

## **Communication in Silence: Conversations with Neville Symington.<sup>1</sup>**

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My conversations with Neville Symington felt like a joint inquiry into the nature of the psyche. Neville never spoke to me from a position of authority, nor has he ever lorded over me his training and experience as an analyst. He treated me as a peer, because he saw the psychoanalytic situation as being on a par with everyday life, and psychoanalysis as relating to ordinary experience. The ordinary was our meeting point, because the kind of philosophy I do is written in ordinary language and relies on real-life examples. The conversations took the form of noticing and naming a phenomenon, which Neville experienced both in psychoanalytic sessions and in everyday life. In the decade in which we had our conversations I acquired and adopted his original terminology of knowledge that becomes “alive” to a person, about a person’s “creative core,” and about “communication in silence,” which is the topic of this paper. He came up with these charismatic terms and they certainly took off, at least as far as I can tell, from meeting so many Sydney analysts who use them. Neville sought to understand the phenomena he named with these metaphoric and oxymoronic expressions in ordinary language and through examples – sharing his vignettes and keen to hear my own examples from my everyday experiences. Neville never settled on a theory of the phenomena that triggered and sustained his interest, always remaining curious and maintaining a sense of mystery and wonder about it.

So what did Neville mean by the seemingly contradictory term “communication in silence”? Somehow, I can have a thought in relation to a certain person, and that thought will have an impact on that person – which is connected in meaningful ways to my thought. So, my thought can be said to have been transmitted or communicated to another person, without saying it or using any intentional gesture or trying to communicate in any other way. I am going to divide the cases of communication in silence by their degree of mystery: the first is when communicating individuals are in the same space, or on the phone, or texting, that is, when the individuals in question have what the philosopher Hilary Putnam calls “information carrying causal connection”(2016); and the second is when these individuals are at a distance, with no such causal connection between them.

### Communicating in silence when in the same space

I have lots of examples of communication in silence with my boys. Neville always urged me: “Write them down!”. I try. Here’s one: I’m in the car with my 6-year-old boy, picking him up from aftercare. He’s in the back seat. I ask him: “how was your day?” and he gets very upset and starts screaming at me. I feel the anger mounting in me, and I feel like shouting back at him, but I don’t. I hold back my anger. I feel it, but I am not expressing it. It’s hard. And then a thought occurs to me – he’s been on his own, coping with social life, for 8 hours at school and then at aftercare. That’s a lot for a 6-year-old (it would be a lot for me too!). He quiets down, and then he says: “how many hours have I been away from you today mummy?” It seems that my thought calmed my son and as if processed his emotional state for him, a processing that he was then able to perform himself, or something like that. If it were only one such occasion, I would consider it a coincidence. But these sorts of scenes occur constantly.

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<sup>1</sup> Many thanks to David Macarthur and Paul Griffiths for their insightful comments.

Neville thought that communication in silence IS therapeutic, to use a term of which psychoanalysts might be skeptical. In his 2018 book, *The Growth of Mind*, the book he wrote during the time that I had known him, he says:

The oft repeated statement that interpretation is the agent of change in psychoanalysis is wrong. What can bring about transformation is the inner imaginative 'pictures' in one that transmits to the other.

Neville insists that what is transmitted is an "inner mental act." In one example, he recounts the story of Konard Lorenz, whose parrot would make a distinct sound when Lorenz was leaving the house, but would not make that sound if Lorenz was merely pretending to leave. Neville says:

It was the inner act to which the parrot responded not the outer performance. Konrad Lorenz said that the parrot must have picked up some small subtle clue that told it whether its master was or was not leaving the house. I don't think that Lorenz is right in supposing that the parrot was relying on a subtle clue but that it was the inner act that transmitted to the parrot.

How is something "inner" transmitted to another living being? We tend to suppose that for something to have any effect on something else, it would have to propagate somehow through some kind of medium. But the medium that Neville has in mind is hard to grasp, since it denies the individuality or the separateness of one individual from another. Those who partake in communication in silence "are in a shared communion, a shared medium, with each other" (*ibid*). By the way, Freud also believed that two people could share a thought, and Neville often spoke to me of Freud's article on Telepathy.

It is difficult not to ascribe to Neville mysticism at this point. I also indulge in mystical thinking from time to time. But my naturalistic commitments do not allow me to avow this mysticism, even if I am able to entertain it. In the rest of this paper, I am going to try to demystify communication in silence, while finding a way to accept its mystery. In that way, I hope to reconcile with skeptics who would otherwise dismiss the phenomenon altogether. The main point will be that we are not dealing exactly with an "inner" mental act. To avoid mysticism, I will endorse some form of empiricism, that is, some kind of reliance of our knowledge of others on the senses.

First, I want to say I think Neville is right that the parrot, or Neville's patients or my son, do not "rely" on subtle cues, as if there were a clear way to translate a piece of behaviour as the stable and repeatable expression of a certain thought. If such a dictionary were possible, we could have a science of such cues (and yet we don't), or at least we would be able to "read" our intimates accurately and reliably. Ordinary experience shows, however, that even our loved ones whom we know very well can surprise us and to some extent remain a mystery to us.

But we need not accept the behaviourist picture of an "inner" mind that is casually connected with "outer" behaviour. We may adopt, instead, a picture of the mind as embodied or expressed in behaviour and other bodily manifestations. What we pick up on is not a cue but what Wittgenstein calls "imponderable evidence." (PI Part 2. Section xi, 358-360.). It is imponderable because we cannot identify what it is in the behaviour of another that made us understand their thoughts. Furthermore, it seems

dogmatic and theory-driven to claim that a specific thought or an image that comes to my mind unbidden is expressed in some unique and individuated piece of behaviour. The picture of the mind as embodied remains vague and unexplanatory. It is not a theory of embodied expression or of how we can pick up on such expressions. It is just a way of seeing our capacity to “read” others as somehow depending on our senses. It is a vision of communication in silence as propagating through embodied causal connections. The picture of the mind as embodied leaves our capacity to “read” others – a capacity our experience shows we have – mysterious, though not mystical.

For a certain kind of philosopher, this mystery is acceptable. Ordinary communication is mysterious too. We, members of a certain linguistic community, utter noises at each other that we call words, and those words have public meaning. Somehow, we can all elicit the criteria of the application of a given word, and we don’t have to look at a dictionary to do it. Nor have we originally learnt the meaning of most of the words we know by reading a dictionary. Linguists and a certain kind of philosophers (formal semanticists) try to explain this mysterious communicative capacity. But so far there is not agreement on the matter. Unlike what Thomas Kuhn calls a normal science, there is not and there has never been an accepted paradigm of linguistics, and no predictive science came out of this study. And yet nobody doubts that we can communicate with words and understand each other.

Stanley Cavell describes our ordinary communication as agreement or mutual attunement. He cannot and does not care to explain this attunement. He uses metaphors to describe it:

[...] The idea of agreement here is not that of coming or arriving at an agreement on a given occasion, but of being in agreement throughout, being in harmony, like pitches or tones, or clocks, or weighing scales, or columns of figures. [...] [W]hile I regard it as empty to call this idea of mutual attunement ‘merely metaphorical,’ I also do not take it to prove or explain anything. On the contrary, it is meant to question whether a philosophical explanation is needed, or wanted, for the fact of agreement in the language human beings use together, an explanation, say, in terms of meanings or conventions or propositions which are to provide the foundation of our agreements. For nothing is deeper than the fact, or the extent, of agreement itself. ([1979]1999: 32).

Neville was a master of metaphors. In the face of phenomena such as those that he had the acuity to notice, he was able to put them in evocative words that could help us notice them too. There is no need to explain communication in silence. Nothing is deeper, to appropriate Cavell’s words about attunement, than the phenomenon of communication in silence itself.

### Communication in silence via action at a distance

Neville thought that communication in silence may occur when people are not in the same space. Yet in the history of Western thought, the idea of action at a distance has been regarded as incomprehensible, and whenever such a proposal emerged, thinkers have tried to explain it away (there are multiple examples in physics for such preference). Neville’s daring hypothesis was based on many experiences he had as an analyst. I couldn’t possibly tell Neville’s vignettes in the same way he did. Neville’s vignettes were nothing short of an artform, a kind of a story I would listen to like a child

with her eyes open wide and with full focus on Neville and his words. A tension would build up as he told the vignette, and then a revelation that was not cathartic, but a spark for a conversation and a challenge to the understanding.

Here is one: Neville describes a patient in his thirties that he saw for a few years, who lived with his mother. Neville knew very well he is not supposed to impose his idea of the good life onto the patient. During his training, his analyst, John Klauber, told him about another patient: "it's his life, not yours." But sometimes, Neville had a hard time living up to that ideal. He could not help but think that the patient should leave his mother's place already, as if waiting for that development to finally arrive. One day, a few days after a session, Neville was in a cab and suddenly, his knowledge of his training became "*alive*" to him. A thought suddenly occurred to him: "It's *his* life!" and he was able to let go of his expectation that his patient should leave his mother's place. The next session started with his patient's declaration that he is leaving his mother's place. Somehow, Neville hypothesized, his thought in the cab made an impact on the patient even if they had no way to get any input from one another through their senses.

But those of us who cannot accept action at a distance cannot accept that Neville's thought in the cab caused the patient's decision to leave his mother's place. If this were just one such occasion of communication in silence at a distance, we could dismiss it as a coincidence. Yet Neville experienced countless such occasions. Let me try and explain this phenomenon, at least partly, in a way that would appease the naturalists, namely those who reject the existence of supernatural phenomena, such as action at a distance. I am going to do so by reappropriating an insight from the philosophy of Leibniz. That is to say, I am not going to adopt any specific view of Leibniz, but I will borrow one of his philosophical moves. It will be a rather ironic reappropriation because Leibniz himself had a supernatural view of reality.<sup>2</sup>

Saying it all too briefly, Leibniz's metaphysics, known as the "monadology," assumes there to be no causal connection between matter and mind. According to Leibniz, then, the physical causal order is separate from the mental causal order. That is, physical stuff causes more physical stuff, and mental stuff causes other mental stuff. But the physical will not cause something mental and vice versa. So how can Leibniz explain pain, which is a mental phenomenon, following a pinprick, which is a physical phenomenon? We normally say that the pinprick caused the pain, but we cannot say that within Leibniz's metaphysics. Or how could we explain an arm being raised, which is a physical occurrence, following my decision to raise my arm, which is a mental occurrence? Normally we would say that my decision to raise my arm caused the relevant bodily movement. But in Leibniz's metaphysics, the mental and the physical do not causally interact. Leibniz, then, faces a similar challenge to the one we are facing with communication in silence. We need to explain how Neville's thought in the cab *seems* to cause the patient's decision to leave his mother's place even if in our world-view – if we are committed to naturalism, that is – it does not. Leibniz, too, needs to explain how one thing/event *seems* to cause another event if, in his metaphysical system, it does not.

Leibniz solves his challenge through the idea he calls "pre-established harmony." One event follows another in time, in a way that seems non-arbitrary to us, as if following some recognizable pattern of interaction or making some sense or another. But this "harmony" is not the consequence of a causal interaction between those two

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<sup>2</sup> Ironic but also appropriate since Leibniz was one of the first thinkers to theorize an unconscious.

things or events. Rather, Leibniz proposes, the way each separate and isolated thing behaves has been set from its creation to proceed in a certain trajectory, which is in turn harmonious with the trajectories of other isolated things. Each thing, let us call it, whether mental or physical, each “monad” or “soul” as Leibniz calls them, is simply following a necessary course of action that it was always going to follow. Instead of a causal interaction, what we have is a synchronization. In order to ensure that each of those independent trajectories of each of these isolated things will operate in such harmony so that it will seem to us as if they bear causal connections with one another, Leibniz invokes God, who created all things in that manner. Here is how Leibniz put it:

What we call causes are only concurrent requisites.

Each of these souls expresses in its own manner what occurs outside itself, and it cannot do so through any influence of other particular beings (or, to put it a better way, it has to draw up [*devant*] this expression from the depth of its own nature); and so necessarily each soul must have received this nature – this inner source of the expression of what lies without – from a universal cause [*cause universelle*], upon which all of these beings depend and which brings it about that each of them perfectly agrees with and corresponds to the others.

I shall use Leibniz’s philosophical move without invoking a God that would have ensured that Neville’s and his patient’s thinking would proceed in complete independence and isolation from each other or from anything else in the world in such a way that it was necessarily destined to seem to us as if Neville’s thought in the cab caused his patient’s decision to leave his mother’s place.

Instead of talking about a pre-established harmony, I propose we think about an established and re-established harmony. Unlike a pre-established harmony that requires only one big causal event where the monads are created, a harmony that is established and re-established requires causal interactions from time to time between individuals that attunes them to one another. Neville and his patient were in such an established and re-established harmony when the relevant thoughts occurred. Each of them was experiencing an independent trajectory that was set prior to the occurrence of these thoughts. Whatever happened to Neville in the cab and to the patient between the sessions, was caused through a previous causal interaction, a communication in silence that occurred in the session that preceded these thoughts and plausibly in numerous sessions beforehand. Neville’s thought in the cab unfolded as a result of what happened in those causal interactions. The patient’s decision to leave his mother’s place occurred as a result of those causal interactions too. But Neville’s thought did not cause the patient’s decision.

The establishment and re-establishment of the kind of harmony people can enter through communication in silence requires long-term familiarity and plausibly an emotional connection. Such harmony is temporary, for people change and their habits of response and association come and go and change over time, and therefore it is always in need of synchronization and attunement through communication in silence, which nevertheless relies on “information carrying causal connections.”

Note that I have not actually explained what happened between Neville and his patient. I merely shifted the scene of interaction to the sessions, where they could

communicate in silence in the same space. What exactly happened? I cannot explain it. And why should I? If the phenomenon of communication in silence were characterized by regularity then maybe there would be a point in positing a hidden reality that would explain it, in the way science does when it explains physical phenomena that exhibit regularity. But the thoughts and images that are communicated in this manner are highly idiosyncratic and do not lend themselves to identifiable patterns. There is a certain kind of naturalist, the liberal naturalist, for whom a phenomenon that is not scientifically explicable is not any less real. A liberal naturalist rejects supernaturalism, but accepts non-scientific phenomena such as persons, art, norms, and values (e.g. Macarthur, 2017). Communication in silence is real and frequent and it has therapeutic effects. It is mysterious, since it is hard to track and we cannot explain it – but there is no need to suppose it is mystical.

But if we accept that communication in silence is the locus of psychoanalysis, as Neville claimed, then we would also have to accept that therapy is mysterious, just like the unconscious that it uncovers. Indeed, therapy itself turns out to be unconscious, not deliberate, or intentional. And this realization about the psychoanalytic process can also make sense of Neville's skepticism of psychoanalytic theories in general and of their application to specific cases in particular. Rather than explaining, Neville's method was what Wittgenstein recommends – to "look and see" (1953: ¶66). With his great powers of attention and creativity, Neville was able to describe the phenomenon and give us the tools to see it and to think about it creatively too.

Unfortunately, Neville died before I was able to share these thoughts about synchronization and harmony with him. I cannot divine how his original mind would respond to all this. But he knew that communication in silence happens to me all the time, with my boys, with my husband, and with my mother. And every time it happens, I think of Neville, and somehow, despite my commitment to (liberal) naturalism, I cannot help but think that he was right, that we are not fully individuated people. And when Neville was in his final hours and could no longer communicate, my husband and I were thinking of him, and I was hoping that he could feel our thoughts, somehow.

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ENDNOTES: