

A Conversation about Communication Ethics with Michael J. Hyde

How did you become interested in studying communication ethics?

I did my graduate work in the Department of Communication at Purdue University. Both my M.A. and Ph.D. programs, however, included intensive study in philosophy under the guidance of Calvin Schrag. I was especially interested in continental philosophy: existentialism, phenomenology, hermeneutics, critical theory, and deconstruction. It was a wonderful education that influenced me to think about how these two disciplines could be brought together for the benefit of both. Clearly one of the linchpins was ethics and its relationship to the theory and practice of rhetoric.

A major catalyst for my work in communication ethics was my father suffering renal (kidney) failure. He had that disease for four years. It proved to be a horrible adventure in the hell of high tech medicine. The experience incited me to narrow my focus in communication ethics. A central question for me became how advancements in medical technology were affecting the health-care expectations of patients. I was awarded a fellowship from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation that allowed me to concentrate on this topic. One result of my research was my book *The Call of Conscience: Heidegger and Levinas, Rhetoric and the Euthanasia Debate*. Communication ethics was a central concern of this 10-year longitudinal study of the moral justifiability and social acceptability of physician-assisted suicide.

How do you define communication ethics?

The study of communication ethics entails an appreciation of “rhetorical competence”—how people go about making cogent and persuasive arguments, how they tell stories that can move others to think and act in morally just ways. From a philosophical standpoint, what fascinated me about the topic was its ontological status, as clarified by such phenomenologists as Martin Heidegger. Although he does not see himself as an “ethicist,” Heidegger is certainly interested in uncovering those conditions that make possible the human capacity for rhetorical competence and its ethical (“authentic”) use.

My approach to communication ethics also receives much guidance from the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur, Jürgen Habermas, Jacques Derrida, and Emmanuel Levinas. These philosophers certainly do not walk hand-in-hand when it comes to an appreciation of communication ethics.

Nevertheless, I find their respective projects to be essential in generating a robust appreciation of the scope and function of the topic. I attempt to illustrate this point in my most recent book, *The Life-Giving Gift of Acknowledgment (A Philosophical and Rhetorical Inquiry)*. The book draws heavily from continental philosophy in making a case for how we need acknowledgment as much as we need such other easily taken-for-granted things as air, blood, and a beating heart. Without the life-giving gift of acknowledgment, we are destined to exist in ways that are marked by the loneliness of social death. One senses the presence of this state of being, for example, in the lives of college students who “don’t fit in with the crowd” or who are suffering from a disturbance brought on by breaking up with their girlfriend or boyfriend. “Where art thou?” Not hearing a familiar “Here I am!” can sometimes even lead a young person to admit that he or she “feels like dying.” Like their teachers who publish so as not to *perish* and who then worry incessantly over who, if anyone, is even reading their work, students are an especially vulnerable population when it comes to dealing with the hurt of being unacknowledged by their peers—and, to be sure, their teachers. Acknowledgment has much to do with communication ethics and rhetorical competence.

Do you prefer the term “rhetorical ethics” rather than “communication ethics” because of the issue of rhetorical competence?

Not necessarily. Although when one is thinking as a rhetorical critic, he or she is interested not just in “what” a text means, but primarily in “how” it means. The effectiveness of a discourse has much to do with how it is structured, arranged, designed for the audience at hand. For example, it’s one thing for a doctor to say to a patient, “We just got back your tests, and I’m sorry to report to you that you have cancer,” and then he or she walks out of the room. The communication is very clear, but it doesn’t take into consideration all the other things that are going on in and affecting that patient’s life and health. When you start to consider carefully, “How should I say this to this individual?” you are emphasizing a rhetorical turn in your behavior. For me, communication ethics necessarily includes rhetorical ethics. It is the rhetorical dimension of communication that plays an essential role in transforming space and time into “dwelling places” (*ethos*; pl. *ethea*), where people can deliberate about and “know together” (*con-scientia*) some matter

of interest. Such dwelling places define the grounds, the abodes or habitats, where a person's ethics and moral character take form.

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

Shortly after I received my Ph.D., I published the edited volume *Communication Philosophy in the Technological Age*, which contained original essays by philosophers of communication and rhetoric. The book reflected my interest in how ethical issues arise as communication becomes more and more technologically oriented. My specific work in communication ethics and medicine grew out of this early interest, which, in turn, led to my "infatuation" with the phenomenon of "the call of conscience." As both Martin Heidegger and Emmanuel Levinas make clear, an ontological appreciation of this phenomenon reveals how human existence is structured spatially and temporally at any given moment and how this structure calls on us to assume the ethical responsibility of affirming our freedom through resolute choice as we attempt to give meaning to the world. Assuming this responsibility is especially crucial when a personal crisis happens in our everyday interactions with things and with others. Today's ongoing euthanasia debate is a result of such a crisis, whereby people must decide what constitutes the "good life" and the "good death." In *The Call of Conscience* I examined how rhetoric functions to sound such a call. With this book, I came to realize that whether people are on the side of the "right to die" or the "right to life," the issue of acknowledgment is right in one's face. Being all alone when you are sick and dying is a terrible way to live and a terrible way to go. Such is the case whether the patient's call of "Where art thou?" is intended as a plea for life or for death.

The Life-Giving Gift of Acknowledgment was thus the necessary next step in my research program in communication ethics. The book contains 11 case studies that address the question "What would your life be like if nobody acknowledged your existence?" Taken together, the case studies unfold as an ontological theory of acknowledgment. With all of these cases I kept confronting the issue of how, as beings in need of acknowledgment, we embody a "metaphysical desire" for perfection: achieving a state of completeness in our lives. This issue warranted more careful consideration than I had so far given it; hence, my current book project on "coming to terms with

perfection.” For me, conscience, acknowledgment, and perfection walk hand-in-hand.

Like both conscience and acknowledgment, perfection admits a certain ontological significance: it is something that is essential to our well-being. “What would life be like if it were never informed by moral consciousness?” “What would life be like if no one cared enough to give you the time of day?” “What would life be like if we lacked any desire to improve the human condition, to perfect the goodness it is capable of producing?”

I thus hope to stimulate an awareness of a relationship, a process, that is too easily taken for granted and forgotten by people who are satisfied with their particular take on what they understand perfection to be and who therefore are too easily blinded to the negative consequences that may follow from their respective worldviews. I submit that it is important to keep these specific matters in mind, especially in an age like ours when, for example, science and technology are being employed more than ever before to create what has been termed our ever-growing instant-makeover, self-improvement culture, where anything less than perfection is pathology. Kenneth Burke provides important direction for grasping the problem with his discussion of how human beings are “rotten with perfection.” Coming to terms with the nature of perfection defines a requirement for maintaining the well-being of our personal and public existence. Human survival and dignity call for some degree of perfection operating in our lives, although how we define, express, and live whatever this perfection is can be quite problematic. The euthanasia debate, for example, certainly raises the issue of perfection with all of its rhetoric on “the good life” and “the good death.”

In thinking about the applications you are now drawing for Martin Heidegger’s work in a postmodern era, are there aspects of his writing that remain consistent across time?

People like Jacques Derrida, Emmanuel Levinas, and others who were influenced by Martin Heidegger’s work admit that its richness and ambiguity encourage a constant reconsideration of his philosophy. Indeed, Heidegger’s theory of hermeneutics emphasizes this very point.

I think it’s fair to say that the way I go about doing work in communication ethics involves turning to certain philosophical schools of thought for directives that provide ways for deepening an appreciation of the role of rhetoric in our everyday lives. At the same time, however, I am interested in

showing how a fundamental understanding of rhetoric may provide directives for dealing with the shortcomings of the philosophy that I am using. I always try to have my work exhibit this double movement.

My recent essay “A Matter of the Heart: Epideictic Rhetoric and Heidegger’s Call of Conscience” is a case in point. The essay appears in *Heidegger and Rhetoric*, edited by Daniel Gross and Ansgar Kemmann. The contributors are both philosophers and rhetoricians. We were asked to read Heidegger’s as-yet untranslated 1924 lecture course on Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* and to discuss how Heidegger’s interpretation of Aristotle contributes to the rhetorical tradition. How important was rhetoric to Heidegger? I think people are going to be amazed when his lecture course is translated because they are going to see, as Nancy Struever put it in her contribution, that what you have with Heidegger’s lecture course is one of the most original and important readings of Aristotle in the 20th century.

With my contribution, I tried to use Heidegger to take us beyond Aristotle’s notion of epideictic rhetoric, while at the same time using Aristotle’s notion of epideictic to critique Heidegger, especially as he moves away from the importance of everyday discourse in his later philosophy. The critique reflects my commitment to the teachings of Cicero. I see myself as an advocate of civic republicanism, or what is sometimes called civic humanism. Here you have the argument that training in philosophy is essential for the education of the orator, but it is the art of eloquence (*oratio*), practiced by this advocate of the *vita activa*, that instructs one on how to equip (*ornare*) knowledge of a subject in such a way that it can assume a publicly accessible form and function effectively in the social and political arena. In Cicero’s words, the “severance between the tongue and the brain” is an impediment to this civic-minded, persuasive, and moral endeavor. For the good of the community, philosophy and rhetoric must work together. Cicero would have it no other way. To be drawn by philosophical study away from active life is contrary to moral duty. As Heidegger developed his philosophy, a sincere concern for the authenticity of rhetoric disappeared from view.

Throughout the history of Western philosophy, such a disappearance has never been a healthy sign for rhetoric. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger still mentions how the practice of rhetoric has an important role to play in the building of authentic community. But after that, his ontological investigations of the “essence” of language and its relationship to the “event of Being” are more attuned to the “poetic” ways of discourse, to how “language speaks” the “truth” of things through discursive acts of disclosure. This

nonrhetorical orientation, however, is not without its problems. For example, when caught up in the midst of life's contingencies, of sociopolitical happenings that can bring us to our knees and perhaps send us to our graves, can we afford to merely sit back and wait and see what the event of Being has in store for us? When the sufferings of others provoke us to hear the call of conscience, is it enough to release ourselves from the practical and ethical matters at hand so that we may properly stay attuned to "the call of Being"? The later Heidegger seems oblivious to Cicero's warning about the danger of allowing a severance to occur between the tongue and the brain. This danger must always be a central concern of communication ethics.

My interest in communication ethics has me look at everyday existence to see what is actually going on *now* in the social and political arenas in order to determine how research in communication ethics might help us improve the process. If that requires that I seek direction from the classical period or the postmodern period, so be it. Sometimes Aristotle and Cicero fit the bill; other times Heidegger, Levinas, and other postmodern thinkers can prove quite helpful in directing and advancing one's theoretical gaze.

People can get so caught up in analytic frames that we lose sight of the social world in which people live and make ethical choices.

Yes, theories can get in the way of one's seeing what is actually going on before one's eyes. Being blinded by a commitment to Aristotle's or Heidegger's or Levinas's philosophical worldview is always a problem. Still, the appropriation, revision, and construction of theory is an invaluable endeavor. One must learn the notes before one attempts to write the symphony. At any given moment, one must turn from emphasizing theory to leaping head-first into the muck and mire of everyday existence in order to ensure the empirical integrity of the research at hand. If you're doing work in communication and rhetoric, it seems to me that sooner or later you have to come back to earth, take your theory and apply it to see if it has any real purchase. I am an advocate of the case study approach to scholarship. Phenomenology and hermeneutical philosophy are my favorite theoretical ways of getting to the ontological heart of the matter at hand. Unlike Levinas, I do not believe that ontology comes *after* ethics.

Can you clarify that last point?

Emmanuel Levinas maintains that Heideggerian ontology subordinates our relationship with others to the relationship with Being in general. Hence, according to Levinas, Heidegger's thinking on the call of conscience leads us down the wrong path. For this call originates, Levinas claims, not in "the temporality of Being," but rather in the "the temporality of the interhuman," in the face-to-face encounter between the self and the other. This encounter, according to Levinas, defines the primordial domain of ethics—a domain where the self, existing as it does in constant proximity to the other, is always in the situation of trying to come to terms with the otherness or alterity of the other, with what the self can never totally be in mind and body, with a fundamental difference embedded in life that forms the existential basis of all forms of social critique because its mere presence calls into question the self's egoist tendencies and know-it-all attitudes. Although Heidegger's philosophy does not focus on the moral character of human being, he certainly makes clear that this being (ontology) must be existing before there can be any talk about any form of otherness. Jacques Derrida, for example, makes much of this very point in his critical assessment of both philosophers. Still, as Heidegger admits, otherness is necessarily a part of the self's existence. Borrowing one of his phenomenological terms, I think it would be fair to say that ontology and ethics are "equiprimordial."

What are your thoughts about a universal communication ethic?

That's a good follow-up question. And a difficult one, too. I am presently struggling with the question in my work on perfection, which I referred to earlier.

A universal communication ethic necessarily raises the issue of perfection. Perfection is at work in our everyday lives—in our thoughts and actions—as we attempt to sustain and advance the progress we have achieved in the struggle to survive, understand the world, be better persons, and live the good life. Our passion for perfection is admirable; it defines who we are as metaphysical animals, creatures who have a longing, a nostalgia, for security, comfort, and completeness in our lives. This same passion is humbling, too. The 18th century Enlightenment philosopher David Hume reminds us of this fact when he notes how we can form ideas of perfection (e.g., God) that go beyond the empirical limits of everyday experience and, in so doing, call attention to our own contemptible limitations. Indeed, despite

our many excellences, human beings are still animals, fallible creatures. At our best, we live lives that, at one and the same time, advance and forever fall short of our ever having it all together before we pass away. There is a *significant insignificance* to our being. Hume goes as far as to say that “the life of man is of no greater importance to the universe than that of an oyster.” Perhaps he is right.

Unlike David Hume, however, I am not ready to admit that in the great cosmological scheme of things, human beings are of no greater importance than some marine bivalve mollusk. Such a skeptical assessment of humankind is called into question by the openness, the objective uncertainty, of our spatial and temporal being. We are always underway toward what is not yet. The future lies before us. The openness here allows for hope. Despite our shortcomings, we are creatures capable of good things. Coming to some agreement about what exactly constitutes such goodness calls on our capacity for collaborative deliberation and thus the communicative and rhetorical competence that allows us to speak our minds about contestable matters. Is not this entire process a dynamic in communication ethics?

I turn to philosophers like Martin Heidegger and Emmanuel Levinas to answer this question in a positive and, I hope, robust and instructive manner. Jürgen Habermas provides the most famous affirmative answer to the question with his “theory of communicative action.” Here we are told of the “validity conditions” of “the ideal community of communication,” wherein “competence” of “communicative rationality” can thrive. These conditions include: choosing a comprehensible expression, intending to communicate a true proposition, expressing intentions truthfully, and choosing an appropriate expression with respect to the dialogical situation at hand.

I find Habermas’s work instructive; he provides us with at least a scaffolding for a universal theory of communication ethics. His theory can serve the interests of rhetoricians who would expose the ideological element of authority that inhibits collaborative deliberation in a given rhetorical situation. What he omits, however, is a major concern of the rhetorical critic: *how* discourse is invented and arranged in order to be expressed in an appropriate, truthful, and effective manner. To repeat, the rhetorical critic is concerned not only with what a text means, but also with *how* it means—for example, how a certain story is arranged such that it enhances a given argument being developed by a speaker or writer. Habermas fails to appreciate certain “positive” functions of rhetoric that make possible collaborative deliberation and that, as I argue in my work, conscience, *ethos*, and acknowl-

edgment are fundamentally related to the ontological, hermeneutical, and moral structure of human being.

This is not to suggest, however, that the kind of work that I do provides the way to discover last remaining elements that are needed to discover a universal communication ethics. If anything, the philosophical and rhetorical nature of my work suggests that this discovery is always dependent on the particular situation at hand. As Aristotle long ago noted, the business of rhetoric is to deal with what is in the main contingent. The openness of human existence is the ultimate source of contingency. Who can say for sure what will happen tomorrow? The material of communication ethics is always *situated* in an ever-changing world. Knowing how to stir the soul rhetorically is essential because existential questions concerning the livelihood of society are not usually decided with the equations of demonstration or the syllogisms of dialectic. Existence is a gamble based on probabilities, and the emotional outlook of an audience influences its judgment at the time the bet is placed. Questioning is an ongoing activity for rhetorical critics who would do what must be done in order to ensure the livelihood of their tradition.

And in the questioning we are able to discern what theoretical applications of rhetorical ethics are appropriate for what particular rhetorical context.

That's correct. As Albert Jonsen and Stephen Toulmin make clear in their study of casuistry, a case study approach can abide by what is thought to be "universals" when examining a particular piece of discourse, but these universals must always remain flexible. The specific circumstances at hand might call for an amending of some thought or principle that heretofore was considered to be a "permanent" truth. Research in communication ethics fails to adhere to an essential feature of its practice when it neglects to remain *open* to such a call. With its temporal and spatial structure, human existence commends openness as being a truthful and ethical way to live. This easily taken-for-granted event lies at the heart of the teachings of existentialism, phenomenology, hermeneutics, and deconstruction, at least as these philosophical outlooks come to us from such thinkers as Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Jaspers, Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Emmanuel Levinas, and Jacques Derrida. These thinkers, to be sure, have their differences, but their respect for openness defines a common thread in the fabric of their respective works.

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

I am interested in the origins and the practices of communication ethics. Western religion is well known for equating these origins with God. Directed by the Darwinian theory of evolution, Western science, on the other hand, feels compelled to associate this source of perfection more simply and soundly with our species' biological and evolutionary drive for survival. Cognitive scientists, in fact, have identified structures in the human brain that can account for our metaphysical tendency to associate this drive with "God's call"—which is not necessarily to say that God exists, but only that the evolved "wiring" of our brains allows us to invent this linguistic construction and feel comfortable and secure with its mysterious referent and supposedly ultimate form of perfection. As Steven Pinker argues, language is first and foremost the product of a well-engineered biological instinct, an evolutionary adaptation that consists of "a form of mental software" ("grammar") made possible by specific genetic structures in the brain.

Western religion teaches that the significance of human being lies in our unique ability to answer God's call, no matter how insignificant we think ourselves to be in the ever-expanding vastness of the cosmos that began with a Big Bang approximately fifteen billion years ago. Indeed, coming to terms with God's truth takes place on a small planet in a galaxy that shares space and time with approximately 10^{11} (1,000,000,000,000) other galaxies in the observable universe. Each galaxy contains about as many stars and each is typically 100,000 light years across. Still, the Old and New Testaments tell stories about how our evolving power of consciousness has an essential role to play in God's plan for the universe to become aware of itself, better itself, and, in so doing, achieve as much perfection as possible as we make our way from our home on earth to our home in an even better world to come. The ever-developing field of cognitive science demands empirical evidence of this plan, which it continues to provide in disclosing the mechanisms of brain function. Research in communication ethics is well advised to keep in touch with the findings of their scientific colleagues. That certainly is one way of building theory from the ground up. But another essential piece of ground is the temporal and spatial structure of human existence. Here is where language, communication, and rhetoric do their everyday social and political work. The data that can be found here and used in instructive ways to educate us about all that is "good" and "bad" in life are no less important for

“postmodernity” than the data collected by cognitive scientists. The future of communication ethics lies in attending carefully to the world’s present-day scientific, social, political, and spiritual development and to the discourses that inform and are informed by such progress. Our goal as researchers should be to discover things about our being and its language that might truly improve the moral quality of everyday existence.

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