

WHAT MAKES HUMAN COMMUNICATION POSSIBLE?

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Whitehead's concept of prehension implies that every actual occasion prehends every other. If prehension is communication, then communication is a universal element of the world process. Let us accept that "in some sense" this is true. Human communication is a special case of cosmic communication. What then distinguishes it?

What communicates with what? Do "entities" communicate as wholes or is there some part or some state of an entity that responds leaving the rest only indirectly affected? Should we say that two offices communicate or that telephones do and that typewriters don't? Or should we say that offices communicate only as a figure of speech—it is the people who communicate? If we take this last view, are we to say that eyes, ears, and mouths communicate and livers, kidneys, and spleen don't? If we want to say that "people" communicate, who or what are people? Are we obliged to repudiate the behaviorists and say that "minds" (*pace Ayer*) communicate and that eyes, ears, telephones, letters, and the rest are only instruments of communication?

We could say that communication is neither more nor less than the activity of media—which can include anything we like: hair, eyes, ears, signs and symbols organized in the air, on paper, in the ether. If we do say this, then we are effectively denying that human communication is distinguishable from any other set of prehensions. We don't quite like this, so what criteria are we to invoke? "Human communications are meaningful." Fine! But do we prehend a meaning in a different way from a toothache or a patch of green colour seen through the window?

It seems that we must reconcile ourselves to accepting "meaningful communication" as an irreducible concept and especially one which cannot be divided into two components: meaning + communication. This suggests that there is an axiom of human communication that makes it "special".

Communication is communication of meaning; or, no meaning, no communicability.

If we agree with this, we must give meaningless communication some other name such as "interaction" which would include all prehensions in which there is not a transfer of meaning.

We now come up against the question: "If meaning is an integral part of communication, how do we know that meaning has a meaning?"

If I say: "I am hungry" have I done anything different from a lamb bleating to its mother or a lion roaring for its prey? It seems probable that human communication begins further down the line (or up it). The grunts and snorts of the forest convey meanings, but we are not happy to put them on a parity with human communication. We are drifting into a tautology: human communication is the

communication of human meanings. If I say "This is a wooden chair" my meaning is clear to any citizen of the western world; but it would have no meaning for an Eskimo who had never seen or heard of a chair and for whom wood is a scarce and precious material. As a solid body in the surface layer of the earth, a wooden table would be classified as dead vegetable matter.

The illustration was probably superfluous as we all know that communication requires some quality that could be called "the ability to recognize what is being said and respond to it" for which we have no word in English. "Communicability" refers to the message and not to the communicator. To avoid coining a neologism, I propose to use the word "sensitivity" to express rather more than we usually imply by the word. I shall use the verb "to sensitize" to designate the process by which a subject S is transformed from a state (S_i) in which he is insensitive (that is, in which he cannot recognize and respond to a message), to a state (S_r) in which he is responsive to it. The $S_i \rightarrow S_r$ transition may be temporary or permanent. We shall call the first "attentiveness" and the second "transformation". $S_i \rightarrow S_a$ the act of "noticing" or becoming aware that a communication is being attempted. $S_i \rightarrow S_e$ means the change brought about by experience, especially by education and training, whereby the Subject S enters a particular realm of discourse and is capable of communicating. In order to receive a communication, he must be sensitized in both ways, i.e.

$$S_r \equiv S_e + S_a$$

which reads "A responsive subject is one who has experience within the field of discourse and who is in a state of alertness to possible communications within the field."

Now we can ask the question: "What has happened to S?" There are three possible hypotheses:

- 1) S has acquired a new attribute C_f , i.e., sensitivity within the field of discourse; but otherwise remains unchanged.
- 2) S has changed from one kind of person to another so that no attribute C_f can be identified.
- 3) S always possessed C_f but it was in some way covered up or inaccessible and the transition $S_r \rightarrow S_i$ effectively consists in removing the veil or veils that obscured C_f .

Clearly, our view of communication and the solution of many practical questions connected with it depend upon which of the three hypotheses we adopt. They can be indicated symbolically (1) $+C_f$ means that C_f is a simple additive property; (2) SC_f meaning that C_f requires a change in S; and (3) C_fS meaning that C_f is integral to S and requires only to be released.

If $+C_f$ is true, it follows that effectual communication within the field F is only a matter of training. This can be viewed as a conditioning process that fixes in S a behavior pattern that has only to be set in motion by the trigger action $S_i \rightarrow S_r$. "Listen: we are now going to talk about the price of pigs." $F_p \equiv$ pig farming and C_{rp} is the ability to communicate intelligibly and effectively within the field. If we designate $F_e \equiv$ Egyptology we have another C_{fe} and we may ask ourselves how C_{fp} and C_{fe} correlate. If we were to find no correlation whatever we shall be inclined to say that the C_{fs} are purely additive. In practice, we know that skill in communication is always to some degree transferable from one field to another.

Is a C_f , once acquired, permanent; or can it be lost? All evidence shows that if not exercised a C_f fades out. This again is in favour of the + C_f hypothesis. Nevertheless, something always remains and we find that it is easier to recall a C_f that appears to be completely forgotten than it is to acquire one *ab initio*. This confuses the issue and makes it look as if we have to adopt some combination of C_f and SC_f , which expressed verbally means approximately that although the ability to communicate is an acquired property, its acquisition produces a change in S that goes beyond C_f . Subjects able to communicate in a wide range of fields can be called "open" and those with little or no ability to share experience are "closed". Now we observe that some subjects acquire a specific C_f but remain obstinately closed in other fields.

This observation makes sense according to hypothesis C_fS . The very notion of "closure" is about the same as that of "veiling" or "obstruction." C_fS would also account for the "subconscious retention" of a specific C_f . It is also clear that we can describe the sensitizing process as the removal of a barrier, better than as the acquisition of a new property.

We can look to various theories of perception for ideas that are relevant here. The hypothesis put forward by Professor H. H. Price in his classical *Perception* is effectively the same as our C_fS . He shows the difficulty of the theories currently favoured and comes forward with the suggestion that perception is elimination of the irrelevant from the infinite field of percipience open to S at any moment. S can perceive because he possesses in his sensorium an apparatus of unlimited potential: but he cannot interpret his perceptions unless they are selected, organized, and presented to his awareness. Price goes further and asserts that our specialized senses of seeing, hearing, touching, and smelling are selective mechanisms that eliminate the irrelevant rather than sensitive organs that respond to every impression that reaches them. From this, he seeks to explain extrasensory perceptions, such as clairvoyance and telepathy, as the work of a subconscious organ that is capable of making direct contact with actual occasions even if they are not within reach of our sense perception.

These suggestions have a direct bearing on any theory of communication. They imply that people may communicate without knowing it through a subconscious contact that may not emerge into mental awareness. There may be a general field F (Gothic) in which all people share, and all the particular fields of which we are aware—such as pig-keeping (p) and Egyptology (e)—may be carved out of F. Maybe the expression "carved out" won't do, because on any showing, S needs to have acquired some "knowledge" of p and e.

We have now reached the frontier between behavior and experience. S behaves in a certain way because he has been conditioned by his interaction with p and e. But his behavior is subject to quite independent constraints connected with the $S_i \rightarrow S_r$ transition. He cannot communicate successfully about p if his mind is on other things and he cannot communicate at all if he is asleep or in delirium. From these illustrations, it might seem that $S_i \leftrightarrow$ is a reversible transformation outside the control of S. But this patently is not always the case. S can make a voluntary effort to shift the $S_i \leftrightarrow S_r$ balance towards S_r . The power to do this can be developed by practice and the practice itself can be made more efficient by applying techniques. This is a totally different process from the acquisition of knowledge which produces the transition $S_o \rightarrow S_p$ or $S_o \rightarrow S_e$ where S^o is some starting point in the learning process.

On the whole, we tend to concern ourselves with the $S_o \rightarrow S_p$ type of transformation and assume that $S_i \rightarrow S_r$ will be obtained without the participation of S by the way we "present" the field F_p or F_e to him.

The combination ($S_o \rightarrow S_p$) ($S_i \rightarrow S_r$) is commonly assigned to the *media*. It is the task of the media to acquaint S with the field P in such a way that his attention and interest are aroused and the desired response behavior is assured. The trouble with any approach that coalesces $S_o \rightarrow S_e$ with $S_i \rightarrow S_r$ is that the subject is deprived of the possibility of increasing his conscious control of S_r . He becomes dependent on the external stimulus and develops the susceptibility to conditioning influences that is so characteristic of our present Western culture.

Researches in progress at my Institute during the past ten years have demonstrated that it is possible to develop $S_o \rightarrow S_e$ and $S_i \rightarrow S_r$ independently in students of all ages. The techniques used have been applied in the Basic Course of the International Academy for Continuous Education at Sherborne House, Gloucester, England. We have given parallel courses in a variety of fields including Turkish linguistics (F_t), cookery (F_c), history (F_h), music (F_m), gymnastics (F_g) and psychology (F_{ps}). The same students were also given intensive training in the focusing of attention, enhanced sense perception, arousing interest in otherwise boring topics, decision-making, and leadership. These latter activities all had a direct bearing upon the $S_i \rightarrow S_r$ transition.

Eighty-four students participated in the project over a period of ten months. Tests applied at intervals showed that both conventional learning and the capacity for voluntary response to non-stimulating themes improved and were highly correlated. As the work was looked upon as a preliminary exploration, controls were not introduced and the results are not being published. They were convincing for the students and staff. I hope that at the end of the Course now in progress we shall have results in a form suitable for publication.

I believe, however, that even the exploratory work has been sufficiently interesting to merit attention. The main points noted are summarized below:

- 1) Communication depends upon a combination of knowing, being, and the will to communicate.
- 2) The acquisition of knowledge symbolized by $S_o \rightarrow S_p$ is a process that occurs mainly in the level of waking consciousness. A student learns and knows that he is learning and what he is learning; he can verify whether he has learned or not.
- 3) There is a subconscious mechanism that is involved in both learning and communication. This connects the subject with the universal field F of all possible experience. It is possible to increase one's awareness of this connection by appropriate exercises.
- 4) Interest, attention, response, and sensitivity are largely independent of $S_o \rightarrow S_e$ and should be developed independently. There is a mechanism whereby our interest and attention are aroused. This mechanism has only recently begun to receive attention in educational systems. In communication, it is usually activated by adding an emotional stimulus of the $S_o \rightarrow S_r$ transition. This is disadvantageous unless the aim of communication is limited to the conditioning of behavior. If it is desired to develop in S the capacity for independent judgement and the power to

transfer from one field of discourse to another, e.g., $S_t \rightarrow S_h$ (Turkish to History) or even $S_g \rightarrow S_{ps}$ (gymnastics to psychology), it is essential to work separately on the $S_i \rightarrow S_r$ capacity.

5) It is possible both to enhance and inhibit $S_i \rightarrow S_r$. This means that the subject S who has an obsession with some field X can be deconditioned and liberated ($S_{r(x)} \rightarrow S_{i(x)}$).

6) The reversible action $S_i \leftrightarrow S_r$ is the mechanism of self-control.

7) Subjects with well-developed reversibility are good communicators. They can speak and listen with equal ease. They know when and how to put themselves forward and when to hold back.

8) Media should be scrutinized for their effect upon reversibility. If it is undesirable that a group of subjects G should be susceptible to mass suggestion, they should be trained to control their own $S_i \leftrightarrow S_r$ equilibrium. This can be done by group techniques which include physical and emotional work. It is not possible to control $S_i \leftrightarrow S_r$ by a mental operation alone.

There is the further general observation that, over the age of 25, in most people the capacity for communication falls away and is replaced by a repertoire of automatic behavior. The behavior pattern of the individual becomes fixed and he loses the possibility of communicating by way of the universal field F. One obvious result of this is the tendency to rely upon external media of communication to seek to understand other people. There is, however, evidence that the tendency to fixation is only superficially irreversible. It can be changed by developing a deeper sensitivity to the quality of present actions. Exercises for this have been introduced and tested with promising results.

The general conclusion reached is that human communication differs in a radical way from animal communication by reason of the ability inherent in man and apparently absent in animals to influence his own response to communication. This ability should be fostered even though the tendency of modern society is in the opposite direction. We find it more convenient to condition our subjects than to foster their capacity for independent judgement.