

Interview

INTERVIEW WITH JOHAN SIEBERS: A PHILOSOPHY TO LIVE BY

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Although *Empedocles: European Journal for the Philosophy of Communication* is a well-known journal; would you give us the details on the motives of making a journal of philosophy of communication? How and why *Empedocles* comes out?

Well, back in 2006 I attended the International Communication Association's annual conference, which was held in Dresden that year. It was a great occasion for me. Communication studies was a new field for me and I had picked this conference as a place to get inspiration. I had exclusively worked in philosophy up to that point. At the conference I met Elihu Katz and Ruth Katz (with whom I had wonderful discussions about opera during that week), I met Jürgen Habermas. I also met Robert Craig and Ed

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McLuskie, who were later to join the advisory board of *Empedocles*, which did not exist at the time. I had been working on philosophy of language, but with a focus on language use, speech, rhetoric, dialogue and communication. I had also worked on metaphysics, especially event ontology. I wanted to bring the two together into an area of philosophical concern that wasn't exactly philosophy of language as we know it, but that also did not a priori reduce communication to an interplay of other dimensions (society, the mind, linguistic structure, etc.). I was interested in what it means to speak. It seemed to me that communication was a basic aspect of being, something meaningful that needed to be understood on its own terms. None of the philosophers of language had done this, the ones advocating the "linguistic turn" least of all, although there were some starting points, for example in Buber, but also in Davidson. So for me there was a definite spirit of metaphysical urgency about it. We could envisage a real philosophy of communication, standing on its own ground! It was clear to me that it would be a long process to develop such a philosophy, and that it would depend on the interdisciplinary collaboration of communication studies (an unfortunately sluggish term, the German *Kommunikationswissenschaft* is better) and philosophy. I found a like-minded scholar in Tino Meitz (now at Jena), and we decided to do two things: Tino suggested to start a separate section for Philosophy of Communication in the European Communication Research and Education Association (ECEA), and I suggested to start a journal for philosophy of communication. We ended up doing both. I came up with the name *Empedocles* because of the story of Empedocles throwing himself into the crater of Mount Etna to become one with the whole. As you know, he lost his sandal while jumping. This trace communicated what had happened to him. So Empedocles shows us that communication is a vanishing act. I thought that this might indicate the kind of thinking the journal was going to afford space to. Tino and I set up the Section, which is currently chaired by Mats Bergman, and we approached Intellect Publishers, who are working together closely with ECEA, with the idea for the journal. I am very happy they gave us the chance. The journal is now well-established in the field and I hope it will be around for a long time to come.

How would you put forth the differences of philosophy of communication from philosophy?

I think the term "philosophy of communication" should be read in two ways: on the one hand, it indicates philosophical interest in communication as a phenomenon or an object of reflection. Here we can think of ethics of communication, epistemological aspects of communication as mediation, communication as something studied in the philosophy of mind and language, the psychoanalysis of unconscious communication, the relation between communication and ideology, and so on. But we can also read the term as a subjective genitive, to name the kind of philosophy we get when we start from

communication as a basic word. So here, communication becomes the ground on which we philosophize. If we do this, we discover that many things change.

How would you put forth the differences of philosophy of communication from communication?

Communication is an aspect of reality. In my view it names a surplus in everything that is real, which makes things relate while not becoming one. I also like to use the term “over-againstness” for it. Communication happens in the free, open space where we are over-against each other and an encounter can take place. Communication is therefore something else than coordination. Communication names the paradoxical common ground of internal and external relations. You could say it is a figure of negation, or rather negation is to be understood as communication. On this basis we can provide a fundamental theoretical perspective on all kinds of communicative interaction. At the same time, the empirical and experimental study of communication interacts with communication theory. The relation is pretty similar to the one between experimental and theoretical physics. Philosophy of communication concerns the foundations of communication theory. However, as Robert Craig has so forcefully pointed out, communication theory arises on the basis of, and reflects back into, communication practices and ways of understanding communication (the two cannot be distinguished radically). So it is with the philosophy of communication. Its place in the edifice of theory is only part of it. It is also a philosophy to live by. As we think, we live.

Are philosophy of communication and media philosophy the same? If not, what are the differences?

They are closely related but they are not the same. Communication is what we do with media. But there may also be a meaning to the idea of immediate communication, so they are different. We can leave media and words behind and still communicate. The situation is as in the perceptive remark by Chuang Tzu: “The fish trap exists because of the fish. Once you've gotten the fish you can forget the trap. The rabbit snare exists because of the rabbit. Once you've gotten the rabbit, you can forget the snare. Words exist because of meaning. Once you've gotten the meaning, you can forget the words. Where can I find someone who has forgotten words so I can talk with them?” But, as Chuang Tzu himself ironically indicates here, a strict separation is not useful to maintain and would in fact stifle the mind by reifying form and content. I still need words to talk with you. So I take a generalized ontological notion of media to be fundamental for the philosophy of communication. McLuhan was one of the first to see this clearly. But he got his ideas from his deep knowledge of medieval philosophy, especially the Aristotelianism of Aquinas. The forms in Aquinas’ realist account of cognition are the basis of McLuhan’s account of media. As Aquinas says, understanding requires “expression in another”. That is why

media are everywhere, but are hard to notice. They disappear in the face of what they themselves evince and so the world autopoietically comes to be in its disclosure, without the need to resort to transcendentalisms of any kind – Kantian, Heideggerian, Wittgensteinian; we are back with Empedocles' sandal. When we read Walter Ong, Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan, or Maturana and Varela for that matter, we should always have Joseph Owens' *The Doctrine of Being in the Aristotelian Metaphysics*, and Bernard Lonergan's *Insight*, on our bedside table.

Many believe that technological developments in the last twenty years have fundamentally changed the way people communicate in the world. Do you agree with this observation? If not, why not? If so, what is the nature of this change? Does the new condition require a new way of thinking about communication?

I think the changes that we have seen, and are seeing, are at least as fundamental as the invention of the printing press. Who could have thought, in 1998, that twenty years later the president of the United States would conduct international politics via 280-character messages, broadcast to everyone from his couch, not even spell-checked? On the one hand, we see a level of directness and informality that is unprecedented. McLuhan had something like it in mind with his idea of the global village. It has a very liberating potential, but also, as McLuhan predicted, the potential to dismantle urban freedom and privacy and establish a global world of social control. We have to hear the dark side of "village", too. But what McLuhan missed, because no one could have predicted it, was that this space is not primarily verbal and televised, but written and texted. People read and write more than ever before; we are seeing a true emancipation of the letter! This is perhaps the most fundamental change. The fact that sending letters has become instantaneous creates a whole new dimension in which the distance that writing creates inserts itself into direct communication. Nearness and distance enter into a new constellation, in which each now mediates the other in previously impossible ways; it could, to stay with McLuhan's terms, insert the city back into the heart of the village, so it has a utopian dimension. It is having an influence on our sense of identity and it is spreading like a virus in our institutions. It has tremendous creative potential, and also tremendous destructive potential, as we are seeing with the unexpected developments around fake news and with the imminent collapse of Facebook. Fundamentally communication does not change, however. Fundamentally the embodied dimension of face to face communication also has not changed, nor has the fact that this dimension retains primacy, as an anchor, over other forms of communication. The printing press did not eliminate face to face education, and our technological revolution will also not do that. In fact, as Whitehead pointed out a long time ago, the printing press led to a huge increase in the number of schools and universities. I think we are seeing the same type of development now, and will see more of it when people begin to understand intuitively

the way the new media work. We do need new ways of thinking about communication to understand the changed conditions, with their profound effects on social and political institutions, and on the way we experience ourselves. But we also need to continue to reflect on the fundamental dimensions of communication, which have not changed. These are on one hand grounded in our bodily, physical existence and on the other in the way we relate to self and other, where things come into play such as recognition, spontaneity, freedom and expression, creating togetherness and separation, play and creativity, meaning and nonsense, hope and history, listening and speaking, singing and telling - all communicative realities. The fundamental meaning of these things does not change, and it is difficult enough to understand them, and not let surface changes obscure our awareness of them. One way of indicating this level could be to say that, whatever technology or media we use, communication is fundamentally a matter of the word. (As you can see from what I have been saying I take the Christian theology of the incarnate word as a proto-philosophy of communication that is perhaps somewhat lacking in self-understanding but has managed to stumble upon something close to the truth.) What is the meaning of that term – “word”? It is, perhaps, more of an open question than ever since the time of Chuang Tzu. For all of these reasons it is true to say that we are living in a time of heightened urgency and opportunity to think again in a fundamental way about communication.