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The law of the gift, the meaning of life and its communication

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Abstract

The law of the gift, the meaning of life and its communication

In our age of digital communication and social media, it can be instructive to ask what communication is at its foundations. What differentiates human communication from non-human communication? What guides the human use of communication? What ethical considerations pertain to communication and how do we determine or measure its use? This article is an inquiry into the metaphysical underpinnings of communication. It begins with Aristotle who (1) established the essential features of human communication and (2) offered that its greatest application is in the service of wonder and contemplation, which for Aristotle are the human being's highest, most "god-like" activity. Next the article looks to Thomas Aquinas who develops Aristotle's notion of communication as essential to human flourishing, emphasizing the cultivation of virtue. This reflection on Thomas Aquinas is a springboard to a final turn toward the personalist metaphysics of John Paul II, whose philosophical notion of the Law of the Gift gives fresh and penetrating insight into the truth about human communication, its purpose and its highest application. This article does not attempt to be exhaustive in its philosophical consideration of communication; rather its aim is to trace a line from Aristotle, arguably its greatest ancient proponent, through Aquinas, arguably its greatest medieval proponent, to John Paul II, whose insights into the nature of the human person provide the ground for one of the most fascinating contemporary reflections on the purpose and value of human interaction: its key role in human flourishing.

Keywords: communication, ethics, truth, love, meaning, gift, John Paul II

While the study of communication normally occurs in the context of the social sciences, it is also true that communication can be analyzed philosophically. In fact, philosophy's job is to shed light on the nature of things, and very little falls outside of its scope. Hence, we might take a moment to reflect philosophically on the very nature of communication and consider its metaphysical foundations. In so doing, the great insights of John Paul II will prove to be the most enriching and illuminating.

Method

Our method will be to sketch a philosophical line of reflection from Aristotle to Thomas Aquinas, both of whom are precursors to the penetrating thought of John Paul II. Aristotle will set the philosophical framework for how to analyze communication in terms of its nature. Aquinas will add features to the Aristotelian paradigm. Then John Paul II will both appropriate and, in an interesting way, overturn this rich philosophical heritage. His claims about the meaning of human life and human excellence being achieved most fully through making a sincere gift of self will give new insight into the purpose and value of human communication.

Aristotle on communication

We begin in the 4th century B.C., when Aristotle sets forth a philosophical consideration of the natures of different kinds of living beings. Aristotle contrasts sensate, non-rational animals with rational beings in terms of their communication (Aristotle, 1984a, III.3. 427b13, p. 680). Non-rational animals communicate mostly, according to Aristotle, in order to perpetuate the species—mating calls, signaling for food and the like. Human beings also communicate to help safeguard their survival—we use words to attract potential spouses, keep the spouses we have, help our children stay away from danger, to obtain and ration food, and so forth. But human beings can also communicate on a higher level. For Aristotle, it is not just a matter of degrees, as though we are more sophisticated in our speech than chimpanzees, but that we can do something that they just cannot do: we can apprehend and also disclose ‘truth’, truth *per se* (Aristotle, 1984a, III.5. 430a20–25, p. 684). We can share beautiful realities just for the sake of sharing them, just because they are beautiful. According to Aristotle, humans are oriented toward ‘wonder’ (Aristotle, 1984b, I.2. 982b12; 983a14, pp. 1554–1555). Wonder is not at the service of survival. It is not pragmatic or transactional. Wonder is, according to Aristotle, god-like (Aristotle, 1984b, XII.7. 1072b20–31, p. 1695). So, communication, for Aristotle, can be on the level of utility, getting what we want or need, but it can also be on the level of transcendence: revealing to one another the truths that are so beautiful, so good and so compelling that we share them out of the compunction to give others the intellectual

treasures, so to speak, that we are enjoying. Delight—when we communicate out of delight, we are communicating on this higher level that is qualitatively different than the level of utility or survival.

Thomas Aquinas on virtuous communication

Thomas Aquinas draws on the rich heritage of Aristotle as he crafts his own philosophical theology which includes insights into the nature of communication. Aquinas agrees with Aristotle about the above, and Aquinas ascribes human actions to two categories: those that are perfunctory or instinctual, such as scratching one's beard, versus those actions that engage the intellect and will. Those that engage the intellect and will are human acts as such (*actus humanus*). They are human actions properly speaking, as they are the ones in which we actualize our human potential and flourish as only humans can (Aquinas, 1948, I-II.1.1, p. 583). Just as we might hope that the sapling we planted in our garden grows into a blossoming cherry tree, and that the baby kitten we have taken in grows to be a soft, lovely cat who is not only nice to hold but also catches unwanted mice, human flourishing will pertain to human acts as such and involve maximizing our potential for knowledge, wisdom and understanding. It will also have bearing on actions that exercise virtue: kindness, magnanimity, prudence, justice, courage, and truthfulness (Aquinas, 1948, I-II.4.6, p. 607).

Communication fits within this framework in the thought of Thomas Aquinas. Words, he says, are signs of ideas, and ideas are images or similitudes of things in reality, and so words relate to the meaning of reality through the mode of intellectual conception (Aquinas, 1948, I.13.1, p. 60). Aquinas confirms Aristotle's view that the purpose of communication is to manifest one's interior grasp of things, ultimately seeking to manifest the truth. Hence communication is foundational for human acts as such, including knowledge, wisdom and understanding. The right use of truthful speech is critical for the survival of human beings and for social integration: "Since man is a social animal, one man naturally owes another whatever is necessary for the preservation of human society. Now it would be impossible for men to live together, unless they believed one another, as declaring truth to one another" (Aquinas, 1948, II-II.109.3, p. 1656).

Communication is not only about survival; it also pertains to moral life. Using words to convey the truth as well as one is able is virtuous, for Aquinas. It is the opportunity to exercise consistency and reasonableness, which involves moral beauty. Truthfulness is also one way to be just, and justice is a cardinal virtue that perfects one's character. Being truthful "makes its possessor good and renders his action good" (Aquinas, 1948, II-II.109.1, p. 1655). Conversely, lying is wrong: it is a deliberate choice to represent the truth falsely or with a distortion (Aquinas, 1948, II-II.110.3, p. 1660). For Aquinas, communication is not only fundamental to society, but it requires a virtuous application—both the individual and the culture are strengthened by a truthful, integrous use of all forms of communication.

John Paul II on dignifying communication

John Paul II understood the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition well and appropriated it for himself. But as a philosopher in his own right, he added something new: self-disclosure out of love. How does the human being flourish? Not by building himself up, but by giving himself away. In his office as supreme pontiff he writes:

Being a person means striving towards self-realization which can only be achieved through a sincere gift of self. ... Man is called to exist for others, to become a gift (John Paul II, 1988, p. 28).

This can be called the Law of the Gift: the amazing fact of human nature, that self-realization or fulfillment can only happen, paradoxically, through a "sincere gift of self" (Second Vatican Council, 1965, § 24). It is an awe-inspiring, counter-intuitive feature of human nature, built into the metaphysical fabric of who we are, that instead of thriving by way of gaining goods and amassing fortunes for ourselves, rather than establishing our good name and even acquiring fame and honor, the surest way to genuine happiness is the kind of love through which we give ourselves away.

John Paul II identifies marriage as the proto-typical setting in which humans mutually give themselves, each to the other, but it is not the only one. Nevertheless, his message is consistent throughout his writings: *Find a way to make of your life a gift; that is the surest path to happiness.*

How do we make of ourselves a gift to someone else? Self-disclosure is a key feature (Wojtyła, 1993, p. 23). Communicating our interior lives, thoughts and feelings to our trusted companion is the basis of our gift of self, upon which we build through actions of humble, loving generosity.

The essence of John Paul II's vision of human communication is that we are to speak to others in a way that respects their inherent dignity. We are never to objectify the other person but always to treat them as a subject (Wojtyła, 1993, pp. 21–28). How easy it is to objectify others and allow ourselves to be objectified in today's world of social media and digital networking. But John Paul II wrote that we are never to treat others merely as a means to an end, but as an end in itself (Wojtyła, 1993, pp. 21–28). As a survivor of World War II and a witness to the atrocities of human objectification in its cruelest forms, the cornerstone of John Paul II's ethics for human communication is respect. Each person has an inherent dignity, he believed, and it is of paramount importance to maintain that dignity, even when we are doing transactional business and even when we disagree. Whether we are speaking to a stranger, or to our spouse, parent or child, we should never treat others as mere tools or ways to get what we want. The need to communicate entails an obligation to communicate with mutual respect.

So many people are restless, seeking a path that makes sense of and helps us cope with the vicissitudes of life. In *Fides et ratio* no. 1 he writes:

A cursory glance at ancient history shows clearly how in different parts of the world, with their different cultures, there arise at the same time the fundamental questions which pervade human life: *Who am I? Where have I come from and where am I going? Why is there evil? What is there after this life?* These are the questions ... which have their common source in the quest for meaning which has always compelled the human heart. In fact, the answer given to these questions decides the direction which people seek to give to their lives.

John Paul II posits that the quest for meaning is fundamental to human existence, that searching for meaning is essential to what it is to be human. He says in *Redemptor hominis* no. 10:

Man cannot live without love. He remains a being that is incomprehensible for himself, his life is senseless, if love is not revealed to him, if he does not encounter love, if he does not experience it and make it his own, if he does not participate intimately in it.

He and other Fathers of the Second Vatican Council tie this quest for meaning and sense with the notion of human progress:

Man's social nature makes it evident that the progress of the human person and the advance of society itself hinge on one another. For the beginning, the subject and the goal of all social institutions is and must be the human person which for its part and by its very nature stands completely in need of social life. Since this social life is not something added on to man, through his dealings with others, through reciprocal duties, and through fraternal dialogue he develops all his gifts and is able to rise to his destiny (*Gaudium et spes*, 1965, § 25).

Human beings are not isolated in their quest for meaning. Rather, we are social creatures who cannot flourish without communion, community, society and relationship. What is the basis of this matrix of interaction? "Fraternal dialogue." Communication.

Conclusions

In sum, then, from a philosophical perspective, how might we approach the questions, "What is communication?" and "What guides an ethical use of communication?" John Paul II agrees with both Aristotle and Aquinas that a link exists between communication and the achievement of human greatness. Communication is self-disclosing interaction with another, and can have as its purpose survival, practical ends and social engagement. All three thinkers see communication as correlated to reality and believe that truthfulness is essential to a right use of it. Yet with John Paul II we see an innovation. One use of communication, John Paul II says, is self-disclosure done in the mode of love, with a view to making a sincere gift of self to someone else. This kind of communication gets to the heart of what is most fundamental about the human person, namely that meaning is found in love. This feature sets humans apart from other species of living things and is what is greatest about them. The way to the greatest happiness of human beings is through making a sincere gift of self to another, and self-disclosure is key to this process. As we advance in global communications, social networks, and digital platforms, John Paul II's message is to take care not to objectify one another. People are not mere means to an end: they are subjects in their own

right and are worthy of love. Communication throughout our culture, even when it is pragmatic in nature, is ethical when it aligns with the human path to flourishing: the pursuit of wisdom which culminates in self-donating love.

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