

A CODE OF ETHICS FOR SPEECH COMMUNICATION

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The theme of our 1982 convention was "Communication, Ethics, and Values." Numerous papers and panels addressed the theme. While Frank Dance presented his views on the topic of his Presidential Address, "This Above All,"¹ I did not have the opportunity to speak to the topic. This is my time to address the convention theme which I chose. I intend to make the most of the opportunity.

My purpose today is not to probe the ethical stances which inform various rhetorical and communication theories. Nor do I propose to discourse on the ethical practices that should characterize our teaching. There is much to be said on those issues. I can barely restrain myself from addressing the inherent conflict between endorsing free speech while simultaneously publishing a list of 50 topics, including such *insignificant* issues as nuclear power or war, gun control, or cancer, on which no one may speak upon pain of automatic failure in the course. That must be another topic for another time.

There is some sense of rightness in making this presentation in Washington, D.C. This city, so central to our political life, is associated with words and phrases like "Watergate," "Ask not what the country can do for you," "the Tonkin Gulf resolution," "I will never lie to you," "the high administration spokesperson." Politics brings the ethical issues of communication into central focus. Aristotle saw ethics and rhetoric as inexorably linked to politics—the science of the polis. That is true in Washington. This is not to say that individual interactions at work, social and intimate contacts, are not urgent areas of ethical concern here as everywhere.

My goal today is to set forth a series of ethical standards, a set of moral articles, which taken together constitute an ethical guide for individuals as they communicate. My focus is upon situations and settings involving speech but no great violence will be done if my points are extended to most forms of human communication. I seek standards, applicable generally, although additional specific articles should be added for restricted situations or specialized roles such as adult and child, reporter, agent, etc.

In offering this code I ask each of you to challenge the arguments, to test the implicit and explicit claims both by rational examination and by actual practice. One test of the adequacy of an ethical code is to treat it as binding upon all people until such time as the code is demonstrated to be inadequate. Ethical codes should provide a practical guide to action, helping us to decide what we ought to do, what would be less "good" to do. They should provide a basis for evaluating our acts and those of others as blameworthy, unac-

ceptable, as requiring response. A code should provide a generalizable standard to assist us in making judgments in all cases.

I seek a code of ethical practices for speech communication which grows out of the essential nature and uses of the activity itself. Organisms and activities have one or more potential functions. In general we seek to maximize to a proper degree the useful capacities, the desirable potentialities of organisms and activities. We have seen people struggling to survive. They are not said to flourish, to be healthy. Too little (a blighted existence or malnutrition) or too rapid growth (future shock or cancer) kills the soul or body.

My effort is to devise an ethical code which enables the activity in question to flourish fully, to provide the maximum of its helpful, useful potential. Yes, there is more than a little suggestion of the importance of the telos, the end or purpose of the activity, so basic to Aristotle and his doctrine of the mean which avoids the harmful excesses on either end of a continuum.²

The groundwork for this code of ethics, then, lies in a concept of the function of speech communication in the life of the individual and the community. Communication, particularly speech, is essential to that thing we identify as human. To lose the ability to communicate is to lose much of one's humanness. We are dependent upon the communications of others for the fulfillment of any sensible life plan. Communication, particularly spoken communication, is an activity that unites people, that makes a community possible; yet it also permits maximum individualization and individual choice.³ We use communication to perform our various roles. Any normal human has many goals, not one. Communication is used to acquire the goals, to test them, to modify them, to attain them.

Communication involves people in activities quite directly: listening, speaking, repeating, questioning, thinking. But, even individuals not immediately involved can be affected by the communication activity of others. Failure to get clear directions may result in a missed appointment. If the President issues the order to fire the missile based on faulty intelligence, we are affected. If we lose trust in our political process, the quality of decisions and their acceptability are affected.

Communication reflects the fact we are necessarily tied to the community. We are independent and yet dependent upon others in pursuit of our individual versions of the "good life."⁴ Note, too, communication is increasingly the work of our world. By some estimates we are past the point where 50% of our gross national product is associated with communicative (taken broadly) activity.

Finally, as we think of the role of communication we must remember that every communication act has many effects—both potentially and actually. An ethical code must take into account the varied uses of communication, the functions it serves and the effects which can do result.

I have not found a code which consists of a

single criterion or moral article. Nor do I believe any hierarchical ordering will provide the proper ranking for application of articles within the code in every situation. While a general hierarchy can be defended, a mechanism is needed for ordering the items in particular situations.

What are the tenets of a code of ethics for speech communication? I offer six, listed in a generalized, hierarchical order starting with the most basic. But it is an order which is flexible and dominance of particular articles is determined by the situation.

The first article: *Accept a proper burden of responsibility for the communication activity in whatever position you find yourself in a particular interaction.* This article is so basic that many see this as a prerequisite to a code rather than a part of the code itself. I have spoken to this theme on other occasions and so will not develop this point in great detail.⁵ Acceptance of responsibility is essential for listeners and readers as much as for speakers and writers. Clearly, responsibilities vary with particular roles: teacher, parent, committee member, volunteer. And what of the unique responsibilities of those who serve as reporter, broadcaster, representative, agent? There are responsibilities for those not involved in a particular interaction. As noted previously, those uninvolved in a particular exchange are possibly influenced by it. That is one reason we codify some principles into laws; it is one reason that we establish a somewhat generally shared code which we enforce upon one another.

As a mnemonic device we might think of this article as yielding a 300% theory of responsibility in which source, receiver and those less directly involved, including the society as a whole, accept 100% of the burden which should properly be theirs.

The second article: *Act so that the potential effectiveness of all future communication is enhanced.* More minimally, we might state this article as: act so that the existing potentiality of future communication is not diminished or impaired. Since communication is so basic to the flourishing, well ordered society, no individual should be allowed to diminish the potential contribution of future communication activity. Indeed, one ought to enhance that potential to the degree it is possible. Obviously, there are individual, prudential reasons for accepting this premise. "Don't lie" is often defended on the grounds that it pays to tell the truth. A source will wish to act in ways that are conducive to a favorable ethos so that her credibility will warrant future action, acceptance. A listener wants a reliable source of information.

Note that the stress is on future communication rather than immediate communication. As David Hume warned us, we tend to overvalue the short-term and undervalue the long-term. This article emphasizes that our actions must withstand the test of time and reminds us that the passage of time assists us in estimating effects. A corollary would be to act to improve the likelihood of an individual turning to the

communication process as a means of reaching decisions.

The third article: *Act to maximize individual freedom of choice and responsibility while enhancing the quality of the society as a whole.* This dictum calls upon us to weigh the impact of a communication in terms of its contribution in maximizing the meaningful free choice of the individual (source as well as receiver) while ensuring acceptance by each individual of the responsibility for such choice. But it does this in the context of the need to enhance the quality of the society generally. Individuals might in the short term maximize their freedom and opportunity by taking advantage of the factors in a society which permit exploitation for the advantage of the few.

This article will generate as corollaries many specific standards such as provide good evidence and reasoning, earn the right to speak, be open to more than one source of information, seek out alternatives, etc.

The fourth article: *Act so that the respect of each participant for self and for the other is maximized.* If one succeeds in "pulling the wool over another's eyes," he might see himself as somehow "great" although that would be a defective form of self respect, certainly not the proper pride of Aristotle. But respect for the other would necessarily decline and the effort thus is seen as ethically defective.

The fifth article: *Act to improve communication ability and understanding.* Effective communication is learned, not given. Understanding the insights into the communication process can be strengthened through conscious attention and effort. In some sense this dictum is a necessary requirement of the previous statements. How does one act to maximize the potential of future communication activity unless one understands communication, knows what effects are likely, possible? Just as one does not turn to a poor surgeon for a major operation, one does not turn to a poor listener, an inept communicator. To the degree others do not develop their capacities as communicators, we are the poorer. To the degree we do not develop our capacities as communicators, they are the poorer.

The sixth article: *Enforce the code upon self and upon all others.* This is a specification of the initial article on responsibility. We not only have the right to enforce the code on others, we have the obligation. The functions given to communication are too essential to our life, to their life, and to the life of the community—indeed at times it is a matter of individual and collective survival—for us to allow the activity to be impaired. Obviously there are matters of proper enforcement to a proper degree. One does not beat a three-year-old for telling a lie. One may end interaction with another adult who does lie; indeed, one may send him to prison.

Codes should not be ideals offered without any effort to achieve them. Part of acceptance is to use the code, defend it, argue that it is binding on others. A certain level of shared standards for communication must exist for communication to function at the most minimal level. But it is in our collective and individual

interest to see it flourish and to do more than the minimal. Kenneth Burke seems to suggest that communication would cease when we have achieved consubstantiality. I have never worried about that possibility. I worry more that communication will cease because we have debased the process to the degree that random chance lotteries are just as helpful.

Time does not permit a full exposition of the code. This code has not offered a list of specific injunctions, although many can be generated from it. It offers general principles from which specific directives can be generated situation by situation. The code may be accused of restatement of the two key principles in slightly different words. Perhaps. Codes are devices with a pedagogical function to them. But the issue should be "Does the code provide a basis for improved communication?"

This summer we celebrated the 20th anniversary of Martin Luther King's march on Washington and the immortal "I Have a Dream." Dr. King proclaimed and expounded a vision. Perhaps in a far less dramatic way, I have done the same. I doubt that the vision I have of all people following the code which I have offered will ever occur. But, if we as a discipline would commit ourselves to this or a perfected view, and consciously place such a vision before others as they seek help in dealing with family or personal concerns, as they participate in the activities of the larger community, might we not have cause to feel more confident that we have fulfilled our responsibility as teachers and scholars in speech communication? We have insights and understandings to share, and we have an ethical responsibility to do so. Why not accept the challenge?

ENDNOTES

¹Frank E. Dance, "This Above All," *SPECTRA*, XVIII (December, 1982), 3-5.

²Aristotle, "Nicomachean Ethics," W. D. Ross, translator, *Introduction to Aristotle*, ed. by Richard McKeon (New York: The Modern Library, 1947), particularly Book I.

³This is a slight reworking of a statement relative to persuasion found in Kenneth E. Andersen, *Persuasion Theory and Practice*, 2nd ed. (Boston: American Press, 1983), p. 3.

⁴I take "life plan" and the "good life" in much the sense in which John Rawls uses these concepts in *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1972). See particularly Chapter VII, "Goodness as Rationality," pp. 395-452.

⁵"Ethics of Communication: The Role of the Third Party," *The Southern Speech Communication Journal* (In Press).

American Studies

The American Studies Society Interest Group would like to invite interested SCA members to participate in promoting the interests of the group by helping in program-planning and screening of papers submitted for its programs. Please write either Prof. Ronald Carpenter, Department of English, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611, or to Prof. Howard H. Martin, Department of Communication, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48109.

WALLACE BACON HONORED

The Speech Communication Association Distinguished Service Award is given each year to an SCA member who has contributed significantly to the organization and to the field of speech communication. This year the Awards Committee has chosen to honor a great teacher and productive scholar who has been called The Dean of Oral Interpretation, a title we believe that he richly deserves. You of course know by now that I am referring to Dr. Wallace Bacon, Professor Emeritus of Northwestern University.

He completed an A. B. degree at Albion College (1935) in Michigan, and M. A. (1936) and Ph. D. (1940) at the University of Michigan. After serving as an instructor at Michigan and a stint in the U. S. Army, he joined the staffs of the Department of English and the School of Speech at Northwestern University in 1947. He taught there until he retired in 1979, serving as chairman of the Interpretation Department in the School of Speech during his entire tenure. He also has been a visiting professor at the University of California at Berkeley, the University of Washington, the University of the Philippines and the University of Santo Tomas (Philippines).

He has published numerous articles in speech and English journals and has authored several widely-used textbooks. His *Art of Interpretation* (Holt, Rinehart, and Winston), now in a third edition, remains extremely influential in his field. Two of his articles have received the SCA Golden Anniversary Prize Monograph Award (1965, 1973). He has excelled as a teacher, poet, writer, performer, critic, and administrator.

His influence and effectiveness are reflected in the following statement from one of his distinguished students: "All those who sat in his classrooms—and I was one who did so—recognized the presence of a dedicated teacher with a keen mind, astute perceptions, and unusual integrity. We learned much from him about the subjects he taught, but we were also exposed to an attitude, a perspective, a philosophy—about learning, reading, writing, and performing. He expected a great deal from his students, and from himself, but the wonder is that so many of us gave him the best work we were capable of producing."

This most talented man has contributed to us professionally through his example, his leadership, his good spirit and his inspiration. It is with much personal pleasure that I present the SCA Distinguished Service Award of 1983 to Wallace Bacon who now resides in Taos, New Mexico.

Editor's Note: The above tribute to Wallace Bacon was read by Waldo Braden, Chairperson of the Committee on Professional Service Awards, at the SCA convention general session in Washington on November 12, 1983.