

A Conversation about Communication Ethics with Kenneth E. Andersen

How did you become interested in studying communication ethics?

It really grew out of my doctoral dissertation. I had done a historical study for my master's thesis. When I went to University of Wisconsin for doctoral work, Fred Haberman looked at me and asked, "What are you going to do for a dissertation?" I said, "Well, I've done a historical study. I guess I'd like to do something empirical, experimental." He said, "Fine. On what subject?" I said, "Well, I've always been kind of intrigued by the area of *ethos*." This was in my first interview, mind you. He said, "Good. That's something you ought to pursue," and that sort of set the train in motion.

I was classically oriented, so I began going back to Aristotle and all the original sources. Aristotle talks about ethical proof as something you create on the occasion. One of the difficulties of being an empiricist is you have to be able to operationally define terms. So I was casting about for definitions of *ethos*. I talked to a lot of the scholars and one of them particularly struck me. Wilbur Samuel Howell said, almost in Supreme Court language, "I don't know what it is, but I know it when I see it."

I said, "That doesn't quite cut it." When I was looking at a lot of the research that had been done on *ethos*, I found that people would sometimes talk about prior reputation of a communicator. Sometimes they would talk about the content of the speech. They would say if you had these things, these things, and these things—that creates ethical proof. The problem, of course, is ethical proof for whom? I became very focused in my research on the notion that *ethos* had to be defined in terms of the perceptions of the receiver. If we're going to talk about ethical proof or what is seen as good moral character—if we're going to use the Aristotelian approach—we have to talk about moral character in terms of the perceptions of the audience, if you will. I became very listener centered or receiver centered. That was kind of a genesis of a lot of my thinking about communication ethics.

The real breakthrough for me came when I was asked to write *Persuasion: Theory and Practice* for Allyn & Bacon Publishers. At that point, I had to say, "Well, I need to have a chapter on ethics, that's an obvious perspective." That forced me to think through a lot of things, including the effort to ground persuasion in what I call an ethical context: namely, that ethics exists to serve the community, to serve the polis. Ethics does not exist just to serve the source or the immediate receiver, but in a larger sense serves the whole polity. Then one begins to say rhetoric has an ethical function, because

rhetoric has to be ethical if it's going to serve the interest of the collective. So that is sort of how it all began to fit together for me.

How do you define communication ethics?

In my view, we've got to start out with an assumption, I guess, that ethics is a dimension in all the communication process. It is a dimension that is relevant to all the actors in the communication process—the source or the originator, the person that initiates communication; the person who receives, interprets, hears, reads communication; and people, who in effect are further agents of transmission—the Tom Brokaws of the world, or the friend that you say, “Don't tell that guy, but I really am interested in him,” with exactly the intent of saying, “You go tell him as fast as you can!”

So, one begins to say that in all the activity of communication, in whatever role we may happen to be in at the moment, there is an ethical dimension. This doesn't mean we're conscious of it. In fact, I'm very much of the view that so much of our communication is habitual that we often don't call to mind the ethical dimension. I'm a believer in habit. I'm a believer in Aristotle's notion that virtues are matters of practice that become habitual and recurring. You begin to talk about an ethical dimension where people are behaving in a particular pattern, which is more or less ethical in that situation. I think of communication ethics as being a study of the various dimensions of the good. I use “the good” not in a practical utilitarian sense but in a value oriented sense—much as Aristotle would—of the good in communication activity.

To tease out the ethical ramifications has been one of my projects. For example, when I was doing the lecture circuit as the NCA President Elect, I talked about the responsibility of third parties in the ethical pattern. I'll back up. When I did my first persuasion book I articulated what I called the 200% Theory of Responsibility. I said that the source has an obligation to assume the fullest measure of responsibility that one is capable of fulfilling. That responsibility falls upon the source at a 100% level. Simultaneously for the receiver, you don't want to give over to someone else the responsibility or the right to make your decisions. So you have a 100% responsibility to listen, to be critical, to evaluate, to reject, to demand more information, to reject, whatever the case may be.

I started out saying responsibility involved the active parties, the whole audience. Then it occurred to me there is really another dimension to that.

There is a larger society, a larger arena in which we can talk about third persons. I mentioned Tom Brokaw who narrated the news. I am reminded of David Brinkley's eyebrows and the concern by some of the President's people that Brinkley was making sarcastic remarks about them and he would flick his eyebrow at certain statements when he was reading them. There are all kinds of third party roles. You overhear somebody on the subway. You see your neighbors abusing a child. You have intermediary roles that you're serving. There are a lot of third party roles that we assume in the society. There is a responsibility that includes those individuals too. Now those responsibilities in every case will be unique to the situation, unique to one's ability to fulfill the role of intermediary.

There are all kinds of things one can talk about here as to the limits of how you determine one's responsibility. À la Aristotle, the amount of responsibility that falls on each individual is an individual thing. It's determined by the capacities of the individual, the specific situation, a whole set of exigencies and circumstances. To really assess the amount of responsibility any communicator, listener, receiver, and third party has, one has to take into account the wholeness of the situation in trying to make a judgment of what that responsibility may be.

Each person makes his or her own communicative choice to be ethical.

Yes. You have to take account of the capacities of the individual in the particular case. I'm a great believer in Aristotle's doctrine of choices. You don't ask a five-year-old to accept the same level of responsibility you expect a 15-year-old to accept. You don't expect someone of diminished mental capacity, or you don't expect someone who has not the access to certain pieces of information, to behave in the same way as somebody that has fuller access. On the other hand you can hold people responsible for refusing to get access to the information that would have made a difference. So it's a very complicated equation to work out. The goal, I think, is to sensitize people to the ethical dimension and to develop habit patterns that will move you along in the direction of consistently making more optimal ethical choices.

Do you understand communication ethics as distinct from rhetorical ethics?

You're talking about continua here. It's like the fallacy of the beard, how many hairs does it take to be a beard? One hair doesn't constitute a beard—

1,000 hairs don't do it. Well, you're going to end up saying that a million hairs won't do it because at some point you're going to have to identify a specific number and the fallacy trips over. I think that obviously we deal in different communicative situations. When you think about something as a rhetorical situation, speaker to audience, then you conceive of the situation differently than when you're talking to your spouse or to your children, or in a small group of people.

It doesn't seem to me that the issue of the communication activity and judgment of what is ethical and unethical in communication necessarily change depending on the size of the situation, of the audience. There are factors that come into play. It's a different situation if the same speech that someone is making to a large audience is transmitted by radio. It's a different situation if it's printed in the newspaper, such as *The New York Times*, even if they do include *ad hoc* interjections. There are differences, but the notion that one does not therefore have to talk about the ethical continua here is important. I'm looking for an ethic that is, in effect, grounded in the nature of the communication process. The ethical values should be those that serve the ultimate goal of that communication process for all involved—including the existing society and the one yet to be. Now, I'll tell you frankly that gets you into real difficulty if you were to say, "Well, my goal is to steal people's gold eyeteeth!"

One of the things I included in my persuasion book that I've always been very proud of, and nobody else has really paid any attention to, was a chapter on a totalitarian ethic. "What would a persuasion theory look like if I were writing it from a totalitarian society perspective, where I could control the ability to reward or punish at will?" One could talk about Saddam Hussein, where one has the ability to manipulate all the rewards because he holds all the power. This gives you a very different persuasion theory and "ethical" theory than one presumes in a democratic society.

Implicitly, I think one has to say, "The ethics I'm talking about are necessarily grounded in a particular concept of democratic interaction, of freedom of choice, of respect for the individual as someone of moral worth, of several other constituents of the rhetorical dynamic. I'm not talking about those other settings unless I specifically identify differences." Now, that may give us a problem when we begin talking about such things as universal ethical constraints et cetera, but we'll talk about that later.

What is the relationship between an individual's ethical choice and institutional enactments of ethical choice?

I think responsibility ultimately devolves on individuals. Although I've made the argument elsewhere, and it's one I hold to, society is also responsible for the kind of ethical norms it creates. It seems to me that whenever we begin to communicate one with another and when we communicate within society, we're tacitly negotiating the ethical constraints. We're agreeing how far we can go with x, y, and z. It still comes down to the individual who has to assume that degree of responsibility which is proper for him or her. At the same time one has the right to presume that other people are going to assume the responsibility they have and ask/insist that they do so.

One of the things that I would sometimes get on my students about, when I had students, was about their refusal to critique one another: "I'm not going to 'dis' somebody else." To which my comment was, "You don't respect them enough to challenge their idea? You don't respect them enough to say you're worthy of my disagreeing or my saying, 'Have you thought about this, that, and the other?'"

One of the views I have is that whenever one sticks one's head up to become a rhetorician, to raise your hand, you make yourself vulnerable. Not just in the sense that people may reject your ideas, but that the exchange in communication may cause you to reject your own ideas. You may passionately advocate today what you tomorrow may say is wrong. You're caught in a kind of conundrum: "I've got to advocate and tell you what I believe, but I do that in a provisional sense and maybe I'll discover that this isn't right."

Please talk more about "my perception of your unethical behavior." How do we negotiate differences without just saying, "You think differently, I think differently; c'est la vie"?

Well, it depends. I think there are times when it's all right to say, "*C'est la vie.*" My wife will sometimes say, "Do you like this pin or do you like this scarf?" It doesn't really matter to me one way or the other. It's fine with me. But on serious matters it's clear that we do need to be able to talk to one another and try to work out some kind of basis on which we can operate. If we're going to try to build a peace treaty, if we're going to try to build a relationship, if we're going to work out how we're going to relate to one another in future, we have to establish a communication process that enables us to define how we will approach those kinds of things.

Often people can start with very different premises, different foundations, different groundwork. Ultimately it'll come down to some kind of *modus operandi* where there is agreement between parties about a preferred process. Some people may develop an ethic that is heavily grounded in religious tradition; other people may come from a humanist background. It might well be that they find certain things on which they will agree as a pattern of behavior. This is a basis on which we can work and relate. I think so often we assume that our values are shared when upon exploration we discover they are not. Sometimes we don't understand the implications of the differences in grounding that we have.

I don't think democracy ever said, "Everything goes!" You and I might well disagree about whether pornography is this or that. I will have to tell you candidly that I was thrilled that *Avenue Q* won the Tony Award, because I think it is one of the most stimulating and provocative and useful musicals that we've seen in a long time. On the other hand it opens with the song "My Life Sucks." It goes on from there using an awful lot of four letter words that I'm not always comfortable saying, and it's not at all a vulgar show. It's a wonderfully revealing show of what it is like to be a brand new English major trying to make your way in the cruel, cruel world among other things.

I think that certain of the concepts that we have that are requirements of a democracy are in long term the protection against the excesses of democracy. You can make arguments. You have a right to express your free will. You have a right to take up competing positions. Those are important correctives it seems to me. On the other hand, I think there are issues where the state, if you will, treads at its peril. John Cribbet, a law professor and former Chancellor at Illinois said, "Societies are sometimes better known by the laws they do not need to pass, than the laws they do pass." I think we often make a mistake of trying to legislate morality with rules that do not take account of all the situational realities. While I'm a kind of rule-person, I like to think about what's the utilitarian value, if you will, of having this rule? Maybe a better expression would be, let's have a robust generalization that will help guide my behavior. I certainly believe in that concept. I also know that in any particular case I may have five or six values I'm trying to achieve. I've got to decide which is more important in this situation, which is most harmful, most violent. There are a whole lot of things that go into working out a response.

I think that you are going to see a return in our society to the question of whether or not we can do some of the stem cell research stuff. I think that

Reagan's death, Nancy Reagan's plea, et cetera, is going to open up that arena. I think you're going to see important public policy debate on that. I think you're going to see some attitude change in the American public. There will be people who will be convinced that's not the right move. There will be other people who will be convinced that it's a long overdue move. So we'll work that one out. It is also to say that you can disagree without being disagreeable. You can disagree for your own personal value. On one hand you are entitled to your own personal value structure, but you are not entitled to impose that on another person, in particular kinds of cases.

What are your thoughts about a universal communication ethic?

That's a very troubling question for me. I doubt that it is possible. If you look at family units, or if you look in certain structures, you can see communality. The problem is that the ethical bases don't extend beyond that unit. One can think about a tribe or a clan having certain principles in which they are committed to each other, and they respect each other as beings of moral worth, people who are worthy of protection and support. On the other hand they may define an awful lot of people as outside of that, not worthy of respect, not human. At some level you can find commonalities; but the difficulty comes up when you begin saying, "How far will you extend these views? How far will you go out beyond family, or clan, or tribe, or race, or religious entity, or whatever?"

I think there are universals to which we would aspire. If you think about The Declaration of Independence, I think there are some universals there. If you think about The Declaration of Human Rights, it seems to me that those aspirations are valuable and we could, in a sense, see them as models. Now, granted there are some people who would reject those as being inappropriate and not reasonable.

I'm an optimist about the notion that on the whole we as people are making progress toward a better global situation. One can think about Aristotle and the whole notion of slavery, and the irrelevance of women to anything that matters. Then consider the fact that in even in Africa, female circumcision is slowing down. People are beginning to speak against it. You're seeing in Iran and Iraq some groups are talking for a more democratic, a more flexible kind of regime. One could look at the tensions within the Catholic Church. My wife was a member of a denomination that did not ordain

women. She changed denominations and became ordained. I think there are things that are habits and customs that we can see and evolve beyond.

The whole idea of aspiration is exceedingly crucial. We need to set a goal that is not so far above where we are that it's just ridiculous to even conceive of it. On the other hand we need to set a goal that's better than where we are at the moment. You and I can disagree about what those goals are, but if we talk about the notion of spiraling upward, as we begin to move up toward achievement, then we'll see a higher level. You begin to spiral upward, or you could do the reverse and spiral downward into a bad situation. I think again that's the modification of Aristotle's doctrine of choices. You make a good choice that makes possible a new range of good choices, which makes possible another new range of good choices, et cetera.

We're in an information age. The amount of information that we have available to us doubles every six months or less. Some individuals may have more or less information that is actually accessible to them. But if you think about the spread of communication across the world through the media—radio, television, movies—and granted a lot of people don't have access, it seems to me that we're creating an environment in which it's more and more possible for these general universals to begin to develop. If you show a vision of a better life to people, they want the better life. Some people may want something that is a vision of a better life that I personally don't think is a better life. I do think there is a possibility of progress in this sense. It seems to me that the notion of respect for other human beings, of the conception that human life is valued, that you're going to accord people certain rights and responsibilities, is a vision that is going to increasingly spread across the world.

What would be some of the elements that would either inhibit or enhance the possibility of respect for other human beings?

Well, I think the ability to communicate across boundaries is absolutely amazing. You think about the development of a world economy that's going to bind us together. It used to be what happened in China didn't matter to people outside that country. That's certainly not true any longer. People who are losing jobs in this country are beginning to worry about what's happening in India. They're beginning to worry about poverty and pay scales, about diseases spread with modern air transportation. There's no protection

anymore, there's no insulation; Formosan termites are loose in New Orleans. We're in a different world than we were before.

Our world is one in which we have to deal with the world *qua* world. I think it's going to take us a while in public policy to make that shift. We really have to adopt a very different view about how the world is going to function. If you look at the history of the state, you go from the cities and states to nations, to confederations, to the European Common Market. I'm not saying we're necessarily going to have a world government, but we're moving in a direction that to some degree means we have to have worked out relationships with a whole lot of people. While trade and contact and other things perhaps precede this in some sense, they are also dependent on ethical relationships.

I'm very worried about the degree to which knowledge has become so specialized and so compartmentalized. I worry that we're not preparing our students with, what I would call, a really core liberal arts education: to communicate, to reason, to think. In one sense higher education was always about getting a job, about preparing you for a career of some sort—but it was preparing you for a lifetime in which you would “flourish” in your existence. It seems to me we've tipped the scales too much to getting a job and away from the notion of laying the groundwork for a constantly enriching life. It's the life of the mind, the aesthetic dimensions, and the arts—the richness of an integrated human being. I think we've fallen short in a lot of our higher education. That's something we really need to go back to or more forward to for all of society—not just some of it. We need to stress the core liberal arts that are basic to everything we do. Then you lay a job, a business orientation, a major, and other things on top of that and they feed back and forth to each other. I think that's something we've got work on. From my point of view, the exposure and the development of extensive discussion of communication ethics is an essential component of higher education. You can go through an awful lot of classes and programs and there will never once be a reference to an ethical dimension. That's scary.

I think we have lost sight of some very crucial values. Anytime you say there is this single goal, this object, that determinant, I get very worried. We need to live in a much more multi-dimensional world in which we see an array of different goals, different intensities, different priorities. We have to think about the degree to which any action doesn't subvert one set of values or one particular value at the same time it enables you to move forward toward what you want.

You said that ethical values serve the ends of communication. Would you talk more about that?

I think I would see those as reciprocal processes. If you think about the ongoing pattern of things, the one becomes the other in my view. You are trying to get some short-term goal that you have at a particular moment. But simultaneously you're also trying to serve other long-term goals, perhaps not fully consciously. In persuasion class, I used to talk about the salesman that succeeds in selling some poor product, but then has to go back and try to sell it the second time around. You got the first sale and you blew all the other sales. When you think about your reputation, you develop that reputation over a long period of time. We are always engaged in the multiplicity of goals we're trying to serve. We're defining ourselves, and at the same time we're being ourselves we're defining our self. Our communication on one hand is designed to influence other, but at the same it necessarily influences ourselves.

Rhetoric serves many purposes from the individual's point of view, but it also serves many purposes from the receiver's point of view. You want information, you want advice; you want exchange of material. I like to know if there's a new car out; I like to know what the price of gasoline is this week at the local gas station; there are zillions of things I want from the communication process. "What does the society want? Does society want some standard, if you will, on the basis for how we conduct discourse with one another?" It wants to provide a mechanism by which people can make coordinated decisions.

I think back to the Carroll C. Arnold speech I did last fall to reinvigorate the whole notion of the civic culture. We want a dynamic civic culture in which people are involved in making cooperative decisions in which they'll live with the results even when their view does not prevail. When you hear a lot of the attacks on those terrible justices that are making all these decisions; that really is a signal, I think, to say that the democratic process didn't have the chance to play out in full. Take the gay marriage issue. I would hope, as an example, that we don't have any kind of preemptive decision one way or the other coming down from above; either the national Supreme Court or from the Federal Constitutional Amendment. Let's see how that dynamic plays out. You know it was not many years ago that if I had married a black woman, we were not married in a lot of states in this union—even though I had been legitimately been married in my own state. We have made some

progress. Other people will say it is not enough. And it isn't. But, I remember the shock when I went to Dallas, Texas and saw the blue sign for colored water fountains in 1956. I was just stunned. I grew up in Iowa. I didn't know.

We need to talk about the functions that communication processes serve for all the individuals engaged in the communication activity and for the larger polis as a whole. Then one can begin to say there are certain ethical imperatives that one can discern, discuss, and agree need to be the norm.

In addressing themes in your scholarship, you've mentioned several writers. Are there others who have influenced your work in communication ethics?

I need to qualify my answer by saying that my "teachers"—including students and colleagues—were for me more important than books. In part that is because they introduced me to the books; they commissioned papers; they asked me to comment on dissertation chapters; they disputed my interpretations.

Lil Wagner, my undergraduate debate coach, was my professor in at least five courses. She taught the seminar on classical rhetoric, argumentation, advanced public speaking. And we talked about ethical issues a lot for several years.

How can I leave out the impact of Ted Clevenger, of my wife Mary with her coauthoring of the *ethos* chapters in the persuasion book, her dissertation on basic textbooks' treatment of ethics, of Charles Follette's dissertation on Richard Weaver, et cetera, et cetera?

Perhaps the most important book for me is one that never saw print. B. J. Diggs, Philosophy professor at Illinois, directed work I did in two separate semesters of a program of "Study in a Second Discipline" at Illinois. I participated in many courses through that program and several seminars with Diggs. In one we reviewed a manuscript on ordinary morality he was writing, rewriting, and rewriting. It was never published. But it opened a whole world to me. And Diggs was very much one to bind ethics to the larger society in government and in law.

Key authors obviously include Aristotle—*On Rhetoric*—first in the Lane Cooper version and then in much more valid and extensive translations. *The Politics*. *The Poetics*. But most of all, *Nichomachean Ethics* coming well after its grounding the *On Rhetoric*. Second, John Rawls—a source that has largely been ignored by our field. I find that incomprehensible. He was one of the giants of philosophy of the 20th century. We know him not. *A Theory*

of Justice has profound ethical implications for communication although they need to be derived from his work—they are not bullet-pointed for us. Third, Sissela Bok's *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life*. I used this in my ethics class and loved it. A rich resource, as is *Secrets*. Fourth, Frank Haiman's *Speech and Law in a Free Society*. Haiman understood there is an ethical dimension relevant to communication activity and links this to free speech concerns. I could add lots of sources from our own field: Dick Johannesen, Ron Arnett, Tom Nilsen, Jim Jakska and Mike Pritchard, and on and on. We have so many colleagues to value.

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