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## **KIERKEGAARD'S THEORY OF COMMUNICATION**

The purpose of the article is to present Kierkegaard's unique view of communication. Before I proceed to expound the theory which is to be found in his *Papirer*, I would like to discuss succinctly his general sentiments on metaphysics (this seems appropriate, since Kierkegaard's theory of communication is his reaction to the modern metaphysics).

For Kierkegaard each knowing activity, as every human activity in general, includes a value-judgement, since as long as it is conscious, it is directed towards the realization of the aim, which constitutes the value for the subject of activity. Thereby, metaphysics, as every human activity, also contains a reference to a given set of values. Not being an innocent description of reality, metaphysics is never an announcement, but always an appeal to specified values. It is always a persuasion to some actions. Metaphysics does not render the "objective" reality, which the metaphysician contemplates from the perspective of a neutral observer. On the contrary, metaphysics is an expression of his subjective attitude towards the reality, in which he participates and, which he (in his subjectively specified way) wishes to interpret and construct.

Having understood the nature of metaphysics in this way, Kierkegaard could formulate his thesis that every communication is a rhetoric. While metaphysics is a rhetoric which endeavours to conceal its rhetorical character by purporting to be an objective mirroring of the Reality, Kierkegaard's communication reveals its rhetoricity. In consequence of this, Kierkegaard's theory of communication is not directed towards

the Truth. Communication, similarly to metaphysics (which, nonetheless seeks to disguise that) never mirrors the Reality, as it always forms it. Each communication reflects nothing more than the outlook of the communicator. Due to the fact that outlooks on life are not subject to the dichotomy of truth and falsehood, Kierkegaard's communication seeks to refrain from judging axiologies. Kierkegaard's indirect communication aims at making the individual aware of the subjectivity of his axiology and, consequently, at encouraging him to undertake actions directed towards the realization of values, to which he subscribes. On the whole, Kierkegaard's communication is an appeal for actions.

Kierkegaard's theory of communication was profoundly influenced by Socrates' maieutics, i.e., the method of assisting the interlocutor to bring forth – and thus become aware of – his latent knowledge. Needless to say, the latent knowledge that the individual is to become conscious of, is his axiology. Similarly to Socrates, Kierkegaard strove to prompt the individual to act, by making him aware of the subjective values on which his outlook on life was based. As the subjectivity of every human's axiology cannot be communicated directly, Kierkegaard constructed pseudonymous authors that were to represent diverse outlooks (existential perspectives).

As the present paper does not pretend to be an exhaustive study of Kierkegaard's idea of communication, I shall confine myself to his *Papirer*, as it is in the *Papirer* that we find the most important source of information about Kierkegaard's theory of communication. I am referring to the section (VIII<sup>2</sup> B 79 – 89, p. 143 – 190) of 1847 year entitled „*Den ethiske og den ethisk religiøse Meddelelses Dialektik*”<sup>1</sup>.

In the paragraphs VIII<sup>2</sup> B 83 i 89, Kierkegaard makes three crucial distinctions. In the first one, which concerns the object of communication, Kierkegaard distinguishes the communication of knowledge (*Videns Meddelelse*), which does possess the object of communication, and the communication of ability (*Kunnens Meddelelse*), which is dispossessed of it. The communication of ability is dispossessed of the object of communication, for it presupposes the presence of some subjective axiology and is directed towards the realization of the values which are already subscribed by the subject.

The second distinction deals with the medium of communication and comprises, on the one hand, the communication of knowledge which remains in the medium of imagination (*Phantasie-Mediet*) and to which Kierkegaard ascribes possibility (*Mulighed*), and, on the other, the communication of ability, whose medium is actuality (*Virkelighedens Medium*). In accordance with the second distinction, Kierkegaard characterizes all communication of knowledge as direct communication (*directe Meddelelse*), while all communication of ability as indirect (*indirecte Meddelelse*).

The third and last distinction refers to the communicator (*Meddeler*) and the receiver (*Modtager*). If one accentuates equally the communicator and receiver, then it is the communication of esthetic ability. If one accentuates mainly the receiver, then it is the communication of ethical ability. And finally, if one accentuates mainly the communicator, then it is the communication of religious ability.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Dialectics of the Ethical and Ethically-Religious Communication*. In the article, I use the Danish SØREN KIERKEGAARDS PAPIRER, bd. I-XIII, København, 1968-1970, Index ved Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, bd XIV-XVI, København, 1975-1978.

The purpose of these distinctions is to clarify that the communication of knowledge, as objective, concentrates solely on the object (*Gjenstanden*) and tends towards impersonality, whereas the communication of ability heeding the communication, the communicator and the receiver tends towards personality (*Pap. VIII<sup>2</sup> B 84, 85*). The direct communication, as oriented towards "objectivity" is, in Kierkegaard's eyes, useless, for insofar as it aims at abstracting from any subjective elements (seeking to be axiologically neutral), it has nothing to offer to single individuals.

Thus, reflecting upon communication, Kierkegaard distinguishes *initially* the object of communication, the communicator, the receiver and the very communication (*Pap. VIII<sup>2</sup> B 83 i 85*). Nevertheless, he then ponders the question what it would imply, if everybody possessed some knowledge, i.e., if there were no need for the object of communication. According to Kierkegaard, such an absence of the object of communication would entail a tremendous transformation of the dialectics of communication. As there would be no need to communicate anything, for everybody does possess some set of values to which they subscribe (i.e., everybody already does possess a subjective object of communication that cannot be communicated objectively), there would be no need for the object of communication, communicator or receiver. With the situation being as it is, the direct communication becomes pointless and has to be superseded by the indirect communication.

Kierkegaard repudiates the traditional pattern of communication, for, in his eyes, it disseminates quietism. The direct communication compels individuals to accept passively whatever is communicated and, as a result of this, to abandon all acting. The direct communication is, therefore, a construct of people who are entirely devoid of a will to act, and who, by means of this invention seek to hush the voice of their guilty conscience, so that they would never have to act at all. Kierkegaard's theory of communication does not wish to mirror the Reality, since it wants to be an appeal for transforming the reality of the subject.

For Kierkegaard there are no descriptions, just appeals; hence, his indirect communication does not describe actions, but appeals for them. Not being directed towards describing, but towards evoking actions, the indirect communication is based on the presupposition that every communication is rhetorical in its nature. Since every communication appeals to the receiver's emotions, Kierkegaard's indirect communication is an overt persuasion (metaphysics is a covert one).

Every human being has a subjective axiology. For this reason, there is no point in communicating him directly a given set of values. If he already possesses some set of values, then communication should aim at evoking their realization indirectly. That is the difference between the direct and the indirect communication: while the former directly imposes an objective set of values, the latter indirectly evokes a subjective one.

Kierkegaard's entire authorship realizes the postulate of indirect communication. His whole production constitutes an alternative: *either* the direct part (religious works signed with Kierkegaard's name) *or* the indirect part (pseudonymous works). As an author Kierkegaard avoids, then, imposing a concrete axiology. We do not have to associate him immediately with Christianity. For even if he himself declared to be a Christian writer, his authorship can, by no means, be reduced to Christianity, owing to the aforementioned alternative. Thereby, Kierkegaard's idea of indirect communication *is* realized in his authorship, which, not imposing a choice, evokes it.

As I have mentioned before, Kierkegaard was inspired by Socrates. The Greek thinker (at least in Kierkegaard's interpretation) remained utterly negative in his philosophy (he did not concoct any absolute truth), which prevented him from idolizing the established order, in which he lived. As Kierkegaard assumes that every individual does possess a set of values which, therefore, needs not to be communicated (it is a realization of the values that has to be evoked), he renders his indirect communication free of ultimate results. The postulate of freedom of the ultimate results (i.e., the idea that communication should not offer any absolute truth, as it is in the case of metaphysics) is to forestall the deification of the established order, since, in Kierkegaard's eyes, every absolute truth absolutizes the culture which begot it.

Furthermore, Kierkegaard rendered his indirect communication free of ultimate results, as he believed that outlooks on life cannot be classified as true or false. With regard to outlooks, there is no absolute view, to which everybody should subscribe. Kierkegaard rejected the idea of an absolute truth, which could be adopted by all, since humans are sick unto death and equally sick unto death are all their truths. Accordingly, he postulated that communication reflect the nature of the communicator. If the communicator is in the process of becoming, then his communication should also be in the becoming (i.e. it should be free of ultimate results, for all absolute truths exclude becoming). Kierkegaard's indirect communication seeks to avoid petrification which is typical of the direct communication directed towards an ultimate result in the form of an absolute truth. Absolute truths (ultimate results) prevent individuals from self-reflecting and prompt the emergence of the mass society. Thus, the idea underlying the indirect communication is that truth is not something that is given once and for all.

This helps also to explain why Kierkegaard always wrote of himself that the category without authority (*uden Myndighed*) was the category of his authorship as a whole. The communication that is free of ultimate results is based on the assumption that no human being can escape from time. This fact notwithstanding, every human being cherishes the hope that such an escape will fall to his lot. Thus, he seeks an absolute authority, which could provide him with an absolute truth (i.e., communicate an ultimate result to him). Kierkegaard communicates without authority, for no human has the authority to present his outlook on life as the absolute one. As such outlooks cannot be judged as true or false, none of them can become the absolute truth, i.e., none of them can be communicated as an ultimate result.

Additionally, as every human being possess a set of values (and no object of communication is necessary), the communication should be oriented towards the realization of the values. These values can never be realized absolutely, for truth (their realization) is not something given once and for all. Therefore, Kierkegaard speaks of a continuous striving towards truth (*den fortsatte Stræben efter Sandhed*).

The continuous striving towards truth signifies that the individual incessantly reflects upon the values, to which he subscribes. When doing so, the individual is "primitive". Kierkegaard writes about primitivity: *It is not so much to bring something absolutely new forth; for there is actually nothing new under the sun, as it is to revise the universally human (at revidere det Almene-Msklige), the fundamental questions (de fundamentelle Spørgsmaal). That is honesty (Redelighed) in the deepest sense. Entirely to lack primitivity (Primitivitet) and, thus, the revision (det Reviderende); entirely to take everything without further ado as common practice (Skik og Brug) and let it be enough*

that it is common practice, and, thus, to evade the responsibility for doing likewise is dishonesty (*Uredelighed*).

And therefore, I consider it to be dishonesty that this question has not come up at all: what it is to communicate (*hvad det er at meddele*) (*Pap. VIII<sup>2</sup> B 89*).

Kierkegaard warns against being devoid of primitivity. Now, when the indirect communication is directed towards awaking primitivity, it does not mean that the communication praises backwardness, coarseness and vulgarity. It is no glorification of barbarism. Primitivity in Kierkegaard means naturalness and originality; it refers to authenticity and is contrasted with automatically adopted opinions, views, values etc. Kierkegaard qualifies an individual's relation to an idea as primitive, when it is genuine and not resulting solely from a membership in his culture (i.e., taken without further ado as common practice).

Demanding primitivity, Kierkegaard suggests that every human be capable of revising the existing convictions, norms and directives. Such a primitive revision is, in his eyes, the only way to render one's existence authentic. Kierkegaard's theory of the indirect communication is the effect of the cultural crisis, which has befallen modernity. Therefore, in the *Papirer* (*VIII<sup>2</sup> B 81:1-4, 82:2-9, 86*), we read that the confusion and delusion of the modern age originates in dishonesty (*Uredelighed*), which dates from the moment, when one abandoned Kant's "straight way" (*Kants ærlige Vei*), due to which science became fantastic (pure knowledge), as it has been forgotten what it is to be a human being. Metaphysics abandoned Kant's straight way, since it identified thought with being. Such an equation rendered it pseudo-objective (i.e., fantastic and abstract), in view of which the metaphysical project has, according to Kierkegaard, nothing to offer to subjective individuals. As an example of the direct communication, metaphysics abstracts from the subjective axiology of men, and makes the question what it is to be a human being sink into oblivion.

With the situation being as it is, a new type of communication is needed. The indirect communication takes into account humans' axiological subjectivity and is, therefore, authentic communication. Since it is directed towards rendering the individuals aware of their axiological subjectivity, it encourages them to revise the existing norms and directives. Such a revision evokes primitive actions, for having understood the subjective nature of the values to which he subscribes, the individual is bound to proceed to realize them. Such communication is honest, as it does not impose one ("objective") set of values, which the entire society is to accept without further ado as common practice. Modernity is dishonest, for, being dominated by the direct communication, it is a culture, in which primitivity was ousted by the automatically acquired, and, consequently, it is a culture of common practice (*Skik og Brug*) and mass society.

That modern culture is solely customary can be, according to the *Papirer* (*VIII<sup>2</sup> B 87*), traced back to two major factors in the development of it. The first of the two factors, which made culture develop extensively instead of intensively, was the relinquishment of one scholarly language which was due to the coming to consciousness of national individualities. In spite of the obvious disadvantages, a common scholarly language was advantageous for the following reasons: first, it restricted the number of people who dealt with literature; then, it facilitated reciprocal communication (*gjensidigt Kommunikation*); and finally, it provided a relatively standing and fixed terminology, which prevented the individual from squandering the years, in which his primitivity

should develop, for acquiring the apparatus. With the coming to consciousness of national individualities, science began to be practised in mother tongues, because of which the terminology has grown absurdly. Proportionally to the proliferation of the national terminologies, the confusion escalated, as the more one communicated, the more inexact the terminology grew. The renouncement of Latin as the scholarly language resulted in the artificial extension of the apparatus, which now began to live practically its own life. A plethora of terminologies created insoluble problems grounded, however, exclusively on the languages (i.e. terminologies).

The upshot of it all was that one established an institution that was supposed to counteract the effects of the relinquishment of one scholarly language. Although the institution aimed at bringing about understanding, it ended up in precluding it. The institution were scholarly journals. With the emergence of the press, culture was bound to develop extensively instead of intensively. The periodicals were supposed to aid in general view; yet, they became independent, though ephemeral, literature. They started with the demands of the age to end with the demands of the moment. The press, as a form of the direct communication, promotes the herd mentality of a mass society. The journals generated a particular type of writers: journalists, i.e., people who know everything to some extent, yet nothing thoroughly. The journals and the journalists have behind them the power of circulation and profit, so, not surprisingly, they completely disregard all subjectivity.

Unless culture is to become solely extensive, a new type of communication is required. The indirect communication, as oriented towards the primitivity of every axiological subjectivity, makes culture develop intensively, since it neither establishes a supremacy of the collective over the individual (as the metaphysics does), nor does it establish a number of adherents an ultimate criterion for truth (as the press does).

The hegemony of the press renders culture more and more superficial. People exist in compliance with the “objective” (i.e., disseminated by the journalists and metaphysicians) outlook on life, according to which the only behavioral rule is to conduct oneself “as the others”. The outcome is, thus, an atrophy of individuality and personality, which, in turn, makes culture, in Kierkegaard’s eyes amorphous and levelling. And all this for the lack of primitivity. Kierkegaard writes:

*As the superficiality of education and culture grows, people huddle together in the big cities. Already from the earliest infancy, a man receives no impression of himself. In the big cities one has more impression of a cow than of a man, for in the country there are two, three or more cows to one man, but in the big cities there is one thousand men to one cow.*

*That is the confusion of the modern age; awfully it drags the burden of traditions along with itself, the generation is caught in the disorder of existence as never before. That is the dishonesty of the age. Were I to characterize it more wittily, I would say: it is like scurvy – and what is the remedy for it? Only one: green primitivity (Pap. VIII<sup>2</sup> B 87).*

Green primitivity is needed, since modern culture consists in establishing “objective” rules of conduct, which are to be acquired automatically as common practice. In such culture, individuality and personalism are but by-products of the socialization process. While the direct communication disseminates one, “objective” axiology for the entire society, the indirect communication appeals to subjective axiologies of individuals. As the indirect communication is oriented towards subjective axiologies, it has to be, as

mentioned before, free of ultimate results (i.e., it must not seek to impose an "objective" set of values in the form of an absolute truth).

In this connection, Kierkegaard assumes that every individual is *κατα δύναμιν* a human being (*Pap. VIII<sup>2</sup> B 81:5*). That is he assumes that every individual does possess a set of values, to which he subjectively subscribes and, thus, the task is to proceed to realize them. Kierkegaard writes that the task is, then, to become an existing ethicist (*existerende Ethiker*). An existing ethicist is, naturally, somebody, who having become conscious of his subjective axiology, devoted himself to the realization of his values. In view of the fact that it is self-knowledge which becomes the prerequisite for being an existing ethicist, Kierkegaard states: *it takes relatively very little knowledge to be in truth human being, but all the more self-knowledge* (*ibid.*). No knowledge is necessary to be a human being, as every human being possesses the knowledge (i.e., his set of values). All the more self-knowledge is required, as only through self-reflection a human being can become conscious of his axiology (i.e., he can become conscious of the knowledge, which he has always possessed in the form of *his* set of values) and, consequently, undertake its realization.

Due to the fact that every individual possesses a set of values (knowledge which requires self-knowledge, i.e., becoming conscious of one's axiology), Kierkegaard's indirect communication is free of ultimate results. Axiology cannot be communicated as knowledge, since it has to be communicated (i.e. evoked) as ability. As axiology demands realization, and realization presupposes knowledge, Kierkegaard's indirect communication has neither the object of communication, nor the communicator, nor the receiver. If everybody possesses some knowledge, i.e., a set of values, then there is no need for the object of communication, and there is no one with enough authority to be either the communicator or the receiver. As Kierkegaard's indirect communication aims at overcoming the traditional pattern of communication, which disseminates quietism (it discourages individuals from acting by making them passively accept whatever is communicated directly), it stresses the necessity for actions.

The medium for communicating knowledge is possibility, whereas the medium for communicating ability is actuality (*Pap. VIII<sup>2</sup> B 81:26-28, 85:14*). This is a result of the assumption that every individual is *κατα δύναμιν* what he is to become (if he subscribes to some values, all he has to do is undertake their realization). Kierkegaard's indirect communication does not attempt to describe actions, but seeks to evoke them. In fact, the function of this communication is solely to stimulate individuals to self-reflection, in which they will become conscious of their subjective axiologies.

That communication of knowledge takes place in the medium of imagination, while communication of ability (to realize one's axiology) in the medium of reality means that communication and acting are one and the same thing. If one becomes conscious of his axiology, i.e., the values to which he subscribes, one is bound to proceed to their realization.

Communication of axiology in the medium of possibility (imagination) would turn communication into an empty rhetoric, for the *conditio sine qua non* for communication of axiology is the realization of what is communicated – here the only medium can be, naturally, actuality. Kierkegaard characterizes actuality (*Virkelighed*) as *the existential reduplication of what has been said* (*den eksistentielle Reduplikation af det Sagte*) (*Pap. VIII<sup>2</sup> B 85:17*). The category of reduplication is to prevent communication from

becoming an empty rhetoric. The purpose of the category is to rectify the major mistake of modernity, which, in Kierkegaard's eyes, is the transformation of the communication of ability and duty into the communication of knowledge, so that the existential has been dropped (*Pap.* VIII<sup>2</sup> B 85:31).

Kierkegaard's indirect communication is directed towards the existential reduplication of what has been communicated indirectly. What is communicated indirectly is an individual's subjective axiology. As a matter of fact, it is not really communicated, for the individual already possesses a set of values, to which he subscribes and, thus, the idea is only to make him aware of it. Then comes the reduplication. The individual exists in what has been communicated, i.e., he endeavors to realize the values of which he has become conscious. Reduplication is a transition from the abstract (thought, possibility) to the concrete (being, actuality), and, for this reason, reduplication means existing in what has been communicated indirectly: when the one who reduplicates seeks to realize (reduplicate) his own values of which he has been made conscious during the communication.

Kierkegaard's theory of indirect communication deserves our undivided and meticulous attention, for it concerns all of us. The purpose of it is to make us aware of our subjective axiologies and, then, to encourage us to undertake the realization of the values to which we subscribe. The underlying idea of the indirect communication is that as one cannot communicate actions, one can only strive to evoke them. In our world, where many a man does not reduplicate what he communicates or what is communicated to him, Kierkegaard's communication oriented towards the reduplication of what is communicated can prove to be of paramount importance.