

3

Communication as Transcendence

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Communication is *the simultaneous experience of self and other*. That's what I mean by *transcendence*. Communication is the experience of transcending one's (current) self, overcoming one's (current) self, to become more than what one was through connection with another. This is a definition born of the American pragmatist tradition, and it owes much to the classical thinkers in that tradition, especially William James, John Dewey, and George Herbert Mead, as well as contemporary pragmatist writers, notably Richard Rorty, Cornel West, and Hilary Putnam. The definition is deceptively simple; its implications are complex. Thus, I will proceed carefully, articulating each of the main terms of the definition before turning to some of the consequences of holding this definition of communication.

Defining Terms

Communication Is an Experience

The word *experience* is, perhaps, the most important term in this definition. I mean by it something akin to William James' radical empiricist notion of

The author would like to thank Bill Rawlins and Ted Striphas for helpful readings of an earlier draft of this chapter.

pure experience—something that is nothing less than concentrated experience, an undiluted totality. And experience is always *of* something, but it is never only either thoughts about the thing or the thing itself. Imagine you say to someone, “I experienced the most amazing sunset last night.” What would you mean by the use of the word *experienced*? You would, with the use of that word, be suggesting the fullness of what you felt and thought, what you sensed and imagined, what both you and the sun were doing, and what both you and the sun were being, in that moment. In short, you would be suggesting all that was captured in what James called “the immediate flux of life” that was you and the sun last night.

So when I define communication as an experience of self and other, I am trying to suggest that communication is a particular occasion of experience, one which happens when you experience, in all the fullness of life, your self and someone else.

Now let me introduce a second example. Suppose you say to me, “I had the worst dining experience of my life last night.” What is different about that expression from saying, “I had the worst dinner of my life last night”? Well, you probably used the word *experience* to suggest a totality larger than simply the meal itself. I suspect, in fact, you are likely to go on and tell me maybe about the awful service *and* the crying baby at the next table *and* the freezing cold temperature in the restaurant *and* the hostess who put you in the nonsmoking table right next to the smoking section *and* the ridiculously high price of the food *and* the meagerness of the wine list *and* who knows what else in addition to some dishing about the dishes. The point here is that an experience is something whole, something uncontained and unrestrained, something much more than a simple, narrowly proscribed, representation.

As the sunset and restaurant examples may suggest, experiences can be good or bad, colorful or dull, rewarding or punishing, memorable or forgettable, and the like, but they cannot be right or wrong, accurate or inaccurate, or true or false. This makes my conception of communication quite different from the most commonly held ones, because communication is typically thought to occur only when people accurately interpret one another, or only when my meaning *of/for* something corresponds to your meaning *of/for* something. By defining communication as an experience, I am doing away with that requirement of accuracy or correspondence, and that is very important.

My definition urges an examination of the *quality* of the experience of communication: Was it full and moving, or degraded and anesthetizing? Was it honest and joyful, or insincere and unhappy? Communication, by my definition, is not something that is either accomplished or not, depending

upon whether a message was accurately received, but rather a certain sort of opportunity or possibility realized, an experience of self and other, however good or bad (see also Shepherd, 2001b).

Communication Is an Experience of Self

In defining communication, in part, as an experience of self, I intend to call to mind George Herbert Mead's definition of individuals as social, or communicative, products: "All selves are constituted by or in terms of the social process, and are individual reflections of it" (1934, p. 201). We are not born with senses of self. Rather, selves arise in interaction with others. I can only experience myself in relation to others; absent interaction with others, I cannot be a self—I cannot emerge as someone.

It is important to understand that this experience of self, as an *experience*, is not a process of getting in touch with a pre-given entity. Remember, this definition does away with correspondence as a criterion. "Knowing" yourself is not, by my definition, a psychological process of uncovering your inner or "true" self, but rather a communicative process of always-becoming who you are. This *always-becoming* implies the sense of transcendence as the overcoming of self that I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. Communication allows for the continual making, or building, of self, always providing an expanded sense of self (which is not to say a "better sense of self," because that would imply a given self to be more accurately sensed).

Communication Is an Experience of Other

Just as I become myself in interactions with you, you become yourself in interactions with me. And as we are always-becoming only when together, these interactions offer us the opportunity to experience one another. I am tempted to say here that communication allows for understanding one another, as long as everyone agrees that the banishment of correspondence from my measure of communication means that understanding one another has nothing to do with accurately interpreting one another. Rather, by this definition, understanding has to do with the adoption of a certain stance or attitude toward one another and the entering of a particular orientation—an orientation of sympathetic awareness (a common secondary definition of *understanding*). When we experience another in communication, we come to be in sympathy, or in common feeling, with that other. This common feeling is the sense of sharedness we often assume in engaging with others. But it is not "meaning" that we technically share with others when we interact, as is commonly said, but rather our significances, or our always-becoming

selves. It is, in other words, the significance of the experience of one another that we share—each of us becoming more, not by our actions alone, but because of our *interaction*.

Communication Is the Simultaneous Experience of Self and Other

The term in my definition needing least explication, I suppose, is *simultaneous*, yet it is the term that best signals the rather wondrous nature of communication's accomplishment. In the experience of communication, I experience your presence and mine at once. Communication, in this way, is the experience of being-together. I express that as one word, *being-together*, in an attempt to capture both the togetherness of the experience as well as the "becomingness" or "being-ness" of the experience—the processual sense of always-becoming, and always-becoming more, together.

Perhaps another way of getting at the special nature of this simultaneity is to say that communication is the desirable (even if sometimes unhappy) experience of attending not just to me, at the ignorance of you, nor just to you, at the loss of me, but the sympathetic awareness of and attendance to both you and me in simultaneous regard. This definition hearkens to the Latin root of the word communication, *munia*, gifts and services. By my definition, communication is the mutual giving of selves and, so, serving of others. This should also point to the strong connection between my definition of communication and the associated term, and experience, *community* (see Shepherd, 2001a).

Definitional Consequences

The danger in defining communication as transcendence—as the simultaneous experience of self and other—is that it may make communication sound more mystical, more fantastic, possibly more weird, and probably more rare than it really is. This danger is also a legacy of the definition's pragmatic roots. Dewey rather famously characterized communication as "a wonder by the side of which transubstantiation pales" (1925, p. 138), but he also intended communication to be understood as a sort of usual experience, regular, highly significant, but unremarkable in its normalcy. Communication may be a miracle, but it is a rather mundane one, and the oxymoronic character of this mundane miracle is what lends this particular conception its definitional power. This pragmatic definition allows us to see how special, significant, necessary, and needed communication is in our lives, but also

how, as a result, everyday it is. This will become clear through consideration of the various “consequences” to follow.

A Hopeful Definition

The common definition of communication that assumes the transmission of information, thoughts, or meanings to be the defining purpose of communication, with accuracy of receipt, or correspondence of content, held to be the measure of communication’s success, rather quickly leads to the realization of communication’s impossibility (see Shepherd, 1999). Can we ever, exactly, share information, thoughts, or meanings? But believing that we can never really know another as we know ourselves has rather severe consequences. It is a depressing knowledge with often antisocial implications. At worst, this view implies that we are doomed to isolation, forever apart from all others. Why try to understand others when understanding, defined as accurate reflection of another’s knowledge, thoughts, or meaning, is impossible? At best, as Richard Rorty points out, this view suggests that we converse in order to make further conversation unnecessary (1982, p. 170). After all, once I “get” your message, or meaning, the task of communication has been accomplished and we have no further need to talk. Isn’t it more uplifting to think of communication as an experience of being in sympathy with another and yourself at the same time? To me, that definition explains the aching need most of us have to be with others, the seeming naturalness of togetherness and what we know to be the aberrant character of isolation (think here of the hermit or monk, who, through sacrifice, assumes a position of isolation from others.) This need for being-together cannot be explained by a definition that equates communication with the simple transfer of thoughts, ideas, information, or even meaning.

It is important here to point out that my definition does not guarantee that being-together in communication will necessarily prove to be either easy or satisfactory—it is oftentimes hard and dissatisfying, but it does hold out hope for the possibility of something good. The definition captures James’ “meliorism”: something that is neither optimistic nor pessimistic, but full of possibility.

An Empowering Definition

This definition of communication implies the importance of voluntary participation; there can be no communication without the giving of selves, and the act of giving is always, by definition, voluntary (which is not to say that there may not be times when we are forced to speak, but communication is something more than mere speaking, and it requires volition). Similarly, a gift

requires voluntary acceptance to count as a gift (a gift refused is, by definition, no gift). In other words, the possibility of communication and its potential promise is always dependent upon each individual's will. You may choose to shut yourself off from others, close down the expansion project of the growing self, stagnate and keep your gift from the world, or you may choose to leap into engagement with others, trusting, as James said, that others will meet your leap and allow for the experience of communication to take place. It is, in very large part, within your power. Communication is not something that happens in spite of you, but because of you. This definition implies the fundamental freedom of individuals.

This empowering sense of communication also implies an associated responsibility. Without your gift of self, the possibilities of communication cannot be realized. Without your gift of self, others will miss the opportunity to expand their senses of self. Without your gift of self, the potential sense of community that lies waiting to be accomplished will always be limited. Without your gift of self, the need for relationship that all of us have will be to some degree unmet. Without your gift of self, we will all be smaller, less than we could have been. Thus, as much as freedom is implied by this definition, so too is the fundamental interdependence of individuals.

An Ennobling Definition

This definition suggests that being together is as natural a condition as being apart, perhaps more so, because there can be no sense of self absent a sense of other. What Hilary Putnam said of the mind and the world is synonymous with what this definition of communication implies about the self and other: "The mind and the world jointly make up the mind and the world" (1981, p. 11). You and me jointly make up you and me. My understanding and your understanding jointly make up my understanding and your understanding. And the "making up" part is communication. That suggests the naturalness of association (Dewey, 1927), a rather comforting thought.

Consider this: a self cannot feel alone unless it has already experienced togetherness. The experience of aloneness is an experience of absence, suggesting, necessarily, a prior experience of presence. How can you know something's missing if you've never experienced whatever it is you now miss? This suggests what Dewey always argued: Care for others is every bit as natural as concern for self (e.g., Dewey, 1916, especially Chapter 26; see also Ryan, 1995, p. 359). This definition reminds us of the fundamental unselfishness of the social world.

This definition in turn raises us up—it defines communication as *transcendence*. The definition also suggests a certain ideal and an associated

implied morality. There is a reason why we sometimes say to those who are too full of themselves, “get over yourself!” We believe that being-together, or understanding others in the sense of being in sympathy with them, is better than being-apart, or refusing to be in common feeling with others. We know it is not possible to experience sympathetic awareness with everyone, but, as Alan Ryan noted in defense of John Dewey’s hope for peace prior to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, this “suggests the difficulty of the task, not the foolishness of the ambition” (1995, p. 27).

Defining communication as the simultaneous experience of self and other implies not that we can experience others outside of our experience of self but that we nonetheless may strive through this experience to understand others as others. This is an enlarging notion, an ennobling idea.

A Democratic Definition

“Communication as transcendence” is a definition made for a democratic way of life. Transcending your self and being able to experience another as you experience your self are notions needed for a society built on the idea that there are no essential selves. This position contends that I don’t know you because of who you are (by race, religion, ethnicity, sex, etc.), but by who you are becoming in an experience of communication. This is a definition for a people who understand that identities are never fixed, but are rather under constant re-creation—the kind of folks who people democracies, with their embrace of potential, change, and experimentation.

John Dewey wrote, “A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience” (1916, p. 87). People are conjoined, united, or made common through the experience of being-together in communication. The sense of togetherness that communication as transcendence provides is necessary to a democratic way of life because we have nothing in common, nothing really to unite us, other than the significance of shared experience. Those of us who live in liberal, pluralistic societies live in communities of strangers. As such, our democracy demands not simple tolerance of difference, and the fractionating that causes, but the transcendence of our essentially different selves—the getting over your self that communication allows (St. John & Shepherd, 2004). We need a definition of communication to embrace, and a definition in which to hold faith, that preaches this possibility and offers this opportunity. Communication, in this sense, fosters the associated living that is democracy, allowing for the coordination of activity necessary to full participation in the constant construction of our social selves and the society we are making.

Conclusion

Of all human desires, two are especially heartfelt: (a) that we have some say in the future, some measure of influence on our destiny—that we are not mere puppets of fate, cogs in wheels, or unanchored buoys at sea; and (b) that we are not alone. Defining communication as transcendence speaks to these desires. It allows for the possibility of both becoming what we were not and are not now, as well as being-together with others. This is the promise of pragmatism and its conception of communication. As Ryan noted in the conclusion to his biographical study of John Dewey, “We are not, in Heidegger’s phrase, ‘thrown into the world,’ and we are not doomed to cosmic loneliness. We may find ourselves as individuals disappointed in all sorts of ways, may find ourselves lonely and frustrated, bored in our work, and much worse, but these are *problems*, not fate” (1995, p. 365, italics in original). And, of course, I believe that these are problems that can be overcome, and perhaps only overcome, through the simultaneous experience of self and other.

Additional Readings

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30 Making

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