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# KEYNOTE: The Transmission of Information: An "Awful Deformation" of What Communication Really Is – John Shotter

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It is easy to think of communication as being primarily to do with the transmission of information, with the communication of facts, of intelligence, of things people want to know about—a view given scientific expression long ago by Shannon and Weaver (1949). The taken-for-granted background to this view being the Cartesian assumptions of a mechanical world of separate, identifiable, interacting entities in motion according to discoverable laws. Everything changes, however, once we switch to a view of communication as occurring within a ceaseless, indivisible flow of entwined strands of spontaneously responsive, expressive, living, bodily activity—a view adopted by all those who see communication as a dialogic activity (e.g., Bakhtin, 1981, 1986; Gadamer, 1975, 2000; Wittgenstein, 1953, 1980; along with many others.) Straightaway we find, instead of facing simply one kind of difficulty in life—that of solving problems—we face a second, much more basic difficulty— that of gaining orientation, of arriving at a sense of what the situation is that we find ourselves in, prior to our attempts to act well within it.

While the facts of the matter are still of importance to us, what is of even greater importance is our sensing of the relations between the possibilities for action it makes available to us and what, ethically, we feel we must do within it if we are to be the kind of person we feel we want to be. What is special about our living activities in these situations, is that they work in terms of the ways in which our past experiences give rise, within us, to an anticipatory sense of our possible next steps—ethical and political issues then enter into this process as we try to resolve on a line of action, on an expression of our feelings/ sensings that "does justice" to the uniquely detailed situation we currently occupy. While some communications can change us simply in our knowledge, others can change us in our very ways of being in the world, in who we are—it is the nature of these latter which is central to this keynote address.

Dr. Shotter works internationally as an organizational consultant and doctoral examiner. His ongoing reserch interest is in the social conditions conducive to people having a voice in the developpment of participatory democracies and civil societies. Dr. Shotter's books include *Social Accountability and Selfhood* (Blackwell, 1984), *Conversational Realities: The Construction of Life Through Language* (Sage, 1993), and most recently *Getting It: Withness-Thinking and the Dialogical… in Practice* (Hampton, 2011).

> *Modern society expects [the expert] to provide a substitute for past moral and political orientations. Consequently, the concept of 'praxis' which was developed in the last two centuries is an awful deformation of what practice really is. (Gadamer, 1975, p. 312)*

> *… because we are studying not to know what goodness is, but how to become good men, since otherwise it would be useless—we must apply our minds to the problem of how our actions should be performed, because, as we have just said, it is these that actually determine our dispositions. (Aristotle, 1955, Ethics, p. 93)*

I'm sitting in a restaurant and, as I look across to someone sitting at another table in a certain way, I notice them also looking towards me in a similar manner; at that moment, a little ethical and political 'world' is created between us. We each look toward each other expectantly, with anticipations, some shared, some not, arising from what we have already lived through so far in our lives with all the others around us. There is a tension 'in the air'... surely, something next *must* happen? So we look away, neither of us being prepared to initiate that 'something'.

Indeed, to put the point more generally, in our meetings, in any living contact between any two or more human beings, at least two things of importance occur: (1) Yet another, third form of life emerges amongst us, the life of our shared expressions, a collective or shared form of life with its own unique character, its own unique agency, and its own unique world—within whose terms, for the duration of our meeting, we can mean things to each other. And it is within this 'world' that, (2) we can become 'present' to each other, at least to a minimal extent, as who we are; that is, we can, so to speak, in the course of our meeting, begin to 'see into' each other's inner lives. Indeed, if we are to gain this kind of sense of another person as having, in relation to us, an 'inner life of their own,' then, ethically, we cannot confront them as we would a material object, we must relate ourselves to them as an other, as a unique, conscious agency.

Relating to a unique Other in this way, is not currently our concern in our more academic studies, in which—to the extent that we think of our discipline as "a multi-disciplinary area of study" (Fiske, 1990, p. 1)—we try to relate to others in a number of 'one-size-fits-all' idealized, general terms.

But what, ethically, would be entailed in our relating to others as the unique others they are? What would be entailed in our coming to understand them, their life, their inner lives, not just in our terms, but in theirs? It seems to entail our entering into what we might call an intimate relationship with them, a relationship with its own distinctive, qualitative feeling-tone to it, a relationship "more or less outside

the framework of the social hierarchy and social conventions, 'without rank,' as it were"[1] (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 97).

To return to my restaurant example, if it is a stranger with whom we have already become a little too involved, we quickly look away again, if we simply want 'to get on with our own lives' to avoid, as Goffman (1971) puts it, becoming "locked together by [various] involvement obligations" (p. 115). And this urge not to be too deeply involved with the unique others around us seems to be pervasive in all our communication disciplines also: We treat those we study 'as anonymous strangers.'

So this is how I want to begin my explorations here, not with any selected, ideal theories or models "to which reality must correspond," says Wittgenstein (1953, no. 131)—but to proceed like William James (1890), in his "study of the mind from within" (p. 224).

Methodologically, he begins with what we can notice or attend to from within the flowing streams of experience occurring within us as we live out our lives amongst the others and othernesses around us. And he then begins to make linguistic sense of the particular sensings and feelings he picks out from within the stream of thought, not by proposing a set of idealized definitions, but by—as I will call it—a method of comparisons, i.e., by continually trying to say what these flowing, moving, feelings and sensings are like,[2] and why they cannot be easily captured in nameable, 'picture-like' images:

> Sensorial images are stable psychical facts; we can hold them still and look at them as long as we like. These bare images of logical movements, on the contrary, are psychic transitions, always on the wing, so to speak, and not to be glimpsed except in flight. (1890, p. 253).

> We live, as it were, upon the front edge of an advancing wave-crest, and our sense of a determinate direction in falling forward is all we cover of the future of our path... Our experience, inter alia, is of variations of rate and of direction, and *lives in these*

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[1] "Intimate speech is imbued with a deep confidence in the addressee, in his sympathy, in the sensitivity and goodwill of his responsive understanding. In this atmosphere of profound trust, the speaker reveals his internal depths" (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 97).

[2] This is one of Wittgenstein's (1953) methods also: He introduces his ill-defined notion of "language-games" as "objects of comparison," whose task is "to establish an order in our knowledge of the use of language: an order with a particular end in view; one out of many possible orders; not *the* order" (no. 131).

> *transitions more than in the journey's end.* (1912, p. 69, my emphasis).

Ephemeral though they may be, the particular sensings and feelings that we can pick out of the stream are not only crucial in our shaping and guiding our behaviour, as we move around within our surroundings, but the ways in which we make sense of them—i.e., orient towards them—are basic to 'who' and 'what' we take ourselves to be—as well as being crucial also in our trying to answer Aristotle's question as to how, ethically, our actions should be performed.

For as living beings, we cannot not be spontaneously responsive to at least some of the diffuse events occurring around us—even if it is in our power, as we shall see, to differentiate amongst those still diffuse and yet-to-be determined events. And it is in the course of our being spontaneously responsive to events occurring around us—events which 'stop us in our tracks,' which 'strike us,' which 'catch our attention,' we say—by which, as Vygotsky (1978) puts it, that we as children "grow into the intellectual life" (p. 88) of those around us, and come to embody the ways of acting and responding that mark us out as being 'one of us.' But this does not occur just in our early years. As I see it, it is occurring all the time, as we take each new step into an uncertain future. For certain feelings and sensings occurring within us—as transitory understandings and as action guiding feelings (Shotter, 2005)—would seem to be 'primitive' or 'primordial' in the sense that they can operate for us, as Wittgenstein (1981) put it, as "the prototype of a way of thinking, not the result of thought" (no. 541)—we find them 'there' within ourselves as the sense of a unique global 'something' prior to all our efforts at 'making sense' of that 'something.'

It is the nature of these of these 'somethings'—these richly intermingled of speech-entwined activities and activity-entwined ways of speaking—that I see as giving a distinctive shape to our 'identities,' to our 'world' and its 'horizons,' and to all our inquiries—that I see as occurring before what we, in our textbooks, call "communication" and study in our academic disciplines—that I want to try to bring into focus in my talk here today. To put it another way, our appropriate use of words in our everyday affairs is not arbitrary. Due to the unavoidable, spontaneous responsiveness of our living bodies, and our inner sensing of the situation in which we are immersed at the very moment of opening our mouths to speak, is—or it should be, if it is to be a shared situation (ethics again)—itself an organizing agency in structuring our choice of words. Without it, we would all be like Humpty-Dumpties in Lewis Carroll's (1960), *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There*:

> "There's glory for you!" he said,

> "I don't know what you mean by 'glory'," Alice said.
>
> Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. "Of course you don't—till I tell you. I meant 'there's a nice knock down argument for you!'"
>
> "But 'glory' doesn't mean 'a nice knock down argument'," Alice objected.
>
> "When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, "it means what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less."
>
> "The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."
>
> "The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master—that's all." (pp. 268-269)

To try to use words as we, individually, please—in ways that do not spontaneously arouse a specific *sensing* in others—is to use them in ways which need explaining (as Humpty-Dumpty acknowledges), which gives rise to a need for interpretation; and the interpretation depends, of course, on the individual doing it.

Indeed, as I see it, as we move into an intrinsically indeterminate, continuously changing and developing reality—that is open to an indefinite (or uncountable) number of determinations—we find ourselves facing, (1) not just *one* kind of difficulty in life—that of solving problems—but (2) a second much more basic difficulty—that of gaining orientation, of arriving at a sense of *what* the situation *is* that we find ourselves in, prior to all our attempts at solving problems within it. This why, I think, as Gadamer (1975) puts it, our turning to experts within a particular discipline for their orientations towards moral and political issues, as a substitute for our past, more everyday ones, is such a disaster. They, always, are oriented towards a single, ideal, instrumental end, a material product of some kind.

This is why, instead of trying to start with theories, or models—or definitions in which we try to *name* what it is we think of ourselves as studying—I want to start, like William James (1890) in his famous "The Stream of Thought" chapter, on the 'wrong' side of the Cartesian, subjective/objective split, i.e., on the *subjective*, 'introspective' side. About the constitution of the stream of thought, he said, it consists of

> … *signs of direction* in thought, of which direction we nevertheless have an acutely discriminative sense, though no definite sensorial

image [that we could ever give a name to] plays any part in it whatsoever. (p. 253)

It is that *acutely discriminative sense* of the *signs of direction* in thought, that I want to focus on here. It is the "felt meanings" that the *sounding* of these words arouse in us, as we "grow into" the mental life of those around us, that is crucial to our understanding of how communication works.

## 'Relational things': open, unfinished, dynamic unities

So, we turn now to how I would like to look at communication. As something that occurs amongst us as living human beings, dialogically-structured communication must have a certain witness-feel to it—everyone participating within a stretch of 'communicating' as it is occurring, is partaking of, or sharing in, a 'something' that is common to all of them. Thus, there is—or, ethically, there ought to be—a special feeling of being 'in touch with a something other-than oneself' while we are communicating: "We are all in this together," as politicians are currently trying to tell us... or at least, we should be.[3]

It is the nature of these "this's"—that we all can be in together—and especially the dialogical processes of their coming into being, that I want to explore here today. For what is special about such events, if they are dialogically structured as opposed to a collection of objective, quantifiable events, is that within them, "a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, … with equal rights and each with its own world, combine but are not merged in the unity of the event" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 6). In other words—words that will become much more relevant later—if they are dialogically structured events, they can give rise to a felt unity, a felt coherency, within the group of people involved, spontaneously. So, although all involved in 'a situation,' in the discussion of 'a topic' (topos; Gr. place) or of 'an issue', may each express seemingly disparate facets or aspects of it, they will all experience those facets and aspects as relating to the same situation, topic or issue, as related to the current circumstance within which they are all involved. And further, clearly, rather than a 'closed' unity, amenable ultimately to a 'one true' account of its nature, it is an always still unfinished, or "unfinalizable" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 167) unity, 'open' to further developmental change.

We are dealing here, then, not with objective things or events, but with relational or dialogical things, with 'things' that have their existence only in the dynamical

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[3] Yet a lot of us—and I am certainly among that 'lot'—don't *feel* included. Quite the opposite. I feel excluded. That witness-feel often seems to be lacking. To speak for myself, at this moment in history, I feel very much forced to live in a 'world reality', very much *not* of my making.

relations between our outgoing activities towards our surroundings, and their incoming results. Such 'relational things' emerge as a result of "double description," to use Bateson's (1979) expression, and are of a "different logical type" to objective things. They are like our seeing of 'depth' in binocular perception, or hearing an orchestra 'in the round,' so to speak, or seeing a 'rainbow' or the ephemeral 'interference' patterns in so-called *Moire* patterns:
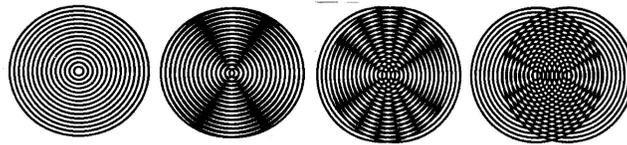
Fig, 1 Interference or Moiré patterns

Such sensed differences—amongst similarities—seem to be crucial, literally, to our making sense of events occurring to us in our surroundings. It is our going out towards them with certain expectations 'at the ready,' so to speak, and our getting back specific deviations from them, that enables us to relate uniquely and quite precisely to experienced events. It is these shared feelings in shared circumstances —these socially shared similarities of feeling—which can constitute the pre-linguistic origins, the paradigms or prototypes in relation to which our more organized, conceptual forms of communication can be fashioned.

If this is the case, then our social orders are not based in anything pre-established either in individual people or in their particular surroundings, but in these socially sustained similarities of feeling we ourselves continually create within the intermingling flows of activity in which we are all immersed, in which we are all engaged now, here in this conference hall. Thus, if I were to suddenly stop speaking and say: "Look, I'm a bit bored by this current topic... Been there, done that... Instead of continuing my advertised talk, let me tell about my new Audi A6 turbo-diesel—wow, it's really something!" you would have a feeling of: "Huh? He's really lost it," or: "Why is he saying this? I can't follow him!"—"I'm not with him anymore."

Now this feeling of *withness*, of 'being in touch with', is not an esoteric or unusual experience. We experience its presence—or its absence—within us all the time. We have a continuing acutely discriminative awareness of it: "Are you *with* me," we say to a friend whom we feel has suddenly stopped being responsive to us as we talk to her or him. Oliver Sacks (1985) gives a nice example in his account of how Dr. P—the man who, with damage to his visual cortex, mistook his wife's face for a hat—looked, not so much *at* him, as *towards* him: "instead of looking, gazing, at me, 'taking me in,' in the normal way," says Sacks, he "made

sudden strange fixations—on my nose, on my right ear, down to my chin, up to my right eye—as if noting (even studying) these individual features, but not seeing my whole face, its changing expressions, 'me', as a whole" (p. 8). Later, Sacks came to think that "he faced me with his *ears...* but not with his eyes" (p. 8) —a hypothesis borne out by other later evidences.

Indeed, as soon as I begin an interchange of looks with another person, and I sense them as looking toward me in a certain way (as they see me looking toward them in a similar way also), a little *ethical and political world* is created between us. We each look toward each other expectantly, with a whole swath of anticipations, some shared some not, arising from what we have already lived through so far in our lives with all the others around us.

But there is more to it that our merely being "locked together by [the various] involvement obligations" existing amongst us.

If we are to live together in productive harmony, more than just our first noticing the existence of others around us, with their wants and needs, and opinions and beliefs, and then realizing, intellectually, that we must invent (and then honour) various moral codes (as ideals), and comply with various obligations, rights, duties, and privileges, and so on—as with Hobbes' and Locke's "Social Contract"—much more is required, and much more is at stake. As T.S. Eliot (1934)—in one of the *Choruses* within his play *The Rock*—said about those who are constantly trying to invent perfectly or ideally just systems of government:

> They constantly try to escape
> From the darkness outside and within
> By dreaming of systems so perfect that no one will need to be
> good.

Our experience of what is required of us in our relationships to others is of a much more indeterminate, diffuse kind. Aware of this long ago, William James (1912) described it thus:

> ... much of our experience comes as an insufficient and consists of process and transition. Our fields of experience have no more definite boundaries than have our fields of view. Both are fringed forever by a *more* that continuously develops, and that continuously supersedes them as life proceeds. The relations, generally speaking, are as real here as the terms are. (p. 72)

It is this *more* that, of course, I want to discuss further here today.

## The transmission of information

But before doing so, I want to take another tack: John Fiske (1990) in his *Introduction to Communication Studies*, begins by saying that "Communication is one of those human activities that everyone recognizes *but few can define satisfactorily*, and that consequently, there is the view that *communication is not a subject, in the normal academic sense of the word*, but is a multi-disciplinary area of study" (p. 1, my emphasis). He then says, "to give some coherence to the confusion" by basing everything else he has to say upon a set of his own—no doubt, reasonable—assumptions, he is going to assume, "all communication involves signs and codes. Signs are artefacts or acts that refer to something other than themselves; that is, they are signifying constructs. Codes are the systems into which signs are organized and which determine how signs may be related to each other" (p. 1).

Thus for Fiske, Shannon and Weaver's (1949) *Mathematical Theory of Communication* model is, "widely accepted as one of the main seeds out of which Communication Studies has grown" (Fiske, 1990, p. 6). As engineers working for Bell Telephone Labs here in the United States, Shannon and Weaver suggested that communication has primarily to do with the transmission of information, with the communication of facts, of intelligence, of things people want to know about. As such, it consists in the transmission of messages by the use of 'signs' sequenced according to a 'code'—and their diagram of a "communication channel" is, of course, well known.

## The Shannon-Weaver Mathematical Model, 1949
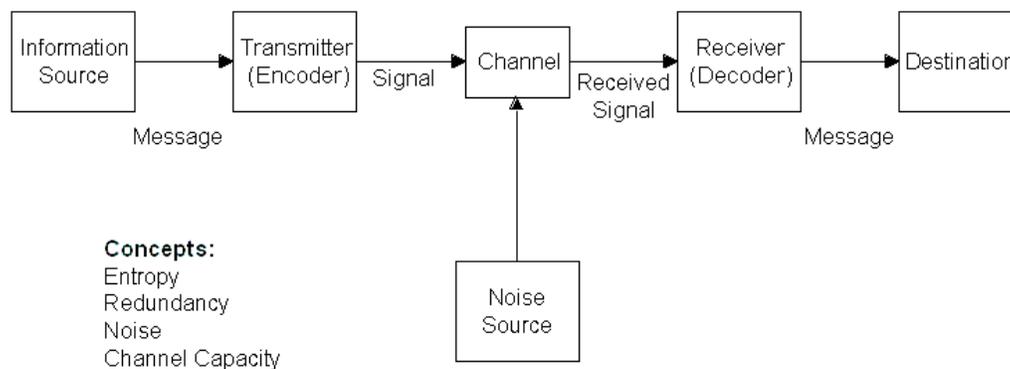


And he continues with his definitions as to what can constitute a properly disciplined academic study of communication by outlining two major schools: the process school and semiotics, where each school interprets the definition of communication, as 'social interaction through messages,' in its own way: "The

process school sees a message as that which is transmitted by the communication process... [with the actor's intention] being a crucial factor in deciding what constitutes a message…. For semiotics, on the other hand, the message is a construction of signs which, through interacting with the receiver, produce meanings. The sender, definer as the transmitter of the message, declines in importance. The emphasis shifts to the text and how it is 'read'" (p. 3)—either way, the taken-for-granted background to both these views is the Cartesian assumptions of, essentially, a mechanical world of separate, identifiable, interacting entities in motion according to discoverable laws.[4] But what this approach does, is to exclude—by fiat, by authoritative pronouncement—all relational things; only separately existing, nameable, and thus countable things can be subjected to our studies.[5]

I am using Fiske's focus on communication as information transmission here, not because I want to be critical just of that model, while thinking that others might be more appropriate. But to use it as an exemplar in being critical of *all* approaches that try to bring some "coherence to the confusion"—as Fiske (1990) claims—by trying to *impose* our own particular 'systematic order of things' upon a whole set of otherwise, qualitatively distinct, relational happenings that already possess a partial ordering of their own. If they did not, if the speaking of the word 'communication' did not arouse in us a precise, but not yet fully specified sense of a 'something' that could not easily be designated by any other word, we would be continually bewildering each other every time we opened our mouths to utter the word. Rather than bringing coherence to the confusion, such imposed definitions contribute to its increase.

Without our already possessing a knowledge of how, in our daily practices, to use the word (and many other such words, designating relational things), our daily communicating with each other would be impossible. There is, thus, a radical difference between giving or imposing a coherence on what we find, in our reflections upon it, to be confusing, and finding a coherence, in the course of a

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[4] In describing his new approach to making sense of our world, Descartes (1968/1637) outlined it as follows: "In order to put these new truths in a less crude light and to be able to say more freely what I think about them, without being obliged to accept or to refute what are accepted opinions among philosophers and theologians, I resolved to leave all these people to their disputes, and to speak only of what would happen *in a new world*, if God were to create, somewhere in imaginary space, enough matter to compose it, and if he were to agitate diversely and confusedly the different parts of this matter, so that he created a chaos as disordered as the poets could ever imagine, and afterwards did no more than to lend his usual preserving action to nature, and to let her act according to his established laws" (p. 62, my emphasis).

[5] But as Einstein is reputed to have remarked: "Everything that can be counted does not necessarily count; everything that counts cannot necessarily be counted."

dialogically conducted investigation of what, in our *everyday practices*, is not at all confusing to us.

Indeed, claims of this kind *reverse*—among, as we shall find, many other great reversals—the relation between our theories and concepts and their 'grounding,' 'footing,' or 'original soil' in our *sensings* and *feelings*. It is, in the view I am pursuing here, to impose a particular 'systematic order of *things*' on an otherwise qualitatively unique, multi-dimensional, relational whole that already has its own partial ordering, and is in fact still capable of being ordered in an inexhaustible number of different ways. What happens if we do this, is that the rest of this larger flow of activity within which we are all still immersed, and from within which what we attend to within it draws its character, is ignored.

Thus, what is lost in this *reversal*—in substituting our own supposedly discovered 'codes' and 'signs' signifying 'describable meanings,' for the real thing—is the living words of a living speaker that can occasion within us the 'felt' withness, or in-touchness, that can occur between ourselves and the speaker, and perhaps, the spoken of, a resonance between ourselves and the world. Presented to us as an array only of 'coded signs'—as in a PowerPoint presentation that we (and often the presenter) are meant to 'read' and 'interpret'—the essential character of communication remains, in fact, hidden from us. Rather than presenters speaking to us in 'their own voice', they try to *transmit information* to us in their presentations—as if we are always in need of more than we already have.

But when we are 'touched' or 'moved' by a spoken voice, we can begin to undergo a bodily and emotional transformation: to be asked a question;[6] to be insulted; to be caught in an error or a lie; to hear unexpectedly that a loved one has been injured or died, is to *feel* the arousal within oneself of a tense 'something,' distinctly and vividly, even before we are able to understand *exactly what it is* that has happened.

## Substitute orientations: failing to 'do justice' to phenomena

Everything changes, however, once we switch to a view of communication as occurring within a ceaseless, indivisible flow of entwined strands of spontaneously responsive, expressive, living, bodily activity—a view adopted by all those who see communication as a *dialogic* activity (e.g. Bakhtin, 1981, 1986;

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[6] For instance, in our sense of what an expected answer to a question might be like: A paradigm instance of the precision and power of such an expectation at work was in the famous grilling on BBC TV on 13 May 1997, of Michael Howard, then Home Secretary in the current government by a Jeremy Paxman, in which he asked Mr Howard the same question 12 times. The audience could hear him quite clearly failing to answer that question 12 times.

Gadamer, 1975, 2000; Wittgenstein, 1953, 1980; along with many others). For we move into, not so much an ill-defined reality, as an intrinsically indeterminate one; a continuously changing and developing reality that is open to an indefinite (or uncountable) number of determinations. And straightaway we find ourselves facing, as I mentioned above, instead of *one* kind of difficulty in life—that of solving problems—we are facing a *second*, much more basic difficulty—that of gaining orientation, of arriving at a sense of *what* the situation *is* that we find ourselves in, prior to all our attempts at solving problems within it. It is in this kind of flowing, indeterminate, still developing reality that we face Aristotle's task: that of acting for the *good* within it—a task that seems somewhat unintelligible within the Cartesian world only of already existing objective things.

While what we might call 'the facts of the matter' are still of importance to us, irrespective of whatever 'the situation' we happen to be 'in', what is of even greater importance is our *sensing* of the *relations* between the possibilities for action it makes available to us, and what, ethically, we feel we must do within it, if we are to be the kind of person within it we feel we ought to be. How can we apply our minds to Aristotle's question of how our actions should be performed if we are to *be* good people?

As I have already mentioned, what is special about our living activities is that, on the basis of our past experiences, they work within us to give rise to an anticipatory sense of our what our possible next steps might be. But, to the extent the situation we are in is indeterminate—and is open to a range of determinations, but not just to *any*—it is up to us, individually, in relation to our acutely discriminative sense of its nature, to arrive at a way of expressing its nature that both relates us to it, and to the others around us, appropriately. Thus, as we try to resolve on an appropriate expression of the feelings or sensings that it arouses within us, we cannot escape the responsibility, in our inner dialogues—as we stumble around in trying to 'find the right words'—of 'doing justice' to the uniquely detailed situation we are currently *sharing* with those others around us. The ethical and political issues that inevitably emerge within this process are there, even when not actually confronted by another person.

I'm sorry to have to say this, but I think information-theory based formulations of the communication process are unethical, in that they fail to 'do justice' to what communication really *is*.[7]

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[7] "(Our only task is to be just. That is, we must point out and resolve the injustices of philosophy, and not posit new parties—and creeds)" (Wittgenstein, 1993, p,181).

In trying, as Gadamer (1975) puts it, "to provide a *substitute* for past moral and political *orientations*... the concept of '*praxis*' which was developed in the last two centuries is an awful deformation of what practice really is" (p. 312, my emphases). It is awful, not because it ultimately fails to help us in effectively solving various problems, but because it has (mis)led many of us, especially in our more professionalized practices, to adopt an objective, quantitative attitude towards other people as a *supposedly rational substitute* for our more ordinary, everyday ways of relating ourselves to others and othernesses around us. This has resulted in us (mis)leading ourselves further, into treating essentially *relational* entities as if they are already separated, or potentially separable and thus countable things, possessing everything to do with their experienced character as being, of necessity, located *wholly within themselves*.

If we are to get to know what we are doing in the course of our doing it— Aristotle's concept of *praxis*—then we need to turn James' acutely discriminative awareness toward our gaining a sense of how our actions are playing into the larger relational context within which they are occurring.

## To have a world means to have an orientation

The trouble that we are in at the moment—if what I have been trying to make visible above is the case—is that we have allowed ourselves to become wrongly oriented. Although it is believed that a technical expertise is always something that supplies benefits to the whole of society, the assumption that it will supply yet further benefits to us all, if it is applied in determining the character of our everyday relationships to each other is, to put it mildly, a 'lunatic' or 'crackpot' idea. For, while some of the communications directed towards us can change us simply in our *knowledge*, others—that influence our *orientations*—can change us in our very ways of *being in the world*, in how we express ourselves as *being* in our *ways* of orienting or relating to the others and othernesses around us.

I was worried long ago about the, then, long term consequences of the implicit mechanistic and other inhuman attitudes expressed in much of our behavioural sciences research (Shotter, 1975, 1980). Now, I think I am beginning to see some of the consequences of these attitudes being played out in reality. I do not think it is a mere happenstance that we are now, everywhere, seeing divided counties, a divided world, and divided, incoherent thoughts as to what we might do for the best in trying to act within such a fragmented world.

> To have a world means to have an orientation (Verhalten—attitude) towards it. To have an orientation towards the world, however, means to keep oneself so free from what one encounters of the

> world that one is able to present it to oneself as it is. This capacity
> is at once to have a world and to have language. The concept of
> world is thus opposed to the concept of environment, which all
> living beings in the world possess. (Gadamer, 2000, p. 433)

It is as it is for us because, as we go out, expectantly, towards it, we find ourselves, to a degree, 'attuned' to the others and othernesses that we meet. We 'resonate' to it, or 'feel in touch with' certain aspects we experience as occurring within it, while failing to resonate to others. Thus it is within our living contacts with the others or othernesses in our surroundings, that our mere surroundings, as an environment, are transformed into "a world" for us—or at least, into a partially shared world that we sense ourselves as being in along with the others and othernesses around us, a world which is dependent upon them, both for its initial coming into being, and for their help in sustaining it in existence.

Due, however, to its *partial*, still unfinalized, 'open' nature, an ineradicable ethics and politics is at work. Each step forward can be opposed by others, in terms of what they 'see it' as meaning. But more than it having just a local ethics and politics to it, besides our having particular expectations as to how the others immediately around us *are likely to* treat us, our partially shared world has also, we feel, a deeper level to it. It has a unique culture, and it is this that determines how they *should* treat us. The ethics and politics of the dialogical are such that: to be me, I need you to allow me, and to afford me, to be me.

Thus for each of us, what we call 'our culture' presents a 'world' to us *as it is*, and, as such, it contains a certain set of interconnected things, with certain values to them in relation to which we take on a certain character, and toward which we take a certain stance; it also 'informs' us of our rights, duties, privileges and obligations in relation to the significant others around us in my 'world': I am a bus driver with a responsibility for all my passengers, while having to drive in accord with a time-table; I am a bridge-building engineer attempting to span a kilometer wide, 500 meter deep chasm; a psychologist surrounded by people who require the kind of help I can offer them; an architect worrying about both the efficient and exciting use of space; a mathematician surrounded by other mathematicians, a painter surrounded by the world of art, a musician, a student of history, a construction worker, and so on. Along with all of these features, my world also has a particular 'horizon' to it—in that not everything in it is actually 'visible' to me at the moment, although I can entertain a reasonable expectation that at some time in the future it will be—further, I can *order* 'my world' at any one moment *perspectivally* in relation to what I take to be the 'point' (on the horizon of my current landscape of action) constituting the 'end in view' of my current action (intention, aim).

If this is so, then at work in structuring our activities within our cultures are 'relational somethings' which cannot be objectively seen and described, but which we cannot avoid experiencing; we can call these invisible 'relational somethings' that nonetheless shape our lives, *traditions* (Gadamer, 2000). Indeed, in working within an academic tradition, whether we like it or not, we are continually running up against others calling our actions into question, continually feeling ourselves as inadequate to the tasks before us, as having always to step out, if not into a morally hazardous unknown, certainly a political one: "This is what is to be experienced," says Gadamer (2000). "But tradition is not simply a process that experience teaches us to know and govern; it is *language*—i.e., it expresses itself like a Thou. A Thou is not an object; it relates itself to us... For tradition is a genuine partner in dialogue, and we belong to it, as does the I with a Thou ... the Thou is not an object but is in relationship with us" (p. 358) In other words, in being like a Thou, we find it makes 'demands' and 'claims' upon us, as well as arousing 'fears' or 'anxieties' within us if we fail to meet—or consider transgressing—what 'it' requires of us.

If this is so, the major organizing influence at work in shaping our activities in the world is not based in anything pre-established, either in human beings or in their surroundings, but in socially shared *identities of feeling* they themselves create within the flows of activity occurring between them, within them, and around them. Vico (1744/1968) called these identities "sensory topics": (1) "topics" because they can give rise to "commonplaces," i.e., to shareable moments within a flow of social activity which afford common reference, and (2) "sensory" because they are moments in which shared *feelings* for already shared circumstances are created. It is these, he claims, as a *sensus communis* (common sense), that constitute the pre-linguistic origins of a social order; they are the paradigms or prototypical forms of expressions from which more conceptually organized forms of communication may be derived.

And this, of course, is why we are hardly conscious of what our individual actions are doing to us, collectively, as we act them out amongst us within our lives together; this is why we do not, as in our actions in relation to physical objects, run up against more immediate resistances to them; and this is why it is so hard to change them, as a change of who, in fact, we *are* to, and in, ourselves is involved. Such changes are thus deep changes indeed. Yet, on occasions, they are sorely needed.

In describing what he saw as occurring as a result of our not being able to trust in such a felt *sensus communis*—consisting in a set of shared identities of feeling as a basis for our living together harmoniously, and our feeling instead that a *best* basis needed to be found in 'winner takes all' arguments—Vico (1744/1968)

described the outcome as leading to our becoming more inhuman in a second 'barbarism of reflection' than we were in a first 'barbarism of sense':

> For the latter displayed a generous savagery, against which one could defend oneself or take flight or be on one's guard, but the former, with a base savagery, under soft words and embraces, plots against the life and fortunes of friends and intimates. (para.1106).

But the phrase which has always grabbed me, is the phrase that expresses that this comes about, not from people coming to live separately—quite the opposite. It is from the fact that, "no matter how great the throng and press of their bodies, they [come to] live like wild beasts in a deep solitude of spirit and will, scarcely any two being able to agree since each follows his own pleasure or caprice" (para. 1106). In other words, they come to *orient* towards each other in *all their daily affairs* in this inhuman manner.

## Moving on from where we actually are—relinquishing utopian dreams

Turning now to what all this means for how we can conduct our inquiries into the nature of our own human affairs within our academic disciplines, and especially in the communication discipline: It means, I think, instead of working in terms of what people *argue* are *ideally* 'the best' ways, ideas, theorizations, or practices— and seeking to discover in our inquiries what we take to be these pre-existing, ideal things—we must accept that we ourselves continually bring such 'things,' the subject matter of our studies, into existence.

So, although we may continually talk of our understandings as coming into existence as a result of our prior 'thoughts,' 'ideas,' 'knowledge,' or 'deliberate plans or decisions'—and that, as a result, it seems perfectly reasonable to seek the namable causal processes responsible—the fact is, such processes can *only* be seen as having been at work in people's performances, *after* they have been completed.[8]

As I see it, this is the case with many more of our named topics of study in the behavioural sciences and communication disciplines: what are in fact *outcomes* of a person's actions, *after* those actions have been performed, are taken as components of the overall process within which they are *produced*, and as a result, the *theories*, *models*, etc., that we produce are, to put it academically, *after the fact*, and *beside the point*—they set us 'looking backwards,' and 'repeating the

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[8] William James (1890) understood this point very well—this *reversal* in which the *products* of a process are used in trying to describe the nature of the *process* itself—and he called it "The Psychologist's Fallacy" (p. 196).

past' as if the indeterminate future we now face was already determined. Indeed, as 'nameable things' they are often, in fact, *foreshadowed* in the very *ways* in which, prior to our investigations, we commit ourselves to a particular way or ways of looking into the phenomena before us. Thus, as I see it, 'something else' altogether guides us in the performance of our actions than the nameable things whose nature we seek to discover in our inquiries. So how can we proceed?

I would like to bring my exploration of some of the ethical issues intrinsic to the very study of communication to a close here, by returning to where I began: with the basing of our studies in the *acutely discriminative sense* that we can have of the qualitative nature of people's *sensings* and *feelings*. We can begin, both with our own sensings, and with our noticing the spontaneous expressions of others as they respond to events occurring to them in their surroundings.

Someone who has been very clear about the need to adopt such a method—a method that he, in fact, calls a method of comparisons, in which we articulate what an experienced phenomenon *is like*—is Amatya Sen (2009) in his book, *The Idea of Justice*. He begins it by quoting Charles Dickens's who, in *Great Expectations*, put these words into the mouth of the grown up *Pip* where he is recollecting a humiliating encounter with his sister, *Estella*: "In the little world in which children have their existence, there is nothing so finely perceived and finely felt, as injustice" (p. vii). In other words, he wants to begin his inquiries, not by asking what a perfectly just society would look like, but from our felt sensing of a something being unjust, from our disquiets, from our feelings of things being not quite right.

Why? Because: "What moves us, reasonably enough," he remarks, "is not the realization that the world falls short of being completely just—which few of us expect—but that there are clearly remediable injustices around us which we want to eliminate" (p. vii). Thus, as I suggested above, by situating ourselves within a particular practical situation within which we can gain a shared sense—along with all the others around us—of a particular *injustice* at work, there is a real chance of us all, working together, arriving at a way of remedying it. For we can all find, in such a situation, both a guiding motivation and, as we mentally move about within it, ways to bring to light the resources we need to move on from that injustice—where the *ways* we need will involve our *theories*, to be used, not as explanatory devices, but as *objects of comparison* to help us in coming to a *felt sense* of what the particular injustice in question is *like*.

So here—if we want to focus on injustices and the ethics at work in our relations to each other—we end with a new orientation toward our inquiries in the communication discipline,  as compared with it as the transmission of messages

within the context of social interaction: a practice-based rather than a theory-based approach. An approach that does not exclude attention to 'relational things' like its theory-based cousin. As such, it will give rise to a whole new set of expectations, a new horizon of future goals and endeavours. However, unlike its more instrumental, theory-based cousin, we will not be able to expect any *final* answers to our general questions. We will never know *what* actually communication *is*—for our way of proceeding will not be 'seeing patterns' out in the world, but with 'sensing similarities' within our lives together.

This will not mean, however, that we can do away with *theory*. We will still need it. But instead of our arguing with others over which is a *best ideal*, all our theories will find a *use*—a metaphorical and/or poetic use—in bringing to light similarities (and differences) within our task of clarifying what a particular sensed injustice *is like*.

In setting out the possibility of this new orientation for our studies in communication in this fashion, I am reminded of how Thomas Kuhn (1962) ended his account of *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. He said:

> We are all deeply accustomed to seeing science as the one enterprise that draws constantly nearer to some goal set by nature in advance. But need there be any such goal? If we can learn to substitute evolution-from-what-we-do-know for evolution-toward-what-we-wish-to-know, a number of vexing problems may vanish in the process. (p. 170)

And this, of course, is what I am proposing here: that we relinquish the still unfulfilled—and, as I see it, *forever unfulfillable*—dream of gaining the very general results we desire in our inquiries, and to be content with the limited, partial, and situated results we *can in fact obtain*, which, in the end, will, I believe, perhaps surprisingly, turn out to be of far greater practical use and value to us.

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