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A Philosophically Based Inquiry into the Nature of Communicating Humans

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Conducting “A Philosophically Based Inquiry into the Nature of Communicating Humans” is foundational to developing a comprehensive “philosophy of life” (Levy, 2002, p. 44) that would encompass “the logic of [the] emergent … from its origins in the simplest most primitive forms of organic being to its culmination in the unprecedentedly complex forms of human existence.” Informational and communicative functions and practices are observable in all living entities and systems and require directed attention from communication ethics scholars, arguably more now than ever, as human historicity and natural history proceed into a twenty-first century that has been quick to display global crises arising at the nexus of society and nature. The associated practical and ethical challenges reach into the most profound concerns about life and death, existence and non-being, survival and annihilation. Ethics, as responsibility to and for the “other” – human and natural, as well as artifactual from the perspective of a number of contemporary philosophies – emerges as the “first philosophy” Emmanuel Levinas envisioned. Levinas and fellow philosopher Hans Jonas are principal inspirational and substantive sources for the central ideas presented in response to this topic. Both may require preliminary introduction, since these thinkers are not widely regarded as founding visionaries for contemporary communication and media studies, though they should be.

Jonas’ wide-ranging philosophical writings during the course of seven decades sought to comprehend the integrated interplay of natural and human processes and practices, ranging from basic metabolism and motility of simple organisms to the human exercise of moral imagination in its most complex manifestations. This depth and breadth of philosophical concern brought Jonas specifically and centrally to the theme of modern technology, considering how its ever-increasing powers put at issue “the integrity of our organic being … the integrity (or proper ‘good) of anything …” (Jonas, 1974, p. xvii). What Jonas strove towards ultimately was articulation of “a substantive link between the theory of the organism and the ethics of technological intervention.” The part played by communication in shaping natural as well as human history has not been adequately examined, and Jonas’ philosophy provides a point of origination for this effort.

The nature of communicating humans comes distinctively into view for Jonas at a threshold of ethnological development where the qualities of interaction between and among beings transcends functional, adaptive, biological behaviors to advance in a direction that opens time and space *extensively* (into contact with and exposure to social and cultural multiplicities) while also
penetrating *intensively* (into the depths of personal experience). Extensive powers are celebrated in our era for advances in technically-supported connectivity, thereby enhancing the potential for ever more widespread dissemination of information and increased reach for telecommunications. But extensivity becomes a cause for ethical concern as persons acquiesce to complex technological systems providing for design control to be exerted across vast stretches of space while encompassing the widest spectrum of human activities, bio-energetic circumstances, and physical ecology. Increasingly precise surveillance of designed environments can take place in so-called “real time” when extensive capabilities combine with increased intensivity in directing audiences’ and consumers’ attention and interest, especially through collection and use of personal data. Moreover, intensive impacts of communication in the contemporary era are linked with the technological capacity to simulate human experience and participation. For example, contemporary media content and mediated spectacles exhibit highly refined verisimilitude and quality of felt presence. Thus, technological systems now compete with phenomenological consciousness and experience as these have been traditionally conceived.

Jonas criticized both the extensive and intensive dimensions of expanded, modern technological powers by concentrating attention on the threats leading towards violent destruction of social life and catastrophic neglect and abuse of the natural world. His way of addressing the situation was to call for heightened commitments to the qualities of human intimacy and mutual-personal relation, with the parent-to-child relation of care as the normative standard. Specifically, Jonas held that the specter of annihilation should summon a mature acceptance of responsibility that characterizes the intentional, reflexive consciousness of the adult, the loving parent in particular. This reflexive intentionality should inspire moral resolve to care for those beings and entities that are ontologically within the human sphere of responsible duty.

Consideration of the perspective provided by Jonas leads ultimately, in this chapter, to the ideas of Emmanuel Levinas as the basis of a complementary position that provides communicative detail about the ontological “face” of mutual-personal responsibility. Human being declares its nature through responsiveness to an originary “pure communication” (Levinas, 1987, p. 119), which transcends saying or doing, or acts of production, but rather instigates an intimate event of “exposure” (Levinas, 1981, p. 49) to an “other”. The exemplary form is an experienced “proximity” (p. 81ff.) to a living “face” (Levinas, 1969, p. 81) that “shows itself simultaneously in its poverty and height” (Colledge, 2002, p. 179). A “command” to act with responsibility to and for the other is imposed through proximity as awareness of an infinite obligation to the other, a responsibility that arrives “as though from an immemorial past, … a time before the beginning” (Levinas, 1981, p. 88).

Ethics is described by Levinas as passivity, obsession, hunger, absence, restlessness, undoing, weight, density, and trauma; it is communicative undergoing rather than communicative doing (see Dewey, 1958, p. 46 ff.). The distinctively human “competence” that can be distilled from these attributes becomes the communicative capacity to experience – i.e., to be impressed by – the significance and inherent dignity associated with (a) the other as person – self-constituting and indeterminable – and (b) the self-other encounter as the paradoxical basis of a common life in and through communication, but one that is only made possible by and through the authority that emanates from the other, since it is a capacity born from the condition of the ethical being as held “hostage” by the other.

Jonas and Levinas sought pathways towards ethical reorientation in a modern world in which nihilism had penetrated pervasively into the foundations of human meaning-making; it now shadows the constant, near-frenzied pursuit of satisfaction, which provides for postmodern societies only a semblance of human flourishing in the form of expanded connectivity to a global storehouse of techno-commercial values, which are the facade of nihilism’s ethical void (Wolff, 2011, p. 128).
The argument now returns to Jonas’ writings (Jonas, 1966, 1974, 1984, 1996) for the framework that initiates this philosophical inquiry into the nature of humans communicating, an undertaking that requires interrelating natural processes with cultural practices. Jonas draws on several foundational premises to guide the study of practices, activities, and actions of humans communicating.

The first is that interdependencies between inward experience (that is, consciousness, including the psychological dimensions of meaning-making) and outward experience (that is, the externalization of consciousness in the form of material productions and observable behaviors) need to be taken into account in comprehending how humans exercise meaning-making capacities. This integration of extensive and intensive perspectives provides specificity to Jonas’ positioning of human communication within the larger philosophical project he pursues, which is to “restore life’s psychophysical unity to its place in the theoretical totality, lost on account of the divorce of the mental and the material since the time of Descartes” (Jonas, 1996, p. 59).

Consider, by way of illustration of Jonas’ point, how “symbolic forms” (Thompson, 1995, p. 18) – that is, extensively circulating, diverse formats and genres of communication – both constitute and express human sensibilities, as the domain of human inwardness; moreover, communicative forms develop interdependently with the “technical medium” or “material substratum” employed in particular instances of communication. Significant attributes associated with technical media include the ability to provide for durable “fixation” (p. 19) of content; ease of reproduction (p. 20); and “space-time distanciation” (p. 21), that is, the spatial/temporal “detachment of a symbolic form from its context of production.”

In line with these capacities, changes in technical media become interlinked with the development of particular formats and concentrations of content while providing resources for “the exercise of different forms of power” (p. 19). Thus, social roles and the attainment of status and authority should be considered historically as significantly a matter of how information and knowledge are produced, collected, stored, augmented, transformed, and retrieved (see Carey, 1989, p. 23), along with how content is transmitted and exchanged through institutional practices.

One observes, for example, how the earliest forms of writing developed by Sumerians and ancient Egyptians were put to economic uses, such as supporting property ownership and facilitating trade (Thompson, 1995, p. 19); today, these interests are carried forward into a globalizing, digital age, as high-powered computers allow for vast flows of financial information while diminishing the historically-perceived “tyranny of geography” (Gillespie and Robins, 1989, p. 7) and turning transactional time into nanoseconds. In such a communicative milieu, functional identities (see Couch, 1990, pp. 29–30) associated with economic and technical roles often take priority over “primal identity, the primordial mode of identification” (Levinas, 1969, p. 36). Dramatic transformations take place within broader patterns of continuities; and these patterns are constituted through communication as “a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed” (Carey, 1989, p. 23).

Jonas’ second premise is that this demand to integrate analysis of the inner and outer, and the semantic and the material, can be best met by elaborating how a “philosophy of life comprises the philosophy of organism and the philosophy of mind” (Jonas, 1974, p. xvii). Humans, along with other life forms, must derive ways to thrive as organisms in their environments; yet, our species is distinguished by the particular capabilities of mind that inform the human response to this fundamental challenge. Since communication is a way of extending mind (see Carey, 1969, p. 273), understanding the role of communication becomes central to a philosophical understanding of life. Furthermore, as Jonas (1966) notes, “a philosophy of mind comprises ethics – and through the continuity of mind with organism and organism with nature, ethics becomes part of the philosophy of nature” (p. 282).
This trajectory of thought allows for distinctive dimensions of human experience, notably symbolic meaning-making and ethical directedness in actions and relations, to be considered as part of an integrative picture of human life. From this vantage point, one can address in a unified manner the widest spectrum of contributing factors in human activity—"metabolism, moving and desiring, sensing and perceiving, imagining and thinking" (Vogel, 1996, p. 10). Basic modes of organismic contact with the environment, as well as advanced socio-cultural and technological ways of impressing individual and collective intentions and projects on shared worlds of experience, should be seen as comparable orders of complexity and meaningfulness; these derive from a primeval, natural drama that becomes historically conditioned within "an ascending scale in which are placed the sophistications of form, the lure of sense and the spur of desire, the command of limb and powers to act, the reflection of consciousness and the reach for truth" (Jonas, 1966, p. 2). Communication is, arguably, the key element within repertoires of instinctual, programmable, and creative functions and faculties that undergird this pageant.

Third, special consideration should be directed towards technological practices, since these have come to be regarded, in modern and postmodern societies especially, as humankind’s “most significant enterprise, in whose permanent, self-transcending advance to ever greater things the vocation of man tends to be seen, and whose success of maximal control over things and himself appears as the consummation of his destiny” (Jonas, 1984, p. 9).

Technological augmentation of communication has been a constitutive feature of social interaction in nearly all societies and in so-called advanced societies in particular (see Couch, 1990, 1996). Jonas contends that the modern results of this general path of development should be critically examined, with particular attention to ethical implications. To encompass social life in its entirety and unity requires comprehension of the technological dimensions of meaning-making. The “technologizing of the word” (Ong, 2002) merits special attention as the transformations from oral culture, to manuscripts, print, and electronic-digital communications play out in the psyches and the social relations that characterize different eras and societies.

To summarize this set of points derived from Jonas: (1) Communication should be addressed as human consciousness in vital action, including attention to the material, or physical-artifactual (see Woodward, 1996) contexts for action. (2) Consciousness and action, with their basis in “the state of being affected and spontaneity” (Jonas, 1996, p. 69), need to be approached with an analytical lens focused on the continuity of human life with other life forms. These range from the simplest organisms, to complex hybrid systems that combine human agency with cybernetic programming. (3) Particular emphasis should be placed on the role of technology as a set of developments that conditions the direction and destiny – for better or worse – that humans embrace through consciousness and set out to realize through communicative action.

These commitments lead to a substantive concept of nature focused on the “omnipresence of life” (Jonas, 1966, p. 8) of which humans and human communication form a part. Nature is “continuity of life forms” (p. 59 ff.), a phrase that serves as a “logical complement to the scientific genealogy of life” (p. 63); and the continuity of life forms is significantly a matter of their capacities for organization of information, ultimately of meaning.

[Information flow, not energy per se, is the prime mover of life … molecular information flowing in circles brings forth the organization we call “organism” and maintains it against the ever-present disorganizing pressures in the physics universe. So viewed, the information circle becomes the unit of life.
(Loewenstein, 1999, pp. xv–xvi)]

Human communicators have played an obvious, distinctive role within this genealogy of life. Persons develop and exercise unique “potencies” (Buber, 1965a, p. 163) for “knowledge, love,
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art, and faith.” Institutionalized practices result from the exercise of these potencies, as collectivities construct modes of education, norms for family life and community, artistic traditions, and religions. These institutional forms emerge within specific, historically-and culturally-situated contexts. Social roles and identities, along with the person’s most basic sense of self, undergo transformations as social actors respond – individually and in collectivities, in conformity with and in opposition to institutional conventions – by shaping perceptions, consciousness, agency, and interactions into “forms of relation” (Jonas, 1966, p. 4). These relations constitute the basis for human, personal identity and provide templates for social cooperation, competition, and conflict.

From this foundational position, Jonas went on to investigate a wide variety of concerns relevant to communication studies: How the “irritability” (Jonas, 1966, p. 99) of the simple cell might be usefully considered as the “germ” of “having a world,” which then develops through the experiences of human consciousness into a “world relationship”; the interventions into human purposefulness and behavior of “servomechanisms” (p. 109), such as target-seeking torpedoes, electronic computers, telephone exchanges,” and how these may call for reexamination of theories of the human, society, and the nature of the good, the summum bonum; investigations of the philosophical dimensions of public policy debates including critical-interpretive, ethical, and phenomenological inquiries into biomedical practices, genetic engineering, euthanasia.

Stepping back again from the appreciation and skepticism Jonas alternately expressed for the evolved quality of human capabilities, in order to continue concentrating for a moment more on their organic foundations, one observes with all live entities and systems that “life is essentially relationship; and relation as such implies ‘transcendence,’ a going-beyond-itself on the part of that which enters the relation” (Jonas, 1966, pp. 4–5). Such “going beyond” entails a degree of freedom that operates even deep within the genealogical substratum of life, in “the dark stirrings of primeval organic substance” (p. 3), since “metabolism, the basic level of all organic existence … is itself the first form of freedom … [one that] … shines forth … within the vast necessity of the physical universe.” When living entities develop beyond “mere dynamism” (Jonas, 1996, p. 70) to become “selective and ‘informed’” in their metabolic directedness, a natural “prototype” of “inner identity” has appeared. For all life forms, “being open to what is outside, becomes the subject-pole of a communication with things which is more intimate than that between merely physical units.” The movement is from causal patterns of determination and control to forms of agency and responsibility that herald a human capacity to develop towards intellectual and moral freedom.

Jonas shares his insistence on the continuity of life with other phenomenological philosophers who have emphasized “the interrelationship of matter, life, and consciousness” (Cooper, 1991, p. 15). The common premise is that life involves participation; in the case of humans, the processes entail “consciousness transcending itself into the lived body, into the community, history and the divine ground of being” (p. 15). But all life processes, “even the ‘simplicities’ of metabolism,” involve a degree of distinctiveness to be achieved by the life form in question, a particularity that can be considered as “the measure of its independence from its own material contents.” This “differentiation of the modes of participation, from inanimate material to animate nature, to the specific modes of human existence” (p. 14), is inherently communicative: The preservation of distinctive forms occurs as activity patterns are traced through time and etched across space, within one or another common medium for behavior or experience that constitutes an organismic environment or a human world. Thus, communication is adaptive in its origins, creative in its human expressions, and complexly combines programmable logic with active agency in its more intricate technological manifestations.

Attending briefly to the case of plant life, one observes that inner need extends towards outer resources through limited relations grounded in physical contiguity and immediacy of exchange.
The defining characteristic of a plant’s existence is “openness for encountering external reality” (Jonas, 1996, p. 69), based on the condition that “living form must have matter at its disposal, which it finds outside itself in the alien ‘world’” (p. 68). Plant life exhibits “outward exposure” (p. 69) and “the state of being affected,” along with a limited, teleologically driven “spontaneity” and the beginnings of “outward reach.” Communication takes the limited form here of material exchange.

Animal life operates with an expanded repertoire of organic potencies, achieving a further “horizon of freedom” (Jonas, 1996, p. 67). The mobile animal, guided by often highly proficient, instinctually-directed senses of sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch, manifests more dynamic relations within space and time. Concerning “space, as the dimension of dependence” (p. 71), the animal’s capacity for more active control allows its spatial environment to be “progressively transformed into a dimension of freedom, specifically by the parallel development of the following two abilities: to move about and to perceive at a distance.” Similarly, “time … is opened up by the parallel development of a third ability, namely emotion …”. The animal’s capabilities to extend the imperatives of instinctual need across physical space and to preserve the stirrings of need through “temporal distance” or duration, make the communication of a still-nascent, inner identity with external objects and living things a more actively motivated process than with plant life.

Two “distinguishing characteristics” (Carey, 1989, p. 27) of symbolic action, even in its rudimentary forms, are “displacement and productivity.” The first reconfigures action from a situation of required, physical co-presence with its stimulus, to a situation in which the stimulating factor can be “indicated” through some form of representation (see Millikan, 2004, p. 17); the second characteristic allows for multiple representations to accompany an action and for these to play a role in constituting the situation as well as symbolizing it. One might be inclined to consider these as traits solely of human communication, but current research suggests that many animals also employ a “functional semantics” (oller and griebel, 2004, p. 5), involving a “primitive representational form wherein both ‘what is the case’” – that is, symbolic, or representational displacement of an environmental circumstance – “and ‘what to do about it’” – that is, productivity in the form of instructions about how to act in the case in question – “are transmitted simultaneously.” Communicative processes “can be used either to reflect states of affairs or to produce them” (Millikan, 2004, p. 17); thus, they face in two directions at once.

Does the dance of the honeybee tell where the nectar is, or does it tell worker bees where to go? Clearly, it does both. … Similarly, alarm calls of the various species do not just represent present danger but are also signs directing conspecifics to run or to take cover.

Approaching the domain of human potencies, one observes (a) how an ever-emergent, increasingly complex “self” not only exists in a situation of dependence or interdependence with other entities, a feature shared even with plant life; and (b) how the ability of the self to act on this situation involves expanded levels of flexibility beyond those of animals; additionally, (c) the human self advances towards a continuously redefined quality of ontological, active, and expressive freedom, constructed in circumstances of mutual-personal relation (see Kirkpatrick, 1986; Macmurray, 1991).

The common element – manifested as a trait in the case of plants and animals, as a vital faculty within human existence – can be usefully thought of as “impressibility” (see Woodward, 2000, p. 355). In forms of life that are basically reactive in their responses to environment, impressibility consists of metabolic processes and instinctually-guided behaviors. In humans, impressibility becomes the basis for enactment, the ability of agents to impress their meanings, values, and projects on the world through communication. Impressibility, as communication, is both receptive and productive: Agents are simultaneously responding to the world, while also acting in relation to the world.
The distinctively human form of transactional response and initiative is “situated creativity” (Joas, 1996, p. 142), wherein human innovativeness transforms “unreflected routine” into “acts of creativity.” Based on the premise that “[a]ll action is embedded in anthropological structures of communication,” this view asserts that “creativity is more than merely one of the necessities for the survival of an organism.” It is, in human life, “the liberation of the capacity for new actions” (p. 133). John Dewey (1958) famously summarized the indissoluble linkages at play. “Experience is the result, the sign, and the reward of that interaction of organism and environment which, when it is carried to the full, is a transformation of interaction into participation and communication” (p. 22). In short, “[c]ommunication is the process of creating participation, of making common what had been isolated and singular …” (p. 244). Being is always and inevitably co-being (Holquist, 2002, p. 25); and for human communicators, being as co-being develops as both a conscious, reflective theme of living and as a source of desires and bodily repertoires that impress unconscious demands on action and experience.

Human communication marks a distinctive threshold of ontological advance in the development of impressibility as perception, knowledge, action, and relation. Simple and complex forms of “inter-personal and inter-group coordination” (Garnham, 2000, p. 3) derive from innate, communicative capacities connected with the “human species’” (p. 2) large brain and the organic requirements for sociality imposed by this endowment.

This brain has enabled it [the human species] to develop culture … patterns of behaviour which are not merely instinctual, but are endowed with meanings which can be transmitted through space and time beyond the immediate stimulus/response site of action, and a learning process the lessons of which are cumulative and open to criticism and modification in the light of experience. (p. 2)

As humans develop, their coordination of environmentally relevant activities occurs in, and reciprocally gives continuous rise to, historically situated configurations of “what we might call institutions as well as structures” (Garnham, 2000, p. 23). Human life has then achieved a level at which “a life informed by convention is natural for human beings in much the way that perception, nutrition, growth, and reproduction are natural” (Wallace, 1978, p. 34). The “potencies” that Buber identified find their appropriate expression in institutions that both fund and result from human inventiveness and creativity. On this basis, persons can make legitimate normative claims to have access to, to participate in, and to make their own “impress” on, social, cultural, political, and economic life as it develops through institutional activities.

Human communicators, as social beings, are active inventors of meaning, situated in environmental fields (see Bourdieu, 1985) that are also human worlds (Schutz, 1967). Worldly, environmental fields can also be considered as “active” in the sense that they condition human activities. “Human expressivity is capable of objectification, that is, it manifests itself in products of human activity that are available both to their producers and to other men as elements of a common world” (Berger and Luckmann, 1966, p. 34). The patterning of environmental elements follows spatial and temporal logics that can tend to become self-organizing – “autopoietic” (Luhmann, 1989, p. 143) – and these environmental logics enter into the acts of communicators and the shaping of communications. In the process, a “duality of structure” (Giddens, 1979, p. 5) is seen to operate, enabling and constraining human action; this duality also applies to human institutions in their historical role of expanding the boundaries of human accomplishment and aspiration while resetting limits on these boundaries.

Of particular interest for understanding communication are stabilities and changes in “the kinds of spaces created by media, and the effects that existing spatial arrangements have on media forms as they materialize in everyday life” (Couldry and McCarthy, 2004, p. 2). Technological invention allows for dramatic expansion of the human capability to extend motivations
and meanings across space and to preserve them through time. Technological augmentation of human experience intensifies a committed sense not only of what does and can occur within a life situation, but what also must occur in order for personal identity to express its felt dynamism, and ultimately to achieve an increasingly sought-after sense of creative inspiration and expression that emerges as an ideal (see Taylor, 1985, p. 22). Thus, technological power and expressivity, as fundamental dimensions of vital action, raise moral and ethical questions for the human, social actor.

Sophocles’ Antigone (see Jonas, 1974, p. 4) conveys dramatically how the technological expansion of human powers can heighten questions concerning their appropriate use. Sophocles’ Chorus tells how man “crosses the sea in the winter’s storm”; “ensnares … the races of all the wild beasts and the salty brood of the sea”; constructs “shelter against the cold, refuge from rain”; and teaches himself speech and thought and educates his feelings in ways required to build and dwell within what is, arguably, the supreme human artifact, the city. The Chorus concludes,

Clever beyond all dreams
the inventive craft that he has
which may drive him one time or another to well or ill
when he honors the laws of the land and the gods’ sworn right
high indeed is his city; but stateless the man
who dares to do what is shameful.

(lines 335–370)

These commanding lines convey how inventiveness extends human responsibility across multiple levels of worldly experience – natural (physical environment), ontological (fellow humans and one’s own self), and artifactual (human creations, including symbolic and technological worlds).

The technologizing of communication has meant that the natural environment, as a medium of expression (see Douglas, 1973), progressively gave way to emergence of an artificial, constructed, environment. Constructed environmental elements – technological and cultural artifacts as resources for social action – came to displace unconstructed, natural, elements (see Couch, 1990, p. 11), and the constructed, human environment – experienced phenomenologically as “world” (see Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Schutz, 1967) – started to progress through stages of structural and institutional development. Today, the world’s peoples observe and act and feel within a time/space in which technologies, the built environment, the artificial resources and accoutrements of post-industrial busyness predominate over natural elements.

With the emergence of “extended availability” (Thompson, 1995, p. 30) of human communications, “[i]nformation and symbolic content are made available to more individuals across larger expanses of space and at greater speeds.” Collective life becomes freed, or unmoored, from locale and from shared presence at a point in time. The monuments, memorials, and rituals of our era tend to seek us out, as coveted viewers/consumers of screens and monitors, rather than requiring what was historically the reverse, that we, as pilgrims, should trek across space as a labor of holy devotion to the authority of a time-honored shrine or commemoration. A historically momentous example of how these relations emerged is the appearance of “a reading public” (p. 126). This development reflected novel communicative circumstances, since this

was a “public without a place” and it was defined, not by the existence or possibility of face-to-face interaction among its members, but rather by the fact that its members had access to the kind of publicness made possible by the printed word.

(pp. 126–127)
Ongoing technological developments have comparable impacts on the conditions and consequences of interaction and communicative exchange. As contemporary communications now extend across vast geographical space, they are also technologically “sequenced” (see Couch, 1990, pp. 29, ff.) effectively and efficiently within micro-units of programmable time. But whatever technological and social achievements can be ascribed to this contemporary moment in the centuries-long “communications revolution,” one should not overlook that everyday communication is still enacted from the foundational situation “wherein people align their actions with one another as they confront and are confronted by an environment” (Couch, 1996, p. 2). These environments may increasingly take the form of hyper-real landscapes that invite viewers and players-participants into imagined worlds within the depth of computer screens, but the challenge to subsist environmentally remains basic and compelling.

In aligning their actions while also addressing environmental challenges and opportunities, human social actors engage in purposive-rational message-sending directed towards control, on one hand, and in communicative action directed towards reaching understanding, on the other (see Habermas, 1984/1987). Concerning the latter motive, communicative partners attempting to exercise cooperative agency, must “harmonize their plans of action on the basis of common situation definitions” (Habermas, 1984/1987, p. 286). This begins with the exercise of communicators’ abilities to “distinguish situations in which they are causally exerting an influence upon others from those in which they are coming to an understanding with them.” In the latter instance, communication proceeds in the direction of dialogue.

Contrastingly, “instrumental” (Habermas, 1984/1987, p. 285), or “strategic” message-sending, as a predominant focus, occurs in the context of “following technical rules of action” or “rules of rational choice.” The standard of judgment is success or efficiency, either of an “intervention into a complex of circumstances and events,” or an attempt at “influencing the decisions of a rational opponent.” Reflexivity then takes on a different character, since the achievement of objective outcomes based on an optimal deployment of means is intended. Communication – or, more precisely, information exchange – then becomes an element in control procedures, and the logic of control inclines towards input-output logics that can be programmed into operational sequences. This occurs through standardized procedures and routines – that is, as techniques or as part of “the physical structure of a purposive mechanism” (Beniger, 1986, p. 40) – that is, as programmed technologies, per se, such as computers that guide, and even dictate, decision-making on a stock exchange.

These modes of contact, and exchange – the communicative and the instrumental, or strategic (Habermas, 1984/1987, p. 285) – both play a part, and often compete with each other, in determining the character of our ways of living and working, particularly in “knowledge societies” (Mansell and Wehn, 1998), where informational and communicative activities become intricately tied up with creating, utilizing, and communicating knowledge. In socio-cultural contexts in which technological mastery is over-valued as basis for communication – as Jonas and other critics of modern technology suggest it is in modern and postmodern societies – an established set of ideological attitudes and practical assumptions takes precedence: Information exchange in the interests of achieving strategic goals prevails over relation-building. An alternative, dialogical position begins with the norm of communicative coorientation, and the potential mutuality of social interests this implies, and then attempts to recapture instrumentality as a subordinate, supporting principle, thus, “bringing instrumental rationality under the control of communicative rationality” (Dryzek, 1995, p. 114).

A philosophically supportable, dialogical (see Anderson, Baxter, and Cissna, 2004; Nikula, 2006) vision of communication has yet to be realized in empirically-observable instances. Accordingly, normative formulations such as Habermas’ theory of communicative action are
appropriately criticized for relying on counterfactual ideals, and failing to specify how “democratic discourse and human agency can combine to change the social structure in more desirable directions” (Tehranian, 1999, p. 90). Also, the notion of an “ideal speech situation” (see Benhabib, 1992), based on dialogue has most often predicated a “generalized other” (see Haas, 2001, p. 427) as the partner in dialogue, thus avoiding the many perplexities associated with conducting dialogue with a historically and culturally specifiable “concrete other” in his or her many manifestations. Any generalized, philosophical conception that sets out from a supposedly stable, theoretical positioning of “self” and “other” will tend to formalize what are actually specific, socio-historical contexts in which situated social actors enter into communicative relations and pragmatic projects. Such generalizations about dialogue also tend towards a theoretical privileging of interpersonal communication at a time when communications are increasingly founded on “time-space distanciation” (Giddens, 1981, pp. 4–5; Thompson, 1995, pp. 21–23), a communicative situation in which spheres of influence and environments for action begin “stretching away, in time and space, beyond the control of any individual actors” (Giddens, 1984, p. 25). Notwithstanding these limitations, the theory of communicative action, as an exemplar of emergent dialogic approaches to communication, provides an important precedent for conceptualizing the differences and interconnections between (a) communications directed towards reaching understanding, and (b) forms of informational, purposive-rational message-sending aimed at mastering practical situations. The ability to combine these modes of communication is central to present and future prospects for equitable communication and the egalitarian social visions such communication might support. One must be careful not to over-estimate the capacity of communicative advances to support social well-being, nor to devalue the essential role communication plays in the coordination of human affairs.

The work of Emmanuel Levinas provides the basis of a third position from those that would valorize mainly system or action, a stance that makes relation a central, normative value. From a relational standpoint, human communication is not determined by system requirements, nor is it unconstrained in its capacity to embody human intentions in the form of actions. Rather, communication is ethically oriented by relational “proximity” (Levinas, 1981, p. 81 ff.) when the human face of the “other” “shows itself simultaneously in its poverty and height” (Colledge, 2002, p. 179). Communicative partners in face-to-face proximity, encounter in the “other” these dual aspects of humanity – the “height” of the commanding presence, and the “destitution” of the vulnerable sufferer (Levinas, 1969, p. 197 ff). The tension between these aspects of human face and its authority to impress can guide thinking about the more general prospects for communication as a basis for ethical life.

Levinas detects a commandment in the appearance of the face, as if a “master” spoke to me. However, at the same time, the face of the other is destitute; it is the poor for whom I can do all and to whom I owe all (Levinas, 1985, p. 89). The call to responsibility in proximity to this doubled face introduces the “proto-norm” (Christians, 1997) of providing response, that is, an ontological call to become “response-able” (Booth, 1988, p. 126; see also, Woodward, 2000). “And me, whoever I may be, but as a ‘first person,’ I am he who finds the resources to respond to the call” (Levinas, 1985, p. 89). Fundamental to this understanding is that the “I” who provides the response from a mature store of resources is also, from another vantage point, a “me” who occupies a position of destitution, one whose face pleads for an ethical response from the corresponding other.

This notion of communicative responsibility can be tracked through six related levels of response-giving. The first three represent technical responses rather than ethical imperatives. These are (1) control, (2) instruction, and (3) discussion; and they are based, respectively, on
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(i) I-it relations of causation/force, (ii) I-it relations of output/programming, and (iii) I-you relations of knowledge exchange/persuasion (see Krippendorff, 1996). Examples are how the candy machine delivers up the selected treat; the thermostat regulates the temperature of the room; and the professional, technical expert delivers the service as the knowledge conveyed in the contract specifies. Three additional forms of ethical, dialogic relations can be distinguished as (4) ethics of care, based on the ideal of authentic being, for example, the spousal or parent-child or sibling relations; (5) ethics of responsibility, based on ethical community, for example, the assembly of colleagues, the religious fellowship, the literary “conversation” among authors, artists, philosophers, and other truth-seekers; and (6) ethics of “addressability” (Ediger, 1994), based on intercultural or multicultural community, for example, the prophetic partnership between the activist and those she engages in a spirit and vision of solidarity. In line with the arguments developed in this essay, I propose an ethics of impressibility for communication as appropriate to the challenges and opportunities of an emergent, global, participatory pluri-culture (Ihde, 1993, p. 56).

A communicative ethics of impressibility highlights how humans act, interact, and shape their practical and moral identities by receiving impressions from, and making impressions on their “triadic” (Woodward, 1996) fields of experience. The triadic field of human communication/participation is (a) material (physical-artifactual), (b) symbolic, (socio-cultural), and (c) relational (mutual-personal). An ethics of impressibility would make possible an understanding of the multiple levels at which moral agents provide responses to others and, at the same time, enact relations to the shared environments in which communicative action unfolds. Accordingly, responsibility should be seen in terms of how the agent is qualitatively, morally impressed by the call of the other, as it is communicated within the three dimensions of the field of experience – that is, the other as nature and humanly-created artifacts; the other as language and cultural creations; the other as communicative partners in mutual-personal relation. At the same time, the moral agent impresses a response on, or within, the triadic field of experience, affecting the world of things, other selves, and the languages of interpersonal contact.

An ethics of impressibility helps to elaborate Buber’s (1965a) “four potencies” (p. 163) of the human agent, namely, “knowledge, love, art, and faith.” This final attribute of faith extends the tripled context of triadic theory – physical, cultural, and human relational – into a “four-fold field of relations” (Buber, 1965b). This perspective would predicate impressibility occurring in two directions – productive and receptive – and at four levels, including the self, others, and things, but also the mystery of being.

The concern to call into play Buber’s four potencies returns the discussion to themes Jonas (1984) places at the heart of ethical consideration: (1) knowledge of the facts – a “scientific futurology” (p. x) – concerning the fate of nature, technological consequence, and the sustainable limits of human power; (2) love for the intimate other, including the “metaphysical other” (Levinas, 1969, p. 38), as envisioned in the possible “being” of a human future; (3) the art required to transform destructive artifice into responsible social productivity; and (4) the faith to restore balance by expanding the reach of ontology to include recognition of what has not yet appeared. This final sphere of experience is what Levinas (1981) describes as beyond being, or “otherwise than being.” Levinas’ ethics of proximity connects with Jonas’ imperative of responsibility by fostering the ethical potency of faith: through faith, persons impress, and are impressed by, human responsibility to what does not yet appear as presence. Through communication as impressibility, persons acknowledge responsibility for the consequential ways in which we impress human projects – practical and ethical – on the triadic worlds of our experience and participation.
REFERENCES


