

Voice in Philosophy

Between Sound and silence. Reflections on the Acoustic Resonance and Implicit Ethicality of Human Language¹

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Blues is at the heart of voice. (Waldenfels 1993, 65)

Recent years have witnessed a significant surge of interest in the human voice and the acoustic, embodied nature of language from a wide range of different disciplines. Just to conjure for a moment the sheer breadth and variety of different disciplinary perspectives that seem to have discovered or rediscovered an interest in voice in recent years, we could talk about an attentiveness to vocality a) in the theories and methods of linguistics and conversation analysis, b) in literary theory, c) in cognitive science, d) in psychoanalysis, or of course e) in contemporary arts, theatre, performance and film.

Of course this list is by no means exhaustive and the voice in question is not the same voice under all these perspectives. Depending on the discipline or angle of study, various aspects of vocality are emphasized. Thus, from the point of view of linguistics and conversation analysis, it is above all the relationship between voice and the semantic level of communication, i.e. the semiotic character of vocality, which is of interest. Literary theory on the other hand tends to focus either on the uniqueness of an author's lyrical voice or, drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of polyphony or "heteroglossia" (Bakhtin 1994), that is, on the notion that a multitude of different voices resides within each voice, the multiple layers of vocality in a literary text are brought to the foreground.² And whilst cognitive science has underlined the fundamental role of the sounding voice—the subject's own as well as the voice of others—in the development of consciousness (e.g. Jaynes 1976), in psychoanalytic theory, the patient's voice is perceived as both a symptom and gateway to the unconscious insofar as an attentive ear may detect in its disturbances key clues to uncovering the traces of secret traumas buried below the surface of a patient's consciousness.³ Finally, within an artistic or theatrical context, a range of different qualities attributable to the phenomenon of voice are thematized or exploited in actual performance in manifold ways according to relevance. These qualities of voice range from its acoustic resonance, musicality, emotionality and 'eventness', i.e. the particular temporality of voice, its ephemeral and elusive presence, to its function as a spatial marker or as a vehicle for language (or text).

Although it is no doubt absurd to attempt to sum up or bring into resonance with each other all these different approaches to the phenomenon of voice, it is perhaps nevertheless possible to define a certain sense in which the various disciplinary perspectives share a common movement: a movement *away* from a focus on abstract meaning and text, *towards* an increased attentiveness to the embodied and acoustic nature of human utterance and communication. Indeed the voice comes into its own in all these different realms not just as a

¹ A version of this talk was published in *Theatre Noise. The Sound of Performance*, ed. Lynne Kendrick/David Roesner, Cambridge Scholars Publishing 2011, p. 57-69.

² For a recent edition dedicated to various perspectives on voice/vocality in literature, see Blödorn, Langer, Scheffel 2006.

³ Cf. Lagaay 2008a, 53-62.

mere carrier of linguistic meaning but as a ‘material’ in its own right, with its own substance, individual “grain” (Barthes 1977), and unique dynamic by which the physical, rhythmical, musical and individual character of spoken communication are perceivable. Thus, any thematisation of voice implies an attunement to the manner in which the voice is not just a transparent medium for language, insignificant in itself, but that in its very materiality a voice may clash with—i.e. disrupt, undermine, or comment on—the main propositional content of what a speaking person is saying. In this sense, the human voice may be revealed as having the potential to *show* what cannot be *said*. And it is also in this sense that the voice as a topic of interest for a multitude of disciplines may be considered as a gauge or marker of the ‘performative turn’ in the humanities.⁴

Performativity is at its core a philosophical term, coined as it was by J. L. Austin to underline the way in which language is not just used to identify pre-existent things in the world but that it also, and essentially, has the power to bring those things about, and thus to constitute, shape and change reality. Yet strangely enough, despite being a philosopher no one could accuse of lacking voice (there is an effusive theatrical vocal presence in Austin’s texts), and despite his recognition of the ritual dimension of performative language which implies a shift of focus from semantics proper to the role of embodied citation, i.e. vocality, Austin appears to have paid little heed to the actual role of voice in performative utterances. Yet surely, it is not just the words that a priest must utter in order for a baby to be baptised or for a couple to be wed that define the success of a performative ritual. The quality, tone and sheer presence of the voice that speaks the quasi magical words contribute equally essentially to the uncanny power of the (always intricately theatrical) performative event.⁵ The words, one could argue, are in a sense but empty placeholders for the voice in such ritualized, ceremonious practices. So it was with Austin and the question of performative language in mind that I originally came to ask: what of the place of voice in philosophy?

Tracing the place of voice in philosophy is a complex and confusing endeavour in which one is led to confront a host of seemingly contradictory perspectives and conclusions. There are several intertwining routes one can take. I want to describe three main pathways.

One route is to look for the place of tonality in philosophy, to consider the often tense relationship between *what* is said or written, i.e. what a particular philosophy explicitly stands for, and *how* it is said, i.e. what tone can be detected in the speaking/writing of a particular philosopher. Does a philosophy reflect its own tonality and is there a sense in which the voice – as meaningful sound - can be distinguished and even perhaps perceived to be saying something else, something slightly or totally different, than the main propositional content of the utterance it carries? Deconstruction and the reading/listening methods developed by Jacques Derrida have clearly sharpened our ears and made philosophers aware of the crucial difference between voice and language and the tendency of the voice to defy conscious rational control.⁶ At the same time it was also Derrida who pointed to a strong tendency within philosophy to do away with the parasitical element that

⁴ For a detailed description of this performative turn, see e.g. Lagaay 2001, Carlson 2004.

⁵ In May 2010 the news was announced in Japan of the first couple to be married by a robot – apparently ‘female’ - known as the i-Fairy. The fact that this news hit the headlines around the world confirms the initial assumption that performative acts can generally only be carried out by *human* voices. But it also raises and complexifies the question of what actually constitutes the performativity of a voice. For a recording of the iFairy in action, go to: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uguH2dN2uvE&feature=fvw> (last visited 1st Jan. 2011)

⁶ Almost any text by Jacques Derrida can be taken to demonstrate this, e.g. Derrida 1973.

could be associated with voice. He writes:

Isn't the dream or the ideal of philosophical discourse (...) to make tonal difference inaudible, and with it a whole desire, affect, or scene that works (over) the concept in contraband? Through what is called neutrality of tone, philosophical discourse must also guarantee the neutrality or at least the imperturbable serenity that should accompany the relation to the true and the universal.

Another pathway is to consider the place of voice in a particular philosophical system. Here it is a question of attending to what philosophers have explicitly had to say about voice, philosophers' words on voice. Given the metaphysical tradition of western philosophy and its quest to establish abstract, rational ideals over concrete phenomena and emotion, one might initially be inclined to assume that philosophers throughout the ages have tended to overlook—no, failed to *hear!*—the significance of the human voice beyond its mere function as a vehicle for language. Yet this is in fact quite blatantly untrue. A host of philosophers have shown keen interest, indeed at times an uncanny obsession, with the human voice and tonality of language. Quite contrarily to what one might expect, the physical and musical aspects of human vocality have in fact been very well perceived not only by Plato and Aristotle, but by philosophers throughout the ages e.g. Lucretius, Saint Augustine, Rousseau, Herder, Humboldt, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Levinas, Derrida and Agamben, to name just a few.

At least two general movements of thought can be identified that many philosophers have shared when it comes to reflecting upon voice.

Ambivalent feelings in response to vocality

Firstly, perception and analysis of the musicality of language, which naturally goes hand in hand with a perception of the conceptual difference between words and their embodied sounds, has often tended to attract ambivalent feelings. Thus the sounding nature of spoken language or in particular the sounding nature of singing has often been described by philosophers as something ecstatically beautiful. Yet the very same phenomenon has just as often, and often at the same time, been perceived as potentially dangerous: dangerous in the sense that it is depicted as tempting the senses away from the sober path of reason. In the eyes of many a philosopher it is almost as if there were something about the medium of voice (as distinct from the word) that were potentially mad, or at least maddening.

Consider for instance this passage taken from Saint Augustine's *Confessions*:

In earlier days the pleasures of the ear enthralled me more persistently and held me under their spell, but you broke my bonds and set me free. Nowadays I do admittedly find some peaceful contentment in sounds to which your words impart life and meaning, provided the words are sung sensitively by a tuneful voice; but the pleasure is not such as to hold me fast, for when I wish I can get up and go. (...) Yet sensuous gratification, to which I must not yield my mind for fear it grow languid, often deceives me (...). [W]hen in my own case it happens that the singing has a more powerful effect on me than the sense of what is sung, I confess my sin and my need of repentance, and then I would rather not hear any singer. (Augustine 1998, Book 10, 229-230).

Augustine makes a clear distinction here between the aesthetically pleasing sound of the words and their meaning. And it is the meaning side he associates with divine reason whereas the sounding aspect, mere noise, is perceived as something to be wary of for fear that one may get carried away by the pleasure of hearing.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau's references to the sounding nature of language would be another, quite different example here. For him, as is well known, it is the sounding, musical, affective dimension of spoken language, or its dramatic intonation that is the very holy source of the origin of language and thereby stands in a privileged relation to truth. The more structural, monotonous, grammatical, side of language is associated with reason rather than with passion, and is thus, quite contrary to Augustine's sense, where the corruption lies (Rousseau 1974).

Outer vs. inner voice

The second striking feature that many philosophies of voice seem to share is that in almost every case in which the outer, acoustic resonance of the speaking or singing voice occurs, it seems to be accompanied by a reference or an attempt to describe a very different experience of voice: the experience of an *inner* voice enters the scene which, whilst lacking the external nature or acoustic resonance of the embodied, musical voice (i.e. no sound waves), is nevertheless clearly audible. Moreover, this voice is almost always distinguishable from the constant murmur of the author's or thinker's own thought-process, flow of consciousness or interior monologue. The *inner* voice enters the scene as the voice of an *other*. And what characterizes this voice is that it tends to have an undeniable *authority* which is impossible to ignore and is associated with clear moral guidance.

An example of this thematisation of an inner voice is to be found in the famous passage in Plato's *Apology* in which Socrates describes and invokes a personal 'daemon', which, he says, manifests itself in his mind in the form of a strange voice-like noise:

Perhaps it may seem strange that I go about and interfere in other people's affairs to give this advice in private, but do not venture to come before your assembly and advise the state. But the reason for this, (...) is that *something divine and spiritual comes to me*, (...) I have had this from my childhood; *it is a sort of voice that comes to me, and when it comes it always holds me back from what I am thinking of doing, but never urges me forward*. This is what opposes my engaging in politics.

(Plato, *Apology* 31 cd, here Plato 1966, 115 my emphasis)

Interestingly, what appears to define the authority of this inner voice is not *what* it says (indeed whatever the voice were to say, Socrates, it seems, would be driven to obey), but the very *fact* that it is perceived. Which brings me to question the nature of this kind of auditory experience, since what characterises the perception of this voice is not what it says but its sound. Yet curiously it is a *sound that lacks acoustic resonance*.

How to relate this silent yet nevertheless audible *inner* voice to the outer, acoustically resonant voice? What is the nature of the sound of the inner voice and how does it compare with the physical resonance or musicality of spoken language? Is there a connection at all? And if so, how or where is one to place the ethicality or moral call associated with this voice? Could the seeming morality of the call of the inner voice

actually have something to do with its silent resonance, or indeed, with the very different sounding nature of the outer voice? In other words, could it be that there is something sensual and rhythmical about human consciousness or indeed conscience itself? And if so, could this sensuality of conscience (which here takes the form of an inner voice) be connected to the idea that *there is a silent dimension that is in fact intrinsic to the nature of the audible, acoustic, physically resonant, noise-like, sounding human voice?*

In a nutshell, it would seem that the quest for a philosophy of voice leads to the need to investigate the sounding nature of the inner voice on the one hand and a dimension of silence intrinsic to the outer, resonant voice, on the other. Could the two dimensions be intertwined in a kind of chiasmic structure? This question may be clarified with recourse to a third possible route to discovering the place of voice in philosophy.

A phenomenology of voice

Filtering out all one's habitual assumptions, theoretical prejudices and acquired knowledge pertaining to voice(s) and simply attempting to concentrate on the sound—and colour—of a voice can be a fruitful philosophical method leading to some quite surprising discoveries. For a start, the difficulty involved in separating voice from language is striking: the moment I begin to listen to what a voice is saying I tend to lose focus of the sounding materiality of the medium, and inversely, when I focus on the fleshy, melodious noise of the words as they are formed in a speaker's mouth and resonate through his or her body, I tend to lose track of their meaning. A phenomenological approach also quickly brings into relief the dramatic quality of a voice as *address* or *appeal*: as soon as an acoustic sound is recognised as a voice it immediately leaves the realm of mere sonorous noise and becomes 'more' than just a bodily vibration. I instantly become aware that someone is (possibly) trying to say something, possibly to me and possibly requesting my response.⁷ Indeed it would seem to be in the very sounding nature of voice that in speaking or even just emitting noise, it *evokes*, perhaps even *invokes*, i.e. implies, appeals to and *brings about* an audience (even if the audience is the speaker him or herself or someone not physically present). In this sense an ethical quality is inscribed within the very phenomenality of voice insofar as it is always already affective, perceived as a call appealing for a response. Moreover, as the mind and senses focus yet more attentively on the sounding resonance of the voices that surround us, a host of paradoxes gradually emerge which seem to have to do with the peculiar threshold character of this mysterious and ephemeral phenomenon:

a) A voice is both individual *and* communal: On the one hand, every human voice is unique, no two voices are ever quite the same. In this sense every voice is the signature of an individual. Yet on the other hand, no voice ever resonates alone but emerges as a singular current brought about within a sea of other mimetically interwoven voices. Thus, every voice, each particular grain, is not only constituted through interaction with other voices, but as a result of this process, it also contains uncanny traces of a company of others. In a voice, that which is most personal cannot therefore be quite separated from that which is shared. Again, though now from a slightly different perspective, an ethical contour appears to define the phenomenon.

⁷ Consider for instance Kurt Schwitters' Dadaist sound poem the *Ursonate* (1922-32). There are hardly any decipherable words in it but the rhythm, intonation and above all voice make it sound like an almost familiar language.

b) Linguistic *and* non-linguistic: As a medium of language, the human voice is distinct from language; it has its origin in a time *before* language (i.e. in the noise of prelinguistic babble), and functions as an index for that which goes *beyond* or cannot be expressed in language (e.g. in the display of inconceptualizable emotion). In another sense, however, it is dependent on language (insofar as distinct from noise), coloured *by* language (e.g. the particular ‘grain’ of a French or Spanish voice), and points to the taking place *of* language (as in its calling nature it signifies a ‘wanting-to-say’).

c) Temporal *and* transcendent: On the one hand, the human voice is a physical production of the concrete human body, and as such is bound to a concrete, immanent materiality, existing in a particular space and time. As such it is a deictic marker.⁸ Yet, on the other hand, insofar as it (and the body from which it emanates) is not only perceived by the other’s physical ear but also by his or her acoustic imagination, and thereby connected to a logic of desire (attraction or aversion), the voice resonates beyond its physical transience; as ‘phantasmagoric’ voice it transcends the body, becoming in a certain sense atemporal.

d) Sounding resonance *and* silent potential: On the surface of perception a voice is of course sounding resonance, a physical vibration perceivable by a biological ear. But voice is not just the random disturbance of sound waves or the consequence of spontaneous or involuntary, arbitrary friction; not simply parasitical to communication, not just noise. To formulate a thesis: what distinguishes voice from noise is its intrinsic relation to the possibility of silence. For, insofar as silence can be considered as a mode of vocal expression, voice cannot be defined in clear opposition to silence (nor vice-versa).⁹ It follows from this that the philosophy of voice is not exhausted in a philosophy of human performance qua activity but must also take into account and articulate itself as a philosophy of human *potentiality*.

I have named and outlined three different pathways towards uncovering the place of voice in philosophy. Of course in a given philosophy, all three paths may often intertwine or fold into each other in the complex manner of a labyrinth: what a particular philosopher has said or written about voice may or may not reveal something about the phenomenology of voice and may or may not reflect upon its own tonality. I would now like to explore the latter, the relationship between voice as sound and voice as silence, in the move towards a ‘negative’ philosophy of voice. Articulating this negative philosophy involves dwelling for a moment on the passage from noise to voice; with noise conceived here as perhaps always already ‘more’ than just random friction insofar as perceived as such it relates albeit as disturbance – to a realm of potentially intentional meaning, and voice as never quite reducible to linguistic signalling.

Towards a ‘negative’ philosophy of voice

Most recent theories of voice tend to focus on the acoustic, embodied, actualised, speaking/uttering sound of voice (e.g. Meyer-Kalkus 2001; Cavarero 2005; Dolar 2006). But do we not experience on a daily basis the reality and power of voices that are withheld, voices that refrain from actually speaking, silent voices? I expect that a voice that were only ever in an active mode of actual speaking performance, a voice that knew no

⁸ For a detailed analysis of the relationship between voice and *deixis* in the work of Giorgio Agamben, see Lagaay and Schiffers 2008b.

⁹ For a detailed account of the potential meanings of silence, see Lagaay 2008c.

silence, could not be a real voice nor even identified as an hallucination. My quest is thus for a theory of voice that does not reduce voice to mere sound. Or stated differently: I'm looking for a concept of sound that allows it to be stretched beyond the actual moment of its resonance; a philosophy of voice, if you like, that resonates or echoes into and beyond silence.

In attempting to grasp this negative philosophy of voice, Giorgio Agamben has much to offer. In *Language and Death* (1991) he describes a philosophy of voice that is not built upon the idea that the human voice in question speaks continuously and from the start. The fact that humans are born *without* being able to speak is essential here. It means that our first experience of voice—including hearing our mother's voice and the voices of people around—is an experience of voice that says nothing. Yet neither is it meaningless noise. This voice is negative in the sense that unlike the voice of animals who are always already in harmony with their own language—they don't generally have to learn to speak—it is *no longer* mere noise but *not yet* meaning. This experience of voice at the threshold to meaning is of fundamental importance for Agamben's concept of potentiality, the source of which he considers to reside in human infancy. This experience of potentiality is not only to be interpreted as an experience of the possibility of speaking. More profoundly at stake here is the experience of a fundamentally human *inability*. Indeed, for Agamben, even when voice becomes articulated language there remains on a deep level a trace of this pure vocality which cannot speak.

Agamben pursues this idea of pure vocality throughout the history of Western philosophy—and poetry—and discovers a link between it and the idea of nothingness and the relationship of humans to death. Both Hegel and Heidegger recognise a close connection between the relationship of humans to language and their consciousness of mortality. For Hegel, human articulation begins in the suspension or transcendence of animal 'voice': man begins to speak at the point when the animal cries out at the moment of death—a vocal utterance on the brink of articulation. The animal's death is thus conceived by Hegel as a threshold of sorts to human language.¹⁰ For Heidegger, on the other hand, Dasein is always already thrown into being *without* a voice. However, this negativity—Dasein's thrownness—leads to an opening, which, conceived as an "acoustic of the soul brings about the 'Stimmung' in which the call of consciousness as a *silent* voice is heard—thus enabling Dasein to articulate its relationship to nothingness" (Heidegger 2001, § 54-62).

At this point, inner and outer voice appear to intertwine. The sound of the inner voice conditions, as it were, the possibility of the outer voice which in the face of death remains silent. And whoever knows this silence will recognise more than mere noise in the sounding nature of the other's voice, one's counterpart. In this experience of a call without content lies an ethical potential which is rooted in the phenomenal voice, understood here as the interdependence of inner and outer vocality. A consequence of this recognition is that our attention must not be directed solely to the outer, sounding voice. For the voice that is withheld is in many ways just as telling. And only when voice remains silent, can silence begin to speak.¹¹

But where does this philosophy of voice leave us, or rather take us, when we turn to the realm of theatre and performance? One perhaps most obvious thing to note is that in its implicit theatricality, the phenomenon of voice shares much with that which constitutes theatre/performance. This is apparent in its ephemeral temporality, implicit indexicality and eventness (the (a)live here-and-now both of voice and of that

¹⁰ "(...) Every animal finds a voice in its violent death; it expresses itself as a removed-self (*als aufgehobnes Selbst*). (...) In the voice, meaning turns back into itself; it is negative self, desire. It is lack, absence of substance in itself". Hegel from *Jeneer Schriften* quoted in Agamben, op. cit., 45.

¹¹ Considered from another perspective: "Silence is not the absence of sound but the beginning of listening" Voegelin 2010, 83.

which makes a theatrical event), as well as in its always already beingness-for-another, beingness-for-an-audience and the implicit request of a response. But what a meditation upon the sounding nature of vocality also—and perhaps essentially—reveals is that, quite curiously, its experience is not exhausted in its sounding materiality. Together, the complex relationship between inner and outer levels of voice on the one hand and the various dimensions of silence within voice on the other, when transferred to or confronted with the realm of theatre and performance, gesture towards the dimensions in which a theatrical event is never quite reducible to the simple materiality of what occurs in the theatrical/performative space. Intriguingly, indeed almost ironically, the very ‘performative turn’ that has led critics and philosophers to concern themselves more intensely with the specific materiality, embodiment and temporal liveness of what is carried out within and thereby constitutes theatre also points, in a certain sense, to the transcendence of these elements. Thus it would seem, and this is what the prism of voice certainly appears to reveal, that an intense preoccupation with that which is present/presence necessarily leads to an increased attentiveness towards that which is not yet fully there—but might be, could be on the brink. Stated bluntly: a conscious focus on sound sharpens the listener’s ears to the surrounding pregnant silence. Yet the ‘transcendence’ of performance gestured towards here must not be misunderstood as transcendence in an absolute sense, not something that necessarily takes us beyond the material or out of the body, for it clearly takes place *within* immanence: it is a transcendence, if you like, that relies centrally on the human senses, insofar as these are capable, essentially, of sensing beyond themselves and the moment—towards the silent yet resonant potential *within*.

Thus, what the voice in relation to theatre reveals is not simply on a banal level that theatre/performance is never just visual but always also sonorous and synaesthetic, but that what happens on stage is constituted as much by that which occurs on the immanent level of concrete phenomenality (creaking floorboards, dense, airless space, moving, calling bodies all combining to underline an urgency of the present moment) as by what does *not* occur, what could have, what might have, but doesn’t quite. Theatre is made, one could say, for the ears as much as for the eyes; and by action and occurrence as much as by inaction and non-occurrence. The philosophy of voice reveals this much but also more: that it is never just eyes on the one hand and ears on the other, not action on the one hand and refrainment or potentiality on the other. Although these different dimensions can be separated and distinguished on a theoretical/theatrical level, what the enigma of voice in fact suggests is that a real challenge of theory/theatre is precisely to understand, grasp and bring to expression the intrinsic, chiasmic interrelation of these various dimensions: eyes *as* ears, ears *as* eyes and action *in/as* inaction on the level of the phenomenon.

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