

Communication is Inscribed in Human Nature: A Philosophical Enquiry into the Right to Communicate

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The discourse on the right to communicate seems to be gathering a new momentum.¹ One reason for this may well be that many people, at the threshold of a new millennium, experience a sense of powerlessness about the world around them. They feel subjected to war, violence and environmental degradation. They feel manipulated in what they buy and how they vote, and feel insecure in their moral judgements. They doubt whether they can still assert themselves about the world they wish to live in and bequeath to their children. They want to speak out but cannot make themselves heard.

In this situation, the discourse on communication as a right – private and public, individual and social – needs to proceed with a high degree of clarity, concentrating on the essential grounding of communication in human nature itself.

Yes, legal frameworks for the right to communicate, and the implementations of this right, are important. So are technologies that can either militate against or enhance the chances of freedom and democracy. And so are the cultural exigencies in an era of increasingly globalised mass media. Just because the right to communicate touches upon so many and such vital facets of human life, the need to find a common ground for the discourse is crucial. This is the main aim of this essay.

Its starting point is what it means to be human. Although we may first and foremost conceive of ourselves as individual persons, our very personhood depends on others. We are both individual and social beings. We then proceed to reflect on human nature as being-with-others, conditioned and orientated towards others. The uniquely human endowment of language as our social and cultural habitat, as well as the source of individual and social empowerment, demonstrates this. Communication is, therefore, an essential human need and a fundamental social necessity. Its central core is the philosophical notion of intersubjectivity, which implies communication in freedom, equality and solidarity. Our final reflections are on communication as the life-blood of society.

Being-with-others: Intersubjectivity

One of the philosophical questions, which have occupied thinkers for centuries, is that of human authenticity. What are the essential characteristics of the human being? What distinguishes us from other mammals? What is authentically human?

Human living is different from any other in that it is essentially other-directed. We seem to be conditioned to live in a world of 'we', prior to the 'I' and 'thou'. Bernard Lonergan (1972: 57) describes this as follows:

Just as one spontaneously raises one's arm to ward off a blow against one's head, so with the same spontaneity one reaches out to save another from falling. Perception, feeling, and bodily movement are involved, but the help given another is not deliberate but spontaneous. One adverts to it not before it occurs but while it is occurring. It is as if 'we' were members of one another prior to our distinctions of each from the others.

It has often been pointed out that humans are the only mammals who are completely dependent on other humans, first and foremost their mothers, when they are born. The very survival of babies depends on others, and not just for a few weeks but for some years. Little wonder then that the first manifestation of intersubjectivity may well be a baby's smile.

We do not learn to smile as we learn to walk, to talk, to swim, to skate. Commonly we do not think of smiling and then do it. We just do it. Again, we do not learn the meaning of smiling as we learn the meaning of words. The meaning of the smile is a discovery we make on our own, and that meaning does not seem to vary from culture to culture, as does the meaning of gestures. There is something irreducible about the smile (Lonergan, 1972: 60).

The smile expresses what a mother or father means to a baby. And throughout our lives a smile indicates what one person means to another. Its meaning is intersubjective. It spontaneously signals the 'presence of the other'. It is a primordial form of self-transcendence.

Human beings become authentic in self-transcendence. That is the very core of their being social beings. Solipsism is an inhuman abyss. And the intentional 'absence of the other' is, in the words of Jean-Paul Sartre, 'hell'. In contrast, the highest form of self-transcendence is the self-surrender to another in love, which is 'the abiding imperative of what is to be human' (Lonergan, 1985: 134). Thus by transcending oneself, one becomes oneself.

Language as self-transcendence

Plato defined the human being as 'the animal that speaks' (*zoon logon echon*). There is little point in pitting Plato against his pupil Aristotle, for whom the human being is 'the animal that thinks.' Both speech and reason condition each other and are dependent on each other. Except that psychologically and in the stages of human development, language comes first.

Humans speak. We speak when we are awake and we speak in our dreams. We are always speaking, even when we do not utter a single word aloud, but merely listen or read, and even when we are not particularly listening or speaking but are attending to some work or taking a rest. We are continually speaking in one way or another. We speak because speaking is natural to us. It does not first arise out of some special volition. Humans are said to have language by nature. It is held that humans, in distinction from plants and animals, are the living being capable of speech. This statement does not mean only that, along with other faculties, humans also possess the faculty of speech. It means to say that only speech enables the human being to be the living being he or she is as a human being. It is as the one who speaks that the human being is – human (Heidegger, 1971: 189).²

The philosophy of language is of course much older than the writings of Heidegger, who called language 'the house of being.' Yet language as the basis for philosophical anthropology may be one of the principal philosophical insights of the 20th century. Charles Morris' seminal work, *Foundation of a Theory of Signs* (1938), was one of the first fruits of modern semiotics. Morris (1975: 235) later said:

Everything which is characteristically human depends on language. The human being is in a real sense the speaking animal. Speech plays the most essential – but not the only – role in the development and preservation of the human self and its aberrations, as it does in the development and maintenance of society and its aberrations.

In the current philosophy of language, reason and language are co-original. One cannot develop without the other. 'Reason only advances by means of establishing communicable expressions, and language is the sole and concrete manifestation of reason' (Pasquali, 1997: 43). In the communicative act, 'language becomes the basis, form and substance of intersubjectivity' (ibid). Vaclav Havel (1990: 44) summarises the meaning of language as follows:

Words could be said to be the very source of our being, the very substance of the cosmic life form we call people. Spirit, the human soul, our self-awareness, our ability to generalise and think in concepts, to perceive the world as the world (and not just as our locality), and, lastly, our capacity to know that we will die - and living in spite of that knowledge: surely all these are mediated or actually created by words.

Human nature itself has provided tangible evidence for this view on language. Susanne K. Langer (1974) discusses in some detail the phenomenon of 'wild children' or 'wolf children', and the experiments with chimpanzees with respect to language learning. A number of cases of 'wolf children', viz. children who grew up without human companionship, have been studied. The best attested are Peter, who was found in the fields near Hanover in 1723, Victor who was captured in Aveyron, Southern France, at the age of about 12, in 1799, and two little girls, Amala and Kamala, who were taken into human custody near Midnapur, India, in 1920. None of these children could speak in any language; instead they had imitated the sounds of the animals among which they had lived. Amala and Kamala never managed to converse with each other, and after six years in human surroundings, Kamala, (who survived her sister) had learned about forty words, managed to utter some three-word sentences, but only did so when she was spoken to. Apparently, small children have an optimum period of learning languages, which is lost in later life (see Langer, 1974: 122).

On the question of animal languages, Langer (1964: 33) comes to the following conclusion:

Animal language is not language at all, and what is more important it never leads to language. Dogs that live with men learn to understand many verbal signals, but only as signals, in relation to their own actions. Apes that live in droves and seem to communicate fairly well, never converse. But a baby that has only half a dozen words begins to converse: 'Daddy gone.' 'Daddy come?' 'Daddy come.' Question and answer, assertion and denial, denotation and description - these are the basic uses of language. The gap between the animal and human estate is... the language line.

Language then is the common condition of the human species. We live in the house of language. No group, tribe or people has ever been found that did not have a developed language system, regardless of the linguistic differences between them. But the aural articulation of sounds for words and sentences is only one, though the most potent, type of human language. The others are so called body languages, employing mainly touch, gestures and visual symbols as signs. Therefore, being-together as human beings requires a language to form, maintain and express being-in-relation with others, just as language enables us to 'name' objects of the world around us.

In brief then, the essence of the human being as a social being is constituted and perfected by language. Being-together-in-the-world, or being intersubjective, is realised and actualised in the self-transcendence of communication. When we are deprived of this togetherness we cannot live lives worthy of human nature. Language is thus the symbolic human construct that allows the forging and maintenance of relationships.

Communication in freedom, equality and solidarity

It is fairly easy to demonstrate (as we have seen) that language is part of being human. Language in action, that is

communication, is an individual human need – as basic as food, clothing and shelter. Basic needs are those that are essential for our existence and our very survival. They are the very preconditions of human life. Because of this, basic human needs become fundamental human rights. While this logic is now generally acknowledged with regard to physical human needs – food/drink, shelter, clothing, perhaps in the descending order listed – the non-material human needs like language and communications are more controversial. Most people seem to survive solitary confinement, exclusion and excommunication, partly because they somehow manage to retain some sort of intentional interpersonal communication, and maintain or renegotiate a sense of belonging even though they are silenced. Being silenced never quite succeeds, because nobody can deprive us of our relational nature.

The experience of being silenced, however, reveals another existential dimension of the human being, namely the need for freedom. What good is the house of language if we cannot converse in it freely? Language and freedom are intertwined. The gift of language is at the same time a gift of freedom. Deprivation of freedom makes genuine communication impossible, and the first sign of repression in groups and societies is the curtailment of freedom of speech. This can be very subtle. Intimidation or the inculcation of fear, the exposure to ridicule may suppress freedom, as can the building up or maintenance of authoritarian structures that allow little or no dissent. Freedom means being part of, and thus being able to participate in, life-in-common. ‘The principle of freedom of expression is one that admits of no exceptions, and is applicable to people all over the world by virtue of their human dignity’ (MacBride Report, 1980: 18).

‘Human freedom is axiological. It needs no proof. It is part of life experience and can only be reflected on. Reflection reveals that freedom is an integral part of human nature and thus a precondition of humans to be moral beings. Freedom makes all specifically *human* actions possible, including

communications... The rationale for freedom is to become more truly human and humane. Freedom is both part of being human and becoming humane... Only in the free encounter with others can genuine freedom be experienced' (Traber, 1997: 334–335).

Humans, however, are not 'born free'. They are situated in existing relationships – in families and groups. Humans therefore encounter the freedom of others. True freedom accepts other freedoms unconditionally, and opens up the freedom of others. Freedom, it should be noted, is not primarily orientated towards objects but towards people. Only in the free encounter with others can genuine freedom be experienced. An intersubjective approach to the notion of freedom also establishes the rationale for the limitations of freedom, which are enshrined in the customary (and codified) laws of all societies.

These reflections lead to another dimension of communication: equality. We cannot communicate with others when we consider them 'inferior'. The master may impart information to his slave or servant, but genuine communication hardly takes place. The same is true when men consider women as 'inferior' human beings. Mere information, or the sale of and access to media products, may then become substitutes for genuine communication. Communicative freedom presupposes the recognition that all human beings are of equal worth. And the more explicit equality is and becomes in human interactions, the more easily and completely communication occurs.

Equality as a philosophical concept is unconditional, but does not deny the reality of specific social identities, loyalties or preferential interests. Equality does not mean homogeneity or uniformity. Neither does it contradict the special roles and ranks which societies confer on individuals and groups of people.

But equality also implies the right not to be discriminated against because of race, ethnicity, religion, or sex and age, etc. Commenting on the 1986 African Charter on Human and People's Rights, which emphasises the duties of the individual

towards the community, and which formalises the notion of group and collective rights, Charles Husband (1998: 139) states:

In recognising that our individuality is contingent upon those communities of identity to which we belong we recognise our connectedness, our solidarity. Consequently, individual rights cannot be fully enjoyed, or guaranteed, in the absence of respect for the dignity, integrity, equality and liberty of those communities of identities, including our ethnic community to which we belong. And in demanding the recognition of any one of our communities... we must reciprocally recognise the legitimacy of the existence, and the integrity, of other communities, including their differences from us.

The non-recognition of such identities in public communication may lead to a 'proliferation of communicative ghettos in which relatively homogenous audiences consume a narrow diet of information, entertainment and values' (Husband, 1998: 143). The inclusion into the public sphere of differentiated groups is likely to result in a heterogeneous discourse of citizens, in which social identities can be affirmed and collective interests expressed.

There is, however, another type of loyalty – often overlooked – that sustains the right to communicate, namely loyalty towards, and solidarity with, the weak and most vulnerable in society, like the physically or mentally ill, or the very young and very old. Solidarity further includes an active commitment to individuals and groups who have been relegated to the margins of society, like the refugees, the outcasts (for whatever reason), and the exploited and oppressed. It is not least a 'solidarity with those whose freedom has been taken away, rendering them less than human' (Traber, 1997: 335). Active solidarity is one of the 'inescapable claims on one another which we cannot renounce except at the cost of our humanity' (Peukert, quoted in Christians, 1997: 7). Our common being-in-the-world is ontologically inclusive, and morally transformative. Gross injustices, to say the least, upset and disgust us, and this sense

of revulsion may spur us into action. Self-transcendence then acquires a new and ethical quality. Intersubjectivity implicitly strives for an equitable social order and, ultimately, for the 'good society', as one cross-cultural study on ethical proto-norms has shown (Christians & Traber, 1997). The good society is not only a utopian projection but also the subject of concrete analysis, which is both a task of social science and of social ethics. The transformative potential of communication is summarised in the following statement:

Communication which liberates, enables people to articulate their own needs and helps them to act together to meet those needs. It enhances their sense of dignity and underlines their right to full participation in the life of society. It aims to bring about structures in society, which are more just, more egalitarian and more conducive to the fulfilment of human rights (WACC, 1997: 8).

The right to public communication for all

The human needs approach leads to the right to communicate for individuals. The right is meant to guarantee and implement the social nature of humans through interpersonal communication. Although it implies the right to public communication, an explicit confirmation is still called for, because it is on this level that the right to communicate is most contested.

The right to communicate publicly is foreign to the thinking of all those who have traditionally associated public communication with the political, social and cultural elite of society. The notion of public 'social actors' has greatly influenced the history of the press and of all other mass media of communication. The conventional criteria for news are obsessed with the news value of 'prominence': the VIPs with political and economic power, and the 'stars' of entertainment and of sports. In fact stardom is bequeathed by the media by repeated exposure; it is an invention of Hollywood that has

spread from film to television and popular music. The mass media have, in the course of time, developed their own culture with its own norms. One of them is 'professionalism.' This does not necessarily mean training or education, but the elitist notion that only 'special people', with special talents, should be journalists and broadcasters. Public communication is thus the prerogative of those who can, and do, uphold the professional norms of media culture.

Another expression of elitism is the tendency (and it is no more than that) to evince mistrust towards 'common' people who may misuse the freedom and the power of public communication. This mistrust is particularly evident with respect to youth. The assumption is that political and ethical responsibility is the prerogative of members of a certain social and professional class. However, the misuses of the power of public communication in recent years have been very much in professional hands. The reporting of the war in the Persian Gulf (1991), the role radio and television played in the genocide in Rwanda (1994), and the ethnic hubris and war mongering of the media in ex-Yugoslavia (long before the conflicts erupted) are cases in point.

Advocates of the right to public information for all challenge the prerogatives of the political and professional elite. Their model of public communication is democratic rather than authoritarian. They aim at the distribution of communication power from the few to the many, from the elite to the grassroots. This right further stipulates a new role for the State, which becomes only one among several concerned parties; it embraces other institutions as well as groups and organisations – apart from individuals.

In other words, the right to communicate is very much dependent upon social structures in which public communication takes place. In brief, democracies require more than the election of representatives to a legislative assembly in a multi-party system. Over and beyond voting and party politics, democracy requires people who can make their wishes

known – in public – and who participate in the debate about the type of political processes they aspire to.

The right to communicate, however, cannot stand in isolation. It is connected to other human rights, particularly the rights to education, culture and socio-economic development. Hamelink (1998: 56) stresses the entitlement to self-empowerment:

Among the essential conditions of people's self-empowerment are access to, and use of, the resources that enable people to express themselves, to communicate these expressions to others, to exchange ideas with others, to inform themselves about events in the world, to create and control the production of knowledge and to share the world's sources of knowledge. These resources include technical infrastructures, knowledge and skills, financial means and natural systems. Their unequal distribution among the world's people obstructs the equal entitlement to the conditions of self-empowerment and should be considered a violation of human rights.

The MacBride Report (1980: 253) says that the right to communicate is a prerequisite for other human rights. There is a direct connection between communication and all those other rights that stress participation in public affairs. Society and its institutions must enable the active participation of all in the economic, political and cultural life of the community. This is not a high minded expression of benevolence, but a demand of justice. Such participation in the field of communication is of course more than 'consumer choice' or passive access to the mass media, or even the interactive chats between buddies on the Internet. The participation meant here is public dialogue about the public good. Its aim is to contribute to the debate about society, its values and priorities, and, above all, our common future. It's a dynamic and ongoing process, aimed at change and transformation.

Conclusion

So we return to the theme of intersubjectivity, or being-in-the-world-together, thus fashioning our future together. Our togetherness has a personal/private side, with its respective right, and a public responsibility, with its rights. The right to public communication pertains to public order and the public good, which are the right and responsibility of all, not just of a few.

Communication is similar to the nervous system of the human body. It is maintained by a multitude of signals originating from all parts of the body. If the nervous system or the immune system breaks down, the well being of the entire body is in jeopardy. Similarly, no modern democracy can exist, let alone flourish, without a certain level of information and participation. It is thus the very body politic that depends on the right to communicate. The roles of communication, both interpersonal and public, have been aptly described in the first paragraph of Chapter 1 of the MacBride Report (1980: 3).

Communication maintains and animates life. It is also the motor and expression of social activity and civilisation; it leads people and peoples from instinct to inspiration, through variegated processes and systems of enquiry, command and control; it creates a common pool of ideas, strengthens the feeling of togetherness... and translates thought into action, reflecting every emotion and need from the humblest tasks of human survival to supreme manifestations of creativity – or destruction. Communication integrates knowledge, organisation of power and runs a thread linking the earliest memory of man [humans] to his [their] noblest aspirations through constant striving for a better life. As the world has advanced, the task of communication has become ever more complex and subtle – to contribute to the liberation of [hu]mankind from want, oppression and fear and to unite it in community and communion, solidarity and understanding. However, unless some basic structural changes are introduced, the potential

benefits of technological and communication development will hardly be put at the disposal of the majority of [hu] mankind.³

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Notes

1. *The Journal of International Communication* (Sydney) devoted a double issue (Vol.5, Nos 1&2, 1989) to the debate on communication and human rights in the context of globalisation and cyberspace. It is guest-edited by Shalini Venturelli, and contains contributions from leaders in the field, such as Cees J. Hamelink, George Gerbner, Marc Raboy and others.
2. The translation of this passage by Heidegger has been altered to do justice to the inclusive term he uses for the human being, namely *Mensch*, not *Mann* (man). See also Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, (trans. Peter D. Hertz), New York: Harper and Row, 1971, in which the author marvels (pp. 47-54) at the Japanese word for language, *koto ha*, which literally means: the flower petals (*ha*) that flourish out of the lightning message of the graciousness that brings them forth (*koto*).
3. I am quoting unashamedly from *Many Voices, One World*, popularly known as the MacBride Report, which UNESCO long disowned. This blueprint for a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) is more pertinent today than it was in 1980, when all member States of UNESCO endorsed it (with one abstention). With the hindsight of the developments in public communications in the last 20 years, the abandoning of NWICO was an act of utter folly.

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