ON THE LIMITS OF COMMUNICATION :
A METAPHILOSOPHICAL INQUIRY

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In order to focus upon some less obvious but equally consequential limits of communication, I will assume here that we are all well aware of the fact that there are inevitably a great many constraints on any communication system or communication situation. These constraints may be economic, political, technological, ideological, human[1], or any combination of these or others.

Such constraints as these have received varying degrees of attention in recent years. What I want to focus upon here, however, are the limits on communication that inhere in our scientific and popular conceptions of the process, *viz.* :

1) The limits on communication that inhere in the dominant "scientific" or academic model or conception of communication, and which are anchored in a deep-level cultural bias, and are thus metaphysical or metatheoretical constraints;

2) The limits on communication that inhere in the popular conception of communication in our culture, which shares the same metaphysical bias as does the "scientific" model, but which has suffered as well the pervasive influence of the "scientific" in contemporary western civilization.

The bulk of this paper is therefore given over to an exploration of the evolution, the present condition, and the likely future consequences of these limits on communication.

I am assuming here as well, in addition, that whatever limits communication in a civilization also limits that civilization, inasmuch as it limits the possibilities for human existence, for the human condition, within that civilization. As David Bohm has observed, "Our general mode of acting and living is evidently determined by our mode of perception and communication. As we perceive and

talk, so we will think and act and, therefore, so will we be"[2] . Just as the image we hold of man determines the nature of man, the ways in which we do and do not communicate with one another, and with ourselves, determine the kinds of images we will hold[3] . Nor is it alone the images we hold of ourselves. We are as well affected by the way we communicate about our environment. For example, Lewis Herber has suggested that, "By oversimplifying the natural environment, we have created an incomplete man who lives an unbalanced life in a standardized world. Such a man is ill–not only morally and psychologically, but physically"[4] . To take but yet another example, Polak proposes that those cultures within which positive images of the future are communicated are healthy and viable, whereas those within which negative or destructive images of the future are communicated are doomed[5] . And these are but some of the myriad ways in which whatever limits communication in a civilization will also limit that civilization.

A third assumption I make here is this : that to communicate is to philosophize, and thus that every manner of speaking and understanding is limited by what informs its philosophy–its metaphysic. "We don't realize that to speak," said Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, "no matter about what, is to philosophize". And we seem not to realize, either, that one's philosophies are limited by the metaphilosophy in which they are grounded. And thus the inseparability of communication, of philosophy, and of metaphilosophy.

With these three assumptions in mind, we can undertake to examine the limits of communication in contemporary western civilization and their metaphilosophical sources, and to witness some of their human and social consequences.

The Evolution of Communication "Theory"

Although Confucius based much of his philosophy on the key relationship between the use of language and the moral order, there is little evidence that communication, as such, was of much concern to western minds before the Greek philosophers and their immediate predecessors. The most obvious reasons for this concern were the emerging self-consciousness of those thinkers who explored inner and outer human space[6] , and the transition from a largely oral to an increasingly visual culture, involving writing and the spread of literacy, along with other visual forms of art and communication[7] .

So it was that the later Greeks, less concerned than was Confucius with the interdependence of language and morality, and less

concerned than their immediate predecessors with "phatic" (i.e., socially-integrative) communication, gave philosophic impetus to the role of communication in civil matters–government, education, business, etc.[8] So a major orienting principle in the metaphysics underpinning communication "theory" in western civilization is this : how communication may be deployed to achieve certain civil ends, or how communication might be of aid in the solution of civil or social problems, a metaphysical heritage that plagues us even today.

The later Greeks were also transitional in another important respect. The early Greeks and their predecessors, typical of more "primitive", less hubristic philosophers everywhere, conceived of communication as something that required the intervention of gods. Indeed, the dominant communication "theory" of this time was that, on supplication the wing-footed god Mercury would swoop down, pluck the idea to be "communicated" from the head of the communicator with his spear and implant it in the proper place in the head of the communicatee–thereby accounting succinctly for that part of the process which has not been adequately accounted for since.

The transitional role of the later Greeks, of course, was that of "secularizing" the process. They dared to conceive of communication as being a natural process within the understanding and control of man alone, not requiring the intervention of any gods. Thus a second major orientation laid down as underpinning for communication "theory" in the west was that it was a "secular" process, fully explainable and wholly controllable by the human intellect, an orientation which enables the rapid "democratization" of words and of communication. For example, it is difficult for western intellectuals to comprehend primitive taboos except in a very superficial manner, for we no longer conceive of words as magic or as sacred, or their users as facilitating or violating a transcendent cosmic order.

Any intellectual history of this scope, reduced to this space, would necessarily do violence to much detail. But all we need here is an overview.

Thus we can note that the Christian orientation, if it had influenced our conception of human communication, would have re-introduced the spiritual into our understanding of communication (e.g., 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God", John I, 1, c. 115). As it happened, it was the secular Romans who most influenced our western concept of communication, and thus the human import of communication

philosophies such as Augustine's–"To understand, you must believe"–never really captured the imagination of the more "scientific" western thinkers.

The dominant impetus of the western orientation toward such matters was to culminate in the hyper-rationalism of 16th and 17th-century European thought–in the proposition that there is no phenomenon of this or any other universe which could not ultimately be comprehended by unaided human thought, and which could not, therefore, ultimately be brought within human control. Thus human communication came to be viewed as natural, mainly of relevance to civil affairs, secular and, finally, as largely if not wholly rational.

In briefest form, this was the metaphilosophical seedbed upon which our contemporary view of communication was nurtured.

The Contemporary Western Perspective

There have been a great many philosophers, of course, who have spoken to the human/symbolic, social/systemic functions of communication both before (Aquinas, William of Ockham, Nicholas of Cusa, Giordano Bruno) and after (Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Cassirer, Unamuno, Dewey, Langer) the hyper-rationalists of the 16th century and beyond. But it is neither the weight of argument nor the weight of facts that impels the evolution of either science or folklore : it is the dominant cultural metaphysic. And so it was that our contemporary understanding of human communication–both the "scientific" and the popular–is a product neither of examined facts nor of rational argument but, largely, of the convergence of an utter *belief* in secularism and an utter *belief* in rationalism–an alliance that gave credence both to the absurd excesses of logical positivism and, dialectically, to the absurd excesses of existentialism.

If the academic social "scientists" of twentieth-century North America had had more than a pocket sympathy for and understanding of Bohr's principle of complementarity[9] –to take but one example of the pervasive ignorance of scientific metaphilosophies that obtains in modern social "sciences"–we might have had a more balanced perspective on human communication. If the social "sciences" of twentieth-century North America had been less informed by scientism, or less compelled by topical problem-solving and repair-shop orientations, we might have had a more comprehensive and potent perspective on communication.

As it happened, however–and this is admittedly to skip over a great many other contributing factors–the dominant perspective on

communication in most of the western world today is linear, atomistic, and algebraic. Stripped of its various superficial embellishments, it is most cogently characterized in the following manner : A → B = X (A... "communicates" something → ... to B ... with X effect). (And we can recognize this also as *the* fundamental *control* model).

It would be naïve to assume that the great renaissance of intellectual interest in communication that came about in the late 1940's through cybernetics, group dynamics, and "communications research" was anything more than a manifestation of this limited perspective on communication. The informing metaphysic was already deeply imbedded in the western intellectual tradition. Those who, from the 1930's through the 1960's, gave early voice to communication theory were doing little more than formalizing a culturally-given perspective. And, because some form of "pragmatism" informs our everyday thought as much as it does our scientific thought, this perspective on communication limits the evolution of communication theory on the same grounds that it limits human and social possibilities in our everyday behavior.

The contemporary perspective on communication is limited because the metaphilosophy which informs it is itself limited. But in what ways is it scientifically (i.e., theoretically) and humanly *limiting* ? And how is it thus limiting, and what are the prospects for the future ?

How the Dominant Communication Paradigm Limits, and Is Limited

There are three ways in which the dominant western paradigm of communication limits, and is limited, each of which may be taken as exemplary :

1) Perhaps the most obvious limitation is the theoretical one : the dominant paradigm, A → B = X, no matter how embellished, simply cannot account for the facts. There are *some* communication phenomena, *some* communication situations, which may *seem* to be adequately described by this paradigm : giving and obeying orders in the military, or the communication between air traffic controller and aircraft pilot, or the requesting and receiving of food at the dinner table or directions at the street corner are everyday examples that come to mind. But the stubborn facts are that the field order is not the "cause" of its being carried out; the air traffic controller's instructions are not the "cause" of the pilot's following them; the request "Please pass the salt" is not the "cause" of another's compliance; the request for directions is not the "cause" of the

reply. In no factual sense is the expression "I love you" the "cause" of a reply such as "I love you too". And so on.

The major theoretical weakness of the A → B = X paradigm is that it implies such a cause → effect relationship, whereas both the "cause" and the "effect", if indeed they are empirically specifiable at all, exist outside of the limited paradigm. If a person has been thoroughly socialized to believe, without doubt, that he should always obey the orders of a superior, it is likely he will do so. Can the "cause" of his doing so then be attributed either to the superior or his orders ? The nature of the communicator (as conceived by the communicatee) and the nature of the communiqué (as conceived by the communicatee) *may* be a necessary condition of the communicatee's response; but neither of these is ever the sufficient condition for that response. Communication is "determined" only to the extent that there is invariance--as is the case with most animal and insect communication. But it is specifically man's capacity (and his languages' capacities) for making "worlds our of words"--as George Steiner has so eloquently put it--that adds and multiplies the *variances* that define *human* communication, thereby enabling civilization (as contrasted with mere recapitulation).

But the theoretical weakness of the dominant paradigm goes even deeper than this : in much social communication--that which impels our social machinery--the notions of "cause" and/or of "effect" may be theoretically impertinent. Does a clever politician (or lover) speak the "truth", or what is likely to be believed ? If he says only what he believes, will he be believed ? If he says what is likely to be believed, is what he says the "cause" of the belief--or is that belief the "cause" of what he says ? The fact that the communicator's and the communicatees' behaviors *define each other* in that unique situation leaves the A → B = X paradigm inadequate and impertinent not only at the theoretical level, but at a metatheoretical level as well. A sayer requires a sayee, a lover a lovee, any human "truth" *both* an utterer and a believer[10]. There is no credibility where there is no credulousness; the relationship is not linear but systemic.

Our dogged (hence metaphysical) persistence in searching for "causes" and "effects" has led us to assume the relatively fruitless theoretical posture implied by the A → B = X paradigm. For example, we endlessly--but always equivocally--search for the "causes" of the "effects" of this or that aspect of television on "people". And we do this in spite of the readily demonstrable fact that *no* advertising message, for example, can be the *sufficient* "cause" of any "effect"--that is, of what the consumer does with that message[11]. What is the "effect" of a "No Smoking" sign on a

person who does not smoke--and why is it that such a sign can be misunderstood or disobeyed only by a smoker ? (If one is angry because he has not received a letter or a call that he expected, where is the "cause" of that "effect" in the $A \to B = X$ paradigm ?)

It is not, as is sometimes argued, that the parts are complexly and not simply related--thereby requiring a longer time to comprehend and specify. It is that, for most *human* communication, the parts define each other in that unique and irreproducible whole, and that the contributing "variables" cannot be partialled out at all. Just as no economist can partial out the contribution of the firm from the contribution of its environment to its "profit", no behavioral or social scientist can partial out the contribution of any one of the "variables" to the outcomes of communication situations : If one shouts "Look out ! " and the addressee turns about and runs into the path of an oncoming automobile and is killed, what "caused" his death ? The whole is unique and irreproducible in fact, and to reduce it in theory is to deny the fact.

Whitehead, of course, saw this difficulty clearly; but not, perhaps, so clearly as did Confucius. And it may have been the less linear, more organic, systemic nature of Eastern metaphysics which gave Confucius the conceptual advantage.

The increased difficulty now of displacing the dominant western paradigm of communication is therefore first a metatheoretical one[12], and it is herein that it is faulted and hence limited.

2) Because the same underlying metaphilosophy informs our popular, conventional orientation toward communication, our human and social possibilities are limited as well. As noted earlier, the $A \to B = X$ paradigm is, not coincidentally, the fundamental model of *control*. To the extent we individually or collectively conceive of human and social communication in terms of that paradigm, we will concern ourselves with controlling and manipulating one another. Fromm's observation that human relationships in western society are characterized by a "marketing orientation" is pertinent here. We will, as we have, come to concern ourselves with what is humanly *necessary* as opposed to what is humanly *possible*[13]. Our social institutions will be more given to a *repair* orientation than to a positive health orientation, because that paradigm is based exclusively on *negative* feedback. Given the pervasive influence of this paradigm in our western culture, it is much easier for us to see what is wrong with something rather than what is right with something. We have come to see mainly in terms of "negative feedback". Our notions of education have to do with controlled learning situations, just as our notions of growth have to

do with controlled growth and our notions of change with controlled change. If people disagree, we see this as a sign of a "communication" problem, failing to realize that people have to be "in" communication as much in order to disagree as to agree.

The two major consequences of this metaphilosophy for everyday human existence are these : That we have come to concern ourselves more with the responsibility of the institution or the medium or the message, and less with the responsibility of people ; and that we have made it possible thereby to conceive of people as made up of determined parts rather than as self-determining wholes. In the first case : If all of the real and imagined ills of the "mass media" were to be corrected overnight, we would still be faced with the problem of the responsibilities of the people who use or "consume" those media. Any solution to the problem of the quality of the "mass media" must ultimately involve the quality of their users. "A word to the wise..." is not sufficient if they are not wise. In the second case : Our assumption that it is our minds which do our thinking, our hearts which do our feeling, our personalities which "determine" our behavior, etc., leaves us fragmented, in much the same way as modern western society and science are fragmented. An organism of determined parts denies a self-determining whole. Yet any metaphilosophy which is not based in human self-determination is anti-human. Thus that metaphilosophy which informs our dominant views on communication is anti-human. As such, it limits the present human condition as well as the possibilities for the human condition in the future.

3) And both of these sources of limitation, in their intricate combinations, have produced and will continue to produce limits in our social structures and institutions. Our concern with the means rather than the ends of communication, implicit in the dominant paradigm which informs both our academic and our everyday conceptions of communication, has led to, and predicts further to, increasing intervention and control. It is as if what can be controlled must be controlled. Since we seemingly have no control over popular tastes or appetites, we must censor what is to be provided, in one form or another. Where self-determination is lacking, or presumed away, then social determination must be fostered. And correct ; social ills is an obvious task of government.

We have designed our organizations to fit our conceptions of the communication process--closed, hierarchical, linear, algebraic--and our social institutions will inevitably reflect these same orientations. For example, most of our concerns with public education are matters of *how* rather than *for what*. In most of our social institutions,

questions of means have long ago eclipsed questions of ends.

All of which is to say that words have consequences, that our ways of seeing the world will largely determine the kinds of human societies we are going to have, and that no human conception has more potent consequences for the human condition that does our conception of communication--for therein the human condition is created and fulfilled. As we communicate, so shall we be; and as we conceive of communication, so shall we communicate. In *The Abolition of Man*, C. S. Lewis wrote : "We make men without chests and expect of them virtue and enterprise. We laugh at honor and are surprised to find traitors in our midst. We castrate and bid the geldings be fruitful". Thus have we limited ourselves, our societies, and the human future by our limited perspective on the communication process. Our view of communication and the process of "knowing" has led us to believe that mankind is best served by the accumulation of "knowledge". Yet Krishnamurti suggests[14] that the only real human freedom is freedom from the known.

It is perhaps time that we ponder such paradoxes as this--as well as our unmitigated obsession with the *means* of communication, which may be more of a threat than a promise[15].

Reprise

Any way of seeing, of course, is a way of not seeing, as Kenneth Burke has insisted. Thus any theory of communication, any dominant paradigm, any pervasively informing metaphilosophy, will have its limits, and its limitations. No alternative to a dominant paradigm would be perfectly limitless, perfectly unlimiting. Yet the dominant contemporary perspective is especially limiting of specifically *human* possibilities and criteria.

For one, it would leave us too literal. The dominant paradigm (A → B = X) directs our concerns toward the "effectiveness" or the efficiency of messages or communication systems, and away from the qualities of existence that might be had within them. The dominant paradigm (A → B = X) is suitable for command and control systems, but will not accommodate irony, spoof, plays on words, love, tragedy, or other of the more complex everyday human experiences possible. Limited by that paradigm, as Cardinal Newman suggested, we would cease to attend to the world's poetry and attend only to its prose. In *The Necessary Angel*, Wallace Stevens points out that metaphors constitute the "symbolic language of metamorphosis"--the most humane and humanly enriching way of social evolution. Yet the dominant paradigm cannot accommodate

metaphor[16]. This potential impoverishment of the human condition is poignantly described by William Carlos Williams[17] :

> It is difficult
> To get news from poems
> Yet men die miserably every day
> For lack
> Of what is found there.

For another, it would reduce us to mere "reality". George Steiner reminds us that "Language is not a description of reality, but an answer to it, a challenge to it, an evasion from it"[18], and that human civilization is based not in what is given in words, but what is not. To reduce communication to descriptions of reality would therein impoverish and limit human possibilities--would, indeed, threaten human civilization as we know it.

For another, it would lead us haplessly into the delusion that it is only that which can be communicated that is relevant to human life and social existence. Yet the late Ernest Becker emphasized that "...communication is largely self-deception, a disguise of power-rooting...people get together not by communicating with one another, but by sharing appetites and power-allegiances"[19]. As Oliver Goldsmith said in 1759, "The true use of speech is not so much to express our wants as to conceal them". If society, as Ralph Ross has observed, is "composed essentially of covert functions, dysfunctions, and nonfunctions..."[20], then our fuller realization of ourselves would require a theory of communication which does not limit us to the overt.

For yet another, that limiting paradigm would lead us to believe that understanding is the consequence of evidence or fact when, actually, understanding in the human sense must always be preceded, as Augustine said, by belief. If one would understand nuclear fission, one would have to believe it. Yet our dominant perspective on communication would have this the other way around, an immensely limiting perspective for this and other reasons.

How we came into these limiting perspectives is well-documented by Radnitzky and by Popper and by Foucault and others[21]. How we did or did not escape those limiting perspectives as a civilization has yet to be documented.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

[1] *Human*, here, in the sense that individuals vary widely in their capacity to comprehend and to formulate ideas, in their capacity for experiencing, etc. *Cf.* e.g., L. Thayer, "Communication and Comprehension", *Communication and Cognition (1974, vol. 7, Nos. 3/4, or pp. 455-65)*.

[2] In "Fragmentation in Science and in Society", *Impact of Science on Society*, vol. 20, No. 2, 1970 : p. 168. Bohm's observation, coming as it does from a physicist, but exemplifies a cantankerous fact of human nature that seems to have eluded the more "scientific" of our social "scientists".

[3] Abraham Heschel wrote, "The image of man affects the nature of man...We become what we think of ourselves..." in *Who Is Man ?* (Stanford Univ. Press, 1965), pp. 7-8. Hugh Duncan explains that "*How* we communicate determines how we relate as human beings", in "The Symbolic Act : Basic Propositions on the Relationship between Symbols and Society", in L. Thayer (ed.), *Communication : Theory and Research* (Springfield, Ill. : C. C. Thomas, 1967), pp. 194-227. The *Dhammapada* begins : "All that we are is the result of what we have thought". And John Dewey : "Society not only continues to exist by transmission, *by* communication, but it may fairly be said to exist *in* communication" in *Democracy and Education* (N. Y. : Macmillan, 1916), p. 5.

[4] In *Our Synthetic Environment* (N. Y. : Knopf, 1962), p. 210.

[5] Fred L. Polak, variously in *The Image of the Future*, Vol. I (Leyden : A. W. Sythoff, 1961). *Cf.* George Steiner, *In Bluebeard's Castle* (London : Faber & Faber, 1971).

[6] See, e.g., Bruno Snell, *The Discovery of the Mind : The Greek Origins of European Thought*, trans. T. G. Rosenmeyer (Harvard Univ. Press, 1953).

[7] Again, e.g., *cf.* the papers by Eric and Christine Havelock in "Communication in the Classical World", ed. Jackson Hershbell, *Communication* (in process).

[8] As, e.g., in Plato's *The Republic*.

[9] It is not, for example, even mentioned in Robert Brown's *Explanation in Social Science* (Chicago : Aldine, 1963), or in Scott Green, *The Logic of Social Inquiry* (Chicago : Aldine, 1969), Maurice Natanson (ed.), *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* (N. Y. : Random House, 1963), or in dozens of other books on social

"science" theory and method.

[10] As Kahlil Gibran says, it takes two to create a [human] truth : one to utter it and another to believe it. Cf. Augustine's "To understand, you must believe", a "theory" of communication which can account for much more empirically than can the dominant paradigm A → B = X.

[11] I would conclude that it is precisely the fact that our utterances *are not* [genetically or culturally] both the necessary and the sufficient conditions for our comprehensions and subsequent actions that distinguishes human from non-human communication. The ethologists' "Kumpan Theory"--which holds that the reception of a properly coded signal is both the necessary and the sufficient condition for the appropriate subsequent behavior--may accommodate most animal and insect social communication, since that is largely genetically determined, but very little specifically human communication, which is not genetically determined.

[12] On such matters as these, *cf.* the celebrated volume by Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Univ. of Chicago Press, 1962); a comparable analysis of "revolutions" as conceptual rather than institutional is given in Donald A. Schon, *Displacement of Concepts* (London : Tavistock, 1963).

[13] Cf. Everett Knight, *The Objective Society* (N. Y. : Braziller, 1960); Floyd W. Matson, *The Broken Image* (Garden City, N.Y. : Anchor, 1966); and Anton C. Zijderveld, *The Abstract Society* (Garden City, N.Y. : Anchor, 1971).

[14] In a provocative little book, *Freedom from the Known*, ed. Mary Lutyens (London : Gollancz, 1972); *cf.* Alan W. Watts, *The Wisdom of Insecurity* (N.Y. : Vintage, 1951).

[15] As discussed by Colin Cherry in *World Communication : Threat or Promise* (London : Wiley-Interscience, 1971).

[16] *Viz.* the almost absolute failure of machine translation of non-literal (i.e. metaphoric) language.

[17] In *Desert Music and Other Poems.*

[18] *In Psychology Today*, February 1973, e.g., p. 66.

[19] Here, particularly, in "An Anti-Idealist Statement on Communication", in *Communication*, Vol. I, No. 1, pp. 121-127. Cf. Robert *Ardrey's* paper on "Non-communication...' in *Communication*, Vol. I, No. 2, pp. 153-168.

[20] In *Obligation : A Social Theory* (Univ. of Michigan Press, 1970).

[21] Gerard Radnitzsky, *Contemporary Schools of Metascience* (Chicago : Regnery, 1970); Karl R. Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations*, 2nd ed. (N.Y. : Basic Books, 1965); Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (N.Y. : Pantheon, 1970).