

A Conversation about Communication Ethics with Christopher Lyle Johnstone

How did you become interested in studying communication ethics?

As an undergraduate student at UC Davis in the late 1960s, I was originally drawn to both rhetoric and those fields in philosophy that dealt with “ultimate questions” of existence—metaphysics and ontology. After several years and much study, I realized that my metaphysical questions didn’t really have answers—or, at least, they didn’t have answers that satisfied me. That realization, though, turned my attention to more practical matters. Even if I could never be sure what “reality” was, I recognized that all of us still have to make choices every day about what to do and not do. This is where my interest in ethics originated—in my awareness that we all need some means of deciding how to behave. So, in graduate school at the University of Wisconsin, my outside course work gravitated toward moral philosophy. Whereas my earlier reading in Aristotle, for example, had concentrated on his *Metaphysics*, I was now drawn to his *Nicomachean Ethics*. I also read other moral philosophers—Francis Bacon, Thomas Hobbes, John Stuart Mill, and Jeremy Bentham, for example. Sometime during my first few years in graduate school, I was encouraged to read John Dewey, and more than anyone else, he really engaged my thinking about ethics. Out of all this came my doctoral dissertation, which was entitled “Communication and Morality.” In it, I examined the connections between rhetoric and ethics in the writings of Aristotle, Bacon, and Dewey. My teaching and scholarship in communication ethics ever since have been an outgrowth of that study. In fact, two of my first publications on ethics and rhetoric—one on Aristotle and one on Dewey, both appearing in *Philosophy and Rhetoric*—were based on chapters of the dissertation. Even now, my interest in Greek conceptions of wisdom and their relation to speech and language is a manifestation of the work I started doing in graduate school.

How do you define communication ethics?

I’m fairly literal in how I frame things, starting with ethics, for example. The word “ethics” is basically a direct translation from the Greek *ta ethika*. *Ta ethika* is a plural noun, and it translates roughly as “things having to do with character.” Ethics, by its origin, is plural rather than singular, so I think that there are multiple “ethics” that might be applied to human communication.

Let’s go back to the meaning of the term and this notion of things having to do with character. Obviously ethics is related to *ethos*. The term *ethos*

itself derives from an older term that appears in Homer, referring to the “customary dwelling place of animals,” their “haunts” or “abodes.” For example, the *ethos* of the sheep, so to speak, is the place where the sheep are accustomed to hanging out. If you go there, you would expect to find your sheep. If you've lost your sheep, you go to their customary place—down by the water hole, for example.

This notion of the “customary dwelling place” got metaphorically “stretched” over time. I’m borrowing an expression here from Eric Havelock, who talks about the “stretching” of the old Greek language to do the work of philosophy. One of the things I’ve been studying over the last twenty years or so is how the older terms from the mythopoeic tradition—from Homer and Hesiod and the other poets—were extended by the earliest Greek philosophers, like Thales and Anaximander and their successors, to express abstract concepts that hadn’t existed before their time. They took the language that was there and put it to their own use. Thus, the term *kosmos*, which was used by Aristotle to refer to the “ordered universe,” was derived from an earlier, Homeric term (*kosmeō*) that denoted the act of “ordering” or “arranging” an army into ranks. Likewise, as I mentioned earlier, the notion of *ethos* as “customary dwelling place” or “abode” morphed into the notion of “custom” or “habit,” and then into “character.”

Certainly by the time we get to Aristotle, *ethos* as “character” refers to a person’s habitual or customary way of acting—to her or his “characteristic” modes of conduct. We come back to the notion of ethics as “things having to do with character.” Ethics has to do with character, and character can be conceived as what John Dewey, another influential thinker in my own intellectual development, called the “interpenetration of habits.” What he called “the moral self” or “self” in general—or what we would call “character”—is defined by the acquired tendencies, habits, predispositions, and so on, that lead one to act in particular ways rather than in others. What defines a person as a person is, by this conception, the things that one tends to do. “How does one tend to behave in various kinds of circumstances?” “What can I count on you to do?” “What kind of person are you?”

That led me, finally, to an interest in the processes by which conduct is chosen. When I think of ethics, and again I’m looking at starting points here, I can’t conceive of a meaningful sense of ethics without presupposing the phenomenon of choice. My starting point is this event. We are all confronted numerous times each day with decisions that we have to make: “Should I get up or stay in bed?” “Should I have cereal or toast?” Granting all the things

about the de-centeredness and instability of the self, the problems with agency, and the whole postmodernist critique of the Enlightenment project—nonetheless, we have the experience of deciding what to do. I have the experience of having to make up my mind on what to do. To me, ethics kicks in when that process is at work.

When we are studying ethics, what we are studying, it seems to me, is those factors—psychological, conceptual, emotional, and philosophical—that bear on the process of choosing conduct. To me, it has to do with the ways in which we make our deliberate choices. When I think about the process of choosing an action, I think of the experience of deliberating, of thinking something through. “Should I do A or B?” We make those kinds of decisions in different ways, but nonetheless there is some sort of thought. If we’re acting purely on impulse or reflex, where there is no opportunity for reflection, then I’m not sure that ethics is an issue. Also, if I’m in a situation where I have literally no choice—or only one choice—I’m not sure ethics applies there, either. There must be the operation of some sort of choice making, of some deliberate selection of action from among realistic alternatives. Aristotle discusses this in his *Nicomachean Ethics* (Bk. III) when he distinguishes merely “voluntary” action from action that is “deliberately chosen.”

The very idea of human moral experience is very complicated; there are no simple answers. It’s full of irresolvable tensions. There is just no way around them. John Dewey said it really well, too. He said that the fundamental fact of moral life is uncertainty. We can never be sure that we’re doing the right thing. He wrote a book called *The Quest for Certainty*, and his basic position was that, in the moral realm, there is no such thing as certainty. We act always, we decide always, we choose always in the face of uncertainty, always with a risk and always with an awareness that we might be wrong.

Decision-making is a conscious process; it involves cognitive and affective elements. Some people obviously do act impulsively, even when they have the opportunity for reflection. I would want to say that raises ethical problems. I think that people ought to reflect when circumstances permit, that they ought to consider the potential ethical aspects of the various alternatives for action that lie before them. For me the central ethical question when I’m trying to decide what to do is ask, “What are my obligations here?” The process of ethical or moral decision making as the manifestation of moral selfhood is discussed in John Dewey’s *Ethics* and in his *Human Nature and Conduct*. There are some discussions in these books on the moral

life and the concept of moral selfhood. It seems to me that the most appropriate and ethically necessary move for me to make is to think about what my obligations are.

There's an article by Ralph Eubanks called the "Reflections on the Moral Dimension of Communication" in the *Southern Speech Communication Journal* that I use in my communication ethics course. He opens this up with a quote from W. D. Faulk, which goes as follows: "There is one commitment whose ground is intimately personal and which comes before any other personal or social commitment whatsoever: The commitment to the principled mode of life as such. One is tempted to call this the supreme moral commitment." That, to me, is a really important starting point, because it suggests that the first ethical choice we have is the choice of whether or not to try to be ethical. This is indeed a moral choice that reflects who we are and how we approach the task of living and decision-making and choice-making. That decision, about the commitment to the principled mode of life, is another way of saying the first ethical choice I have to make is, "What sorts of things should I be thinking about when I'm making up my mind about whether to act one way or another?" The most important central ethical question to raise, for me, is, "What are my obligations to myself, to the Other, to the earth, to God, to Being?" and so on. "What ought I to be trying to do? What am I bound to do in my actions?"

There are, of course, questions that are logically prior to "What are my obligations?" For example, "Do I have *any* obligations?" If so, "Why? What creates obligation?" John Caputo, in his book *Against Ethics*, asserts that "obligation exists," but he doesn't want to answer the question, *why* is this so? Caputo's position isn't philosophically satisfying to me. I want to know why. This curiosity is what led me on to my philosophical track, on to the line of inquiry I've been pursuing for almost 30 years: "What is the source of obligation?" "Why do we have obligations?" "Where do they come from?" One of the things I've done in my reading and writing and teaching is to explore various approaches to the sources of obligation and of principles. This has been part of my ethical project. I've tried to examine various ways of understanding the grounds of obligation, of understanding why I ought to do one thing rather than something else.

Would you talk about the themes in your scholarship related to communication ethics?

My own sense is that there are various sets of ethical standards that may be applied to communication and different systems and/or ways of looking at ethical issues in human communication. We have multiple approaches to identifying those issues and to resolving ethical questions in communication activities. In fact, a lot of my work has really been devoted to exploring different approaches to communication ethics, as opposed to coming up with “the ethic” for communication. I do think about it pluralistically: “What happens if we start here?”

In 1980 I had an article published in *Philosophy and Rhetoric* that examined connections among ethics, politics, and rhetoric in Aristotle’s thinking. I was interested in seeing how one of the first Western thinkers who taught and wrote systematically about these subjects might have viewed such connections. Among the things I found that were interesting to me were, first, that for Aristotle the idea that humans are “political animals,” designed by nature to live in communities, was the foundation of morality. I also discovered that, in Aristotle’s view, the essential activity of moral decision making is deliberation—excellence in deliberation is the essence of *phronêsis* or “practical wisdom”—and since rhetoric is used when we deliberate about practical actions, it seemed to me that moral deliberation and the operation of *phronêsis* are fundamentally rhetorical. Beyond this, Aristotle stipulates certain moral or ethical constraints in his theory of rhetoric, so I was able to perceive some important linkages between rhetoric and ethics.

A few years later, I wrote an article on John Dewey (also published in *Philosophy and Rhetoric*) called “Dewey, Ethics, and Rhetoric,” where I tried to look at communication ethics and indeed at rhetorical ethics from a Deweyan perspective. I found that there’s a certain amount of overlap among his conceptions of selfhood, habit, and the instrumental uses of communication. In fact, the central feature of what I found in Dewey’s thought had to do with what he called “practical intelligence” but what I aligned with *phronêsis*, “practical wisdom.” This is what I had also seen as a central feature in Aristotle’s thinking about ethics, rhetoric, and politics in the “Aristotelian Trilogy” essay. In the end, these two studies led me to many of the same conclusions—for example, that ethics is concerned with human conduct insofar as it is chosen or deliberate; that rhetoric, both as a form of

deliberate conduct and as a form of conduct concerned with deliberation, is intimately connected with ethics; and that public deliberation in the service of democratic decision making is the process by which individual members of society construct the shared moral visions that are supposed to guide our communal life.

I also looked at the ethical implications for communication of other conceptions of human nature. Whereas Aristotle and Dewey both emphasize our “communal” or “political” nature as starting points for their treatments of ethics and rhetoric, I wondered what would happen if one began with a definition of being human in terms of our species-designation, *homo sapiens*. I wrote an article titled “Ethics, Wisdom, and the Mission of Contemporary Rhetoric” that addressed the question, “What happens if we start with the idea of fulfilling our nature as human as the ground of obligation?” On this view, we are obliged in our communicative and other behavior to enrich and cultivate our humanness, whatever that is. I took the notion of *homo sapiens*—in fact, we are *homo sapiens sapiens*, as distinct from *homo sapiens neanderthalensis*—to see how it might lead to some ethical principles or guidelines that could be applied to our communication. *Homo sapiens* means, literally, the human that knows, or the “wise” hominid. *Sapientia* or *sapienza*, if you look at the Latin and the Italian, has to do with wisdom. We are the “wise” human, in contrast to the upright-walking human, *homo erectus*, or *homo habilis*, the tool-using human. What is distinctive about our particular form of humanity is our capacity for sapience, for wisdom. I traced that out in the article, and I tried to explain how a commitment to pursue “wisdom” might shape our thinking about what is ethical and unethical in how we communicate with each other.

Another of my essays came out in a European journal called *Dialogue and Universalism* that tried to situate the grounds of obligation in yet another conception of “humanness.” Here I asked, “What happens if we start our understanding of ethics with our existence as a living creature, with the fact that we are a life form on the planet Earth?” If we start with the assumption that our first obligation is to sustain the existence of our own species, what obligations flow from that and what are the implications for how we should communicate? In some ways, this essay integrated insights I had drawn from both Aristotle and Dewey, and I was able to develop and argue for a set of fairly specific ethical principles that can guide both our personal decisions about how to communicate with others and our judgments of others’ communication with us.

I published another article in the *Southern Communication Journal* that took a somewhat different tack. Instead of looking to some conception of “human nature” as a source of groundings for ethical principles, I tried to develop a set of such principles for evaluating political discourse by starting with the basic tenets of democracy as a mode of governance and of political decision making. I looked at ethical issues in the 1984 presidential campaign between Ronald Reagan and Walter Mondale. I wanted to come up with an ethic that would be used appropriately to evaluate campaign discourse. What I did there was to situate ethics within the values of democracy as a mode of political association. What strikes me now, as I think back on that particular effort, is that the ethical guidelines I articulated there could be applied to *any* political campaign, and indeed to other modes of public, political discourse, including current debates about the war in Iraq and the limits of presidential power in time of war. I think the principles I argued for in that essay would permit us to make meaningful, justifiable ethical assessments of the discourse we now see coming from the Administration and from members of Congress.

In none of this work have I said that “this is *the one, the only, the best*” starting place. Rather, because I am basically a pluralist at heart, I have been interested in exploring the ethical implications of different starting points. I like asking, “What happens if we begin considering ethics here? What happens if we start there?”

Do you understand philosophical ethics as distinct from communication ethics?

To me, ethics comes to bear on communication insofar as communication involves choices. We choose when to talk and when not to talk, what to say and whether to say it, to whom to say it, whether to say it to this person or somebody else, whether to tell the truth or not to tell the truth, how to frame it, how to structure it. We choose message content. We choose message structure. It’s hard for me to think about communication without there existing the opportunity for decision. In ordinary life, you can’t make me talk. Now, you can torture me and force me talk, but these are extreme circumstances. Under ordinary circumstances, when I’m not forced to talk, when you’re not torturing me, I make choices. All communication of the normal sort, in everyday life, involves choice-making and is covered by

ethics. I would say that all communicative choices are covered by ethical theory and by moral philosophy.

Communication ethics is a subset of ethics generally, because not all my actions are necessarily communicative. For instance, I grow organic vegetables in my garden. Unless we are really going to stretch the notion of communication, I'm not going to talk about that as being a communicative event. I do that for the health of my family, myself, and for the earth. But it's not a communicative choice in the sense that I normally think of communication as symbolic action. The sort of ethical considerations that govern my choices about what to plant in my garden are not necessarily going to govern my communication behavior. To say that communication ethics is a subset of ethics does not mean that that all human conduct is governed necessarily by the same principles, which is why I believe ethics—in the plural—involve multiple approaches. Insofar as our communication activity involves choice-making or decision-making, it involves ethical issues. That's true whether it's direct or mediated communication. Advertisers, public relations specialists, speechwriters for the President—they are all making ethical choices just as we do in our conversation with each other.

Another element of our communicative behavior that invites ethical consideration is the fact that words have consequences. How and whether we speak can have an impact on the development and well-being of others, and because our speech is ordinarily a “chosen” form of activity, we can be held responsible for that impact. So, both in its nature as “chosen” and because it affects others' lives and happiness, our ordinary communication is an appropriate object for ethical appraisal.

How is communication ethics similar to or different from rhetorical ethics?

The question of rhetoric is an interesting one, depending on one's point of view. I hold a fairly broad conception of rhetoric. Of course, the term *rhetoric* comes from the Greek and it derives from a term that had to do with public speakers. The *rhêtôr* is the person who stands up in front of the group and speaks to them. So there was a form of the word (I think it's *rhêtêr* in Homer) used to describe the role of addressing an assemblage of people as when Odysseus, Achilles, and Agamemnon and some of the others are addressing the Greek troops in their encampment outside the walls of Troy. The term *rhetoric*, which first appears in Plato's dialogue, *Gorgias*, is derived from this earlier noun having to do with public speaking. Literally

the “art of rhetoric” is *hê rhetorikê* or *hê rhetorikê technê*, which might be translated as “the speakerly art” or “the speakerish art.” It’s an adjective—*rhetorikê* or “speakerish”—that became an abstract noun. So rhetoric has originally to do with the speaker’s art. I certainly have that as the foundation of my understanding of the concept.

Rhetoric involves the selection, the choice, of message content, structure, language, opportunity—all those things—with a view toward producing certain psychological effects in specific hearers. What we do is produce effects, and any communication that is chosen with a view to producing particular kinds of psychological effects is at least nominally subsumable under the notion of rhetoric. Generally, the effects with which rhetoric is concerned have to do with what’s involved in forming judgments or in coming to decisions about practical matters—about practical actions. So, we might want to distinguish between rhetoric and, say, poetics on the basis of these sought-after effects. While poetics aims at producing aesthetic effects for their own sake, rhetoric aims at producing psychological effects (including, at times, aesthetic effects) that will lead an auditor finally to a practical judgment of some kind.

To go back to ethics and rhetoric—yes, I think that the ethics of communication in which I’m interested have their principal application in rhetoric, but I would also say that ethics is fundamentally rhetorical insofar as ethics involves making principled choices, and making principled choices involves being able to provide a coherent justification for action or belief in terms of some sort of principles. Principled action is action for which a coherent justification can be given—you have to be able to provide some kind of a *logos* or a “reasoned account” of it. Without such an account, we don’t have an intellectually defensible basis for acting. There is an art to inventing justifications. I’ll use Aristotle’s definition of rhetoric here—rhetoric is the capacity for seeing in a given case the available means of persuasion. If I tweak it just a bit, we might consider rhetoric as the ability to identify the available justifications that can be advanced in support of a particular judgment. Thus, if ethical action involves being able to discern and compare the justifications that can be given for alternative courses of action, then doing ethics is rhetorical. That’s not a major change in Aristotle’s definition of rhetoric. It’s a matter of being able to come up with arguments. “What are the arguments for and against this?” “What are the principles that are involved here?” “What are justifications for those principles?” “How far back can I go?” “What are the first principles from which I’m arguing?” One

has to be able to think that through and talk about one's first principles. In the end, for ethical decision-making, you have to start somewhere. I'm going to start with the preservation of human life, for instance, and then I'm going to go from there. Or I'm going to start with the preservation of the ecosystem and then I'm going to go from there. Circumstances vary, and I'm going to have to have some starting points that are appropriate to a given set of circumstances and to the particular form of communication involved. This is why I start with that notion of commitment. When I want to think about what my communicative obligations are with respect, say, to my role as a teacher, or as a parent, or as a husband, or as a citizen, I have to ask, "What are the relevant ethical principles here to which I choose to dedicate myself?"

In any case, and to return to your original question, I see the term "communication" as being broader than the term "rhetoric," so that, while all rhetorical acts are communicative, not all communicative acts are necessarily rhetorical. Insofar as rhetoric is principally concerned with the practical, strategic uses of communication techniques, the ethical principles that apply to it may not be equally applicable to other instances of communication—to the sort of "aimless" talk that can occur between friends, for example.

What are your thoughts about a universal communication ethic?

My thinking in general has been that there is not a single right way, a single meta-ethical or meta-philosophical approach to thinking about communication ethics. There are multiple ways, each of which leads to different kind of insights and each of which might be applicable to different kinds of communication situations. Within an ethics of teaching, for example, which is a distinctively communicative and, I would say, rhetorical enterprise, I'm not sure that an Aristotelian or a Deweyan or an evolutionary approach to ethics is the best way to proceed. Their work has emerged for me as kind of a starting point in a lot of my thinking about ethics, but I don't hold any of these approaches to be "universally valid" for all communication situations.

When I set out to identify a set of ethical principles that might be appropriate to a certain kind of communicative activity, I start by looking at the nature and end of the activity itself. If I want to consider, for example, what my obligations are as a teacher, I start by asking, "What's teaching supposed to accomplish? What is the function or *telos* of teaching?" If I can come up with a conception of what teaching is supposed to be about and of what education is, then I'm obliged to do as a teacher whatever it is that advances

the goals of education. I start with trying to find a definition or coherent conception of the activity. In the case of teaching, for instance, I might begin by maintaining that the function of teaching is to educate. “What does it mean to be an educator?” “What is education?” “What does the term ‘educate’ mean?” I’m not a philologist, but I like looking at that kind of stuff. The word *educate* comes from the Latin root, *educare*, which has to do with “rearing” or “raising something up.” I understand this both in terms of rearing children and raising vegetables. That allows me to think metaphorically about education as a process of nurturing, cultivating, and stimulating the growth of human beings and minds. Then I can ask myself, “What conditions are necessary for human minds to be nurtured and cultivated and grown?” This permits me to begin identifying specific guidelines for teaching that, in the end, are ethical principles that can guide my actions insofar as I seek to be a “good” or “ethically sound” teacher. What are my obligations to my students? Well, they are to foster those conditions that are necessary for my students to grow, expand their thinking, become more mature as human beings. Given enough time, I could probably identify those conditions, and then articulate some ethical principles that ought to guide my teaching. I have actually published a couple of small essays on this matter—“Communication and Responsibility” and “Academic Freedom”—so I have put my mind to these sorts of questions before.

Part of my project, as I mentioned earlier, has been to explore ethics from different sorts of perspectives. The thread of continuity that has recurred for me and has really occupied my thinking and my research over the last decade and a half has been the notion of wisdom. “What is the wise human?” If I start with the premise that my first obligation, in all of my conduct, is to cultivate humanness, then my first obligation given this starting point is to do what I can in all of my conduct—communicative and otherwise—to nurture, cultivate, enhance, and augment the essence of our humanness. There is such a thing as a proper life for a human being, given at least the Western humanistic tradition, going back to the Greeks—not just to Socrates, but also his predecessors. We should enhance our humanity through what we do and say. I’ll start with the assumption that, in its essence, humanness is a good thing. This sort of essentialist thinking is problematic and I understand that, but this is kind of how I approach it anyway. Keep in mind that this premise, to cultivate humanness, doesn’t have to be a starting point, but it is one that speaks to me.

If the thing that distinguishes us most conspicuously from other life forms is our capacity for a certain kind of wisdom, human wisdom, then what we need in our behavior—communicative and otherwise—is to do all we can to help us grow in wisdom. That’s led me, of course, to the more fundamental question: “What is wisdom?” That’s what I’ve been working on for about the last 15 years, exploring the idea of wisdom and its relationship to speech and language in early Greek thought. I’ve been thinking about what it means to be wise. This has allowed me to develop my thinking about the grounds of obligation.

Let me then digress for a moment on this notion of obligation. “Do we have any obligations and if we do what are they?” So we’re starting with that primary question: “Do we have obligations, and if so, what is it that creates obligation?” I recently read John Caputo’s *Against Ethics*. He asserts that “obligation exists,” and I want to say, “Why?” For me, that simple assertion isn’t philosophically satisfying. “What is it that creates that obligation?” It seems to me that in one aspect my being here creates a ground for obligation, my decision to be here, now, rather than to leave my society or to leave life altogether. What really creates obligation is, again, a choice that we make. We make certain commitments in our lives when we make choices, including the choice to keep on living. In the making of those commitments, we create obligations.

For example, when I decide to get married and I take wedding vows, I commit myself in that overt act to love and to cherish and all the rest of it. I have created an obligation for myself. I have made a commitment. I have, by that choice, created a set of obligations. I’m obliged to communicate in ways that will nurture and sustain that relationship. So, to go back to the choice to live, to the bare fact of one’s existence, we are born into the world and we are born into a society. I can’t say that by this very fact of being born we take on obligations—that obligations are created—though Caputo asserts that “obligation always already exists” when we enter the world. But if I make the choice to continue living, and to live in a given society, I am obliged to conduct myself in ways that are consistent with my continued presence on the earth and with membership in that society. If I don’t want to have any obligations to anybody, I have two choices: leave society and go somewhere where there won’t be any other people and I will have no obligations to others, or commit suicide and free myself from all obligation (including whatever obligations I may have to the earth itself). By deciding to stay alive and not to exile myself, I have certainly obliged myself to live in such a way

that I fulfill my obligations to where I'm living. If I decide to live in this particular society rather than another society such as Greece or France or somewhere like that, I incur by that choice the obligation to behave in such a way that I advance the fundamental values of this particular society. I am obliged to play the "game of life" according to the rules that govern the game in the society of which I'm a member.

I think this "game" metaphor can be helpful, and it has certainly been employed usefully by proponents of game-theory. Our existence is like being involved in a game and there are rules to it. If we decide to stay in the game, then we are obliged to understand what those rules are, and then to play by them. If I'm going to play poker with you, then I oblige myself to not cheat at cards. We're obliged to play by the rules of the game. What creates an obligation for me is the choice to stay in the game. The obligations then are embedded in those rules and I have to figure out what the rules are.

"What are the rules of living in a democratic society?" one might ask. Well, we can identify what some of those things are. These would then function as obligations, insofar as I choose to continue living in such a society. Another question might be, "What are the rules that govern politicking, as in running for office in a democratic society?" Or, "If one chooses to run for public office, what are the moral rules—the obligations—that one acquires by this very act?" This is what my article on Ronald Reagan investigated. What about the larger game, the game of existence? The game of, "Here I am." Here I am, a self-conscious creature plopped down in the middle of the universe, and I've decided to stay in it. I want to do right by it. So, "What is the game and what are the rules? How am I supposed to play this?" That is what the moral quest in life is about, trying to figure out what the rules of the game are. It seems to me that wisdom ultimately is understanding the rules of the game. Insofar as there are rules to govern the game of life, the game of one's own existence, then understanding what the rules are constitutes wisdom. The way in which that wisdom manifests itself is in guiding the decisions we make about how to act, both generally and with respect to communication in particular. It's a game that came along before I was here. According to Kenneth Burke, it's like coming into a conversation that started before you got here and will keep on going. For all of us, our ultimate obligation is trying to figure out what those rules are and then abiding by them.

I've been interested in looking in particular at the "wisdom of the West." I'm a Westerner. I'm not trying to privilege the Western over other cultural

traditions—over African, or South Asian, or East Asian, or aboriginal North American cultural traditions—but for better and for worse we are products of Western civilization. Our language system and conceptual categories, academic institutions, social institutions of all various kinds bear the stamp of the Western world. I go back to the Greeks to get some insight into it, because that’s where we started. I’m an archeologist at heart, and I like to go back to “first things,” to origins. I started with that, and one of the things that I’ve learned is that, among other things, many of the earliest Greek thinkers, in their love of wisdom—their *philo-sophia*—were trying to understand the rules according to which the cosmos works. It involves the laws, if you will, the principles according to which the world itself, the whole process, is unfolding. Insofar as we can understand what those principles and rules are and live by them, then we’re playing by the rules and are living a “moral life.”

What do you think is the biggest challenge for communication ethics in a time of postmodernity?

What postmodernism has done, of course, is to challenge the whole universalist way of thinking about doing ethics. That whole rational paradigm, the notion of arguments, of reasoning, of logical coherence, of avoiding self-contradiction, all that good stuff. That is to me a very significant intellectual challenge and in some respects a practical challenge, too. It’s a healthy one because it, again, invites us not to take anything for granted—including the very method or technology of inquiry that we bring to bear on our thinking about ethics.

In some respects the challenges of postmodernity and of globalism are the same; that is, dealing with an enhanced awareness of difference, of disparity, of fragmentation, of the pre-eminence or predominance of perceptions of disunity and disharmony. The problem is that we are talking about “ethics” while trying to respect different folks and different cultures, and there’s a lot in me that’s relativistic. The ethics that function appropriately in another society won’t necessarily apply here, and vice-versa. If I push that far enough, who are we to say that democracy is the best for everyone in the world? I think that one of the things that postmodernism has done is to encourage us to ask those questions, to challenge the givens. I’m teaching a graduate seminar next semester on rhetoric and ethics, and in addition to reading Aristotle and John Dewey, we’re going to read John Caputo’s book,

and Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*, and Zygmunt Bauman's *Postmodern Ethics*. I am including these works because I want us to interrogate "traditional" conceptions of ethics and moral philosophy. I want us to challenge our assumptions, what we take for granted. This sort of interrogation and challenge, I think, is important, and I think that "postmodernism" (whatever that term actually means) provides for a very useful critique of our traditional ways of thinking about ethics.

I don't think that these questions are new with people like Zygmunt Bauman, or Michel Foucault, or Jacques Derrida. I think that Protagoras and Gorgias were asking essentially the same questions in the fifth century BCE: "Let's question received tradition, let's question received opinion, and let's challenge the very notion that there is such a thing as objective reality, that there really is a physical and a moral universe out there." That's what the Pythagoreans were about for example, trying to grasp the "ultimate realities" of the universe and trying to have their own personal conduct in tune with the sort of the proportions and numerical relationships that they saw governing the cosmos. There's a single principle I think that runs through Greek cosmological thinking—the notion of equilibrium, balance, proportion. The term *logos* actually means "proportion," and to live morally for Greek thinkers such as Pythagoras, Heraclitus, and even Aristotle is to live in harmony with the principle of balance and proportion that governs the cosmos. That's what Aristotle's doctrine of the Mean in moral virtue was all about.

Then the Greeks also give us this other, sophisticated stance, which says, "Wait a minute. How do you know there's a universe out there? Even if there is a universe, how do you know that what you know about it is the way it really is? Even if you could know it the way it really is, how could you possibly communicate that to other people?" These questions are basically restatements of Gorgias' "three theses," and I think they foreshadow and anticipate the kinds of challenges to tradition and accepted terminological categories that have been raised again in the last half-century or so. I don't think it's a new thing. I think it's a re-emergence of sophisticated thinking, actually. That brings us back to raising these kinds of fundamental questions. I think that's a significant challenge. I think that the challenges of globalism and postmodernism have to do with recognizing difference, disparity, particularity, fragmentation, the instability of the self, the problem of identity, and so on. There are multiple cultural groundings for different kinds of ethics; different cultures have different kinds of approaches.

Relativism allows us to respect difference and not to assume that our way of looking at ethics is the best way, the right way, or the only way. However, “What do you do about genocide?” for example. “What do you do about Rwanda?” You say, “well, you know, that’s their thing and in their culture that’s acceptable.” “What about the Holocaust?” “What about the imposition of fundamentalist Islamic law on women?” “What about the caste system in Hinduism?” “What do we do about what the universalists want to say is a violation of fundamental human rights?” There’s this tension in there. I think, indeed, this is one of the fundamental issues in our time that has to be dealt with. Yes, we want to respect difference and multiple approaches and ethics in the plural. Yet what happens when, in the name of cultural tradition, female genital mutilation—which is an ethnically biased way of putting it—occurs? When you call it “mutilation” there’s a culturally biased slant on it. There’s a more neutral term, female circumcision. I was called on that in class one time. An African-American female student said, “You have already taken a moral position on this issue by that very language. What it’s called by those who practice it is female circumcision.” What about these kinds of things? There’s an ongoing tension with all that.

What that leads me to think about, going back to your earlier question, is, “Is there something that would function as a universal ground that allows us to transcend culture in developing a ground of obligation?” You have to respect difference, but are there things that we have in common? I think that one of the things that has been submerged or marginalized by the recent interest over the last 20 or so years in postmodernist and post-colonialist approaches, is an interest in what we have in common rather than what distinguishes us. I think we have to look back at what we have in common. One of the things we have in common is, of course, our humanity. If we can agree on that, we may not agree what it means to be human yet, but at least we’ve got humanity in common and we might agree that our most fundamental ethical obligation is to respect one another’s humanity.

We’ve come as close as it’s possible to come, I suppose, to embracing that as a universal ground in the Geneva Conventions and the United Nations’ *Declaration of Human Rights*. These things are “universals” by consensus. Not everybody signed on to these documents, but there is a consensus across many cultures and among people in societies around the world—not all people in all societies, but by some people—that there are such things as human rights. By virtue of our very humanity, we deserve to be respected as humans, and so even in a time of war we can treat each other

with a certain amount of dignity. There is a fundamental human rights question at issue there. It's the same thing with female circumcision, or the caste system in India, or genocide in Rwanda or in Bosnia, or the oppression of women under the Taliban and in other Islamic states. We're all human and we have to treat each other with our own kind of individual dignity and autonomy. That is a possible guide to, or portal on, some kind of a universal grounding.

Things have been tried sporadically through the United Nations, which is the closest we have to a global "community center," to stop genocide, to stop oppression. Again, the United Nations is trying to secure the agreement of our fellow members in the community of nations. In any case, we agree to abide by these rules, that the rules of this game of living as societies on the face of the Earth are going to involve respect for each other's cultural traditions but at the same time to respect human life and autonomy. When a particular cultural tradition comes into conflict with this generally agreed upon sense of what basic human rights are, then something has got to give. What ought to give is the cultural tradition. We, not as the result of international pressure, but as a result of internal pressure, did away with slavery, which was an abomination in terms of human rights. We changed cultural traditions.

The other thing I would say in looking for first principles and groundings, while still trying to be responsive to the challenge of multiculturalism and to the postmodern critique, you have to have first principles. You've got to have some place to stand, but we have to recognize that those places we stand are always open to challenge and that we can be called upon to justify those. I once presented a paper called "Between a Rock and a Hard Place." The subtitle is "Searching for Groundless Grounds of Communication Ethics." There is a discussion in that paper which may end up in a chapter in the next book I'm going to write. It talks about the necessity of having an anchor by which to attach or on which to ground our justificatory apparatus. If I'm going to justify "X" action, it's going to be finally justifiable in terms of some first principle, but recognizing at the same time that those principles are not set in concrete. They are open to challenge and they are not quite themselves stable.

In Caputo's introduction to *Against Ethics*, he talks about his sense that he's on an island adrift in a sea on a starless night with nothing to navigate by. At the same time, though it's a floating island, it's the only place you have. You have to hook in somewhere. Otherwise, everything is adrift and

you have nothing to stand on. As Archimedes said, “If you give me a place to stand and a lever, I can move the Earth.” You have to have that place to stand in order to go forward and act. If you don’t have a place to stand, you can’t move outward. The ground sinks away. You try to thrust upward in quicksand and you go downward. So there has got to be a place that you can stand for the moment, recognizing that it’s slowly, slowly sinking below and you have to get to this other stone, some other relatively firm place. In that respect, ethics is kind of an ongoing search for points of relative stability from which we can act, recognizing that those points of stability are transitory. This, again, goes back to the Sophists, and for that matter back to Heraclitus—everything is in flow, everything is in flux.

Another challenge that postmodernism has raised is that it calls into question our traditional ways of thinking about ethics. My sense of ethics involves the experience of agency or choice or volition. That is, I do feel like I’ve got a choice to make here. I can think about a problem and solve it. To be principled is to think about my actions and ask myself, “What are my obligations here and what justifies my choice?” If I can’t justify this moral judgment then what basis do I have for acting on the problem? That’s a very Aristotelian, very rationalistic, approach. If I can’t come up with a rationale for my choices, then I have no rational basis for making them. Therefore, I have no actual ground. I can throw it to chance basically. “Let’s see how the dice come out,” as opposed to making up our minds and thinking it through, or looking in a sacred book such as the *Bible* or *Koran*. We’ve got to make up our own minds and to ask, “How do I know what I think is the right thing to do is really the right thing to do?” I have to see if I can make an argument for it. I have to see if I can indeed provide justifications for my choice.

One of the gifts of postmodernism is that it has put back to the forefront this challenge to confidence in our own thinking. It challenges the very notion of agency, of choice, of the self as an origin of action. The postmodernist critique is directed at a legacy of modernity, and specifically of the Enlightenment project and the scientific revolution going back to Francis Bacon and his successors, which held that we can be the masters of nature. I think there is an arrogance there, and I think that’s why the postmodernist critique is so important, because it has debunked that conceit.

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