning of "human being." We would obviously neither talk secretly nor walk briskly without sound minds and functioning brains, but minds and brains do neither walk nor talk: humans do. One can neither truly nor falsely say that brains or minds trust or are confidential, since such predicates only make sense of human beings. Second, both accounts of the "inner" ability assume that the meaning of "confidential" can initially be associated with one's own "mental representations" and consequently be assigned to others – though this was shown nonsensical almost a century ago (Austin, 1946; Merleau-Ponty 1945, p. 213-241; Ryle, 1949; Strawson, 1959, p. 15-59; Wittgenstein, 1953a, §§243-315; Hacker, 2018, esp. p. 45-56, p. 93-97, to all of which I am indebted). One cannot be said to be able to predicate confidentiality to oneself beforehand and to others afterwards, since there can (logically) be no criteria of identity for and comparison of one's mental representations of being confidential with one's current experience of being confidential. Third, it does not make sense to ascribe a theory of mind to chimpanzees and four-year old humans, since they cannot formulate hypothetico-deductive inferences. Although a few adult human beings can formulate a system of inferences, they have not mastered a theory but a practice of using "trust" and "confidential" first for the behaviour of others and then for themselves. Fourth, there are no criteria for identifying *this* mind as trustworthy and individuating *my* mind from other minds being confidential, since nothing counts for what minds say, do or undergo and no grounds make sense of attributing trust or confidence to minds. Fifth, mirror

neurons could logically only explain being confidential with someone having been correspondingly confidential, but obviously one can be confidential with someone who has not confided the same, and one can respond to someone who is confidential without having oneself confided the same. Sixth, mirror neurons can neither account for our being confidential before nor after our conversations. They could logically only explain what one is presently perceiving, but neither being retrospectively nor prospectively confidential in remembering or imagining conversations. So, these conceptual confusions imply that neither theory of an “inner” ability of being confidential cohere. Rather our theories go berserk with our practice.

We cannot, moreover, say that conversation is merely “outer.” If our behaviour were barely “outer,” then it would be a facade of bodily movements for the “inner.” Yet, we readily use “confidential” for our conversations, since we see confidential postures, gestures and miens, hear confidential intonation, and understand exchanges of confidences. To be confidential is to express to another one’s feeling and thinking on private matters in private manners, and sincerely expressing one’s feeling and thinking *is* the feeling that is felt and the thinking that is thought. Expressions of confidentiality are, for instance, the guest’s hopeful face, candid gaze, sensitive brows, firm mouth, clear tone, striking gesticulations, and serious talking. In this context, utterances are not sounds but expressions of privacy, secrecy or intimacy; tones are not vibrations but manifestations of hesitation, decision or trepidation; giggles are not clatters but displays of mirth, worry or timidity; cries are not noises but exhibitions of delight, grief or pain; tears are not drops but revelations of joy, sadness or pleasure; brows are not aggregates of hair but manifestations of joy, sorrow, shame, anxiety or resolution; motions are not movements but expressions of anger, conciliation, impatience or resignation, and so forth. It is moreover the host’s behaviour in, for example, being adequately trained and tried, providing safe environments, appearing gently, gazing thoughtfully, smiling encouragingly, listening patiently, nodding reassuringly, winking knowingly, moving quietly, interjecting earnestly, asking solicitously, summarising carefully, paraphrasing rightly, and distinguishing readily that enables the guest to confide. In conversing confidentially, we both display what we feel and understand, and we mutually see, hear, remember, apprehend or imagine that we are being confidential. Our exchanges of confidences may evaporate, but we express, show and radiate confidence; we appear, look and sound confident, and our confidential alliance manifest itself. Our behaviours are not just bodily movements devoid or indicative of meaning, but real bodily manifestations displaying the meaning of being confidential with another. “The human body is the best picture of the human soul.”

(Wittgenstein, 1953b, 4.25) “For by behavior the body talks,” (Cicero, DE 3.59.222) None other than behaviour expressing confidentiality can logically be experienced.

So, conversing confidentially is neither “outer” nor “inner” but behaviour expressive of being confidential. This connection between the behaviour of conversing confidentially and the meaning of being confidential can be elaborated. Being confidential does not mean that one may both exchange confidences and not exchange confidences or may as well exchange confidences as not exchange confidences. We cannot say that being confidential may as well be shown in leaving the room, turning one’s back, insisting of only talking of the weather or not talking at all, as remaining in the room, turning to the other and sharing private matters in private manners. Nor could we say that we are equally confidential whether the other clenches teeth in anger and wrinkles nose in disgust or nods reassuringly and listens patiently. Conversing confidentially and being confidential are not connected as smoke may or may not indicate fire and clouds may or may not indicate rain. Rather, the behaviour of conversing confidentially manifests the meaning of being confidential. The behaviour of conversing confidentially is not accidental but proper to the meaning of being confidential. Although it is conceptually possible that some who are confidential do not converse confidentially, it is conceptually necessary that most who are confidential converse confidentially since otherwise the concept of being confidential would have lost its purpose. If no-one nowhere never were conversing confidentially, the word “confidential” would have no use. But being confidential, we properly converse confidentially, namely by showing, displaying or manifesting confidential behaviour, including verbal behaviour. Thus, the connection between confidential conversation with being confidential is not causal but conceptual, not inferential but intuitive, not empirical but semantical. Confidential behaviour, including talking, is what being confidential properly means.

However, using “confidential” of oneself and of another differ fundamentally. Although one first learnt the meaning of being confidential from the behaviour of others and then applied it to oneself, one expresses one’s own confidentiality but ascribes confidentiality to others. One’s own behaviour is not one’s ground for but expresses one’s being confidential, whereas experiencing another’s behaviour is one’s ground for the other being confidential. In a given conversation, the behaviours, including the verbal behaviours, of another, are constitutive criteria – logically or semantically good evidence – as opposed to inductive criteria for the other being confidential. So, we use personal predicates asymmetrically of ourselves and others. And thus, we may mistake the conversation of the other as

confidential when it is polite, self-deceived or dissimulated, but then the meaning of the behaviour is not confidential, and the behaviour shows this. Since we may mistake behaviours for confidentiality, we may (invalidly) conclude that behavioural manifestations of confidentiality and feeling confidential coincide; that we may infer, induce or project confidentiality of another. However, we fail in ascribing confidentiality to another not because the inference is improbable, but because the meaning of human behaviour is opaque. If one ignores this logical asymmetry of predicating confident, confidence and confidential to others and oneself, one may be tempted to assume that such predicates terms are used of an “inner” ability behind the “outer” ability.

The experimentalist misconceptions of the “inner” as well as the “outer” can partly be explained by the history of ideas. Any experimental research proceeds more or less reflectively from conceptions, and if it assumes misconceptions, then experiments are likely to be mistaken. The above conceptual confusions are accepted as empirical truths because of the enormous influence of the modern metaphor of consciousness as “inner” and body as “outer” (e.g. Descartes, 1644, 1.9-11). But most psychologists, psychotherapists and neuroscientists show themselves ignorant of their unfortunate heritage. For instance, David Premack studied philosophy under the positivists Herbert Feigl and Wilfred Sellars, and these together with W. V. O. Quine maintained that mental attributes such as trust and confidential are theoretical attributes – part of “folk psychology” – so that predicating such attributes to others presupposes an explanatory hypothesis (Sellars, 1956; Quine, 1960). This is a variation of George Berkeley’s theme in his analogical argument from one’s own mind to that of others (Berkeley, 1710, §115). Another trait in the Cartesian-Lockean tradition influences the theory of mirror neurons. Although Vittorio Gallese notes that “Lipps’s notion of *Einfühlung* closely matches Freud’s” and is “characterized in terms of inner imitation” (2009, 525), he seems ignorant that Lipps’s antecedence depends on his annotations to the German translation of Hume’s *Treatise of Human Nature* (Hume, 1739). This account requires that one imitate one’s own confiding as the other’s confiding while the other’s confiding is not one’s own confiding. Although the conceptual confusions of the Cartesian-Lockean legacy of experimental psychology have repeatedly been identified from its inception (Kierkegaard, 1844; Stein, 1922; Binswanger, 1962; Heidegger, 1987; Merleau-Ponty, 1945; Wittgenstein, 1980a, 1980b; Ryle, 1949, p. 301-311; Boss, 1957; MacIntyre, 1958/2004), the clarifications have sadly gone unheard generally. Inadequate reflection on the history of the ideas presumed by psychologists, psychotherapists and neuroscientists in their experiments explains

these conceptual confusions of causal connections between “inner” and “outer.” But we need not repeat the blunders of the past if we give up these Cartesian-Lockean misconceptions.

In this section, we have related our narrative of and reflection on our confidential conversations to predominant experimental theories. The standard account explains either the mind or the brain as the “inner” ability of being confidential behind the “outer” conversation. We have argued that this is not based on evidence but on misconception of both the “inner” and the “outer” since these notions do not make sense. For the “outer” is not facade and the “inner” is not hidden, but our conversations show our confidentiality. We know that conversing confidentially is neither “inner” nor “outer” but manifest behaviours. We need to bring theory back to the practice where we begin our research. The above narrative and reflection remind us of what we already know but forget when we are terrorized by theories.

## **Improving confidential conversation**

It takes courage to live. For we will not achieve some of our goods without boldly facing our challenges. We may deny or acknowledge our challenges, but if we acknowledge them, we may then either meet them on our own or with another. If we chose to confide in another, we face the additional challenge of perhaps losing the esteem of the other or of ourselves. Yet, by committing ourselves to another, we not only express ourselves but also experience the responses of the other, so that we can enquire together into the meaning of the experience and may gain deeper understanding than on our own. To exchange confidences means then to entrust and endure conversation about our common challenges in life and living. Thus, we commonly confide one another courageously.

This chapter establishes by reflective practice research that not only what we say but also what we do and undergo together enables us to confide our challenges. Our intricate interaction inclines us to inform one another of our intimate issues and our mutual expressive conducts embolden confidence and empower confidentiality. In practice, we do not misunderstand ourselves as “inner” minds or brains behind “outer” facades of our talking, but understand the confidential brows, lips, eyes, mouths, tones, gestures and words. All these express how we are affected and inclined to cooperate, and our shared experience enables, emboldens and empowers us to converse confidentially. Thus, trusting to talk together.

There are important implications for improving confidential conversation. We need further research into the practice of confiding ourselves in conversation. Predominant theories mislead us to misconceive ourselves as “inner”

and our conversations as “outer,” while our traditional practices are neither “inner” nor “outer” but expressive of our being mutually confidential. Yet, our expressive behaviour in exchanging confidences is commonly only partly voluntary. Although we, for example, console intentionally, we do not deliberately display most of our responses to another’s existential or ethical issues. Nor can we simulate or manipulate behaviour into confidential ones. So we need further practice research into the partly voluntary behaviour expressive of being confidential not only to better understand those that guest our practices and those that study with us but also ourselves. What is it to be increasingly receptive to our mutual experience and appropriately responsive insofar as these are voluntary? How good it would be if we all became more enabled to tackle our challenges in life and living together, being and becoming more receptive to the expressive mood of entrusting one another with our confidences. To give and take, to entrust and endure our fellow human challenges. Not judging but supporting one another, emboldening one another to be truthful and trustworthy. Guests would then become confident and confidential as hosts show themselves trustworthy by the expressive behaviour of their mood.<sup>7</sup>

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