

Reception: texts, readers, audiences, history

Vol. 1 (Fall, 2008)

<http://copland.udel.edu/~pgold/webpage/RSSsite/rssjournal.html>

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Patrocínio P. Schweickart, “The Receiving Function: Ethics, Communication, and Reading,” pp. 1-42.

Ethics refers to a person’s conduct in relation to other persons. Ethics stems from the intrinsic sociality of human life, from the fact that each of us must live her life among and in relation to other human beings.

I follow Jurgen Habermas’s lead in taking linguistic communication as the basic form of human interaction. Communication is basic, first, because it is an ubiquitous, everyday practice. In effect, Habermas replaces the Cartesian “I think; therefore, I am” with “We can speak to each other, and therefore we can coordinate our actions and live like human beings.” Secondly, communication is basic in the sense that it is the model for all human interactions. Of course, this claim is controversial. For now, let me only say that it is justified by the fact that human interactions are generally enabled and accompanied by linguistic communication.

Habermas is a post-metaphysical thinker because, instead of starting with metaphysical premises, he looks at human practices. He recognizes that the metaphysical grounds of philosophy are no longer tenable, but he does not think that we have to give up on the achievements of the enlightenment—in particular, we do not have to give up on the idea of reason. We can dispense with metaphysical premises because everything we need can be reconstructed from the intuitions and norms latent in our everyday communicative practices. From this paradigm of communicative reason, Habermas derives an ethical theory he calls discourse ethics.

There is a long tradition in literary studies relating ethics and reading.¹ This tradition can be roughly divided into two strands: the first focuses on the moral content and effects of literature—the “moral lessons” that one may or may not get from literary texts; the influence of literature for good or ill. The second strand focuses on the moral implications of the behavior of the reader. This paper belongs in the second strand. I take reading as an intersubjective and therefore moral activity, involving a reader with other human subjectivities, not just with a textual object, or language, or a general not-me. I argue that a theory of communicative action that seeks to comprehend the cognitive and moral processes that enable “humane forms of collective life” should include a careful examination of reading practices.

Habermas’s Theory of Communicative Action

Let me now give a summary of Habermas’s theory. A key to this theory is what Habermas calls the “validity basis of speech.” When we speak we make four kinds of validity claims: a truth claim, a rightness claim, a sincerity claim, and an intelligibility claim. For example, when I say “Women are equal,” I am making a claim that women and men are in fact equal; that it is morally right to assert their equality, that I am sincere in doing so; and that my utterance is a well-formed English sentence. Habermas takes a fallibilistic attitude toward all claims: in principle, all claims are questionable. So, when I say “Women are equal,” someone may respond: Is that so? How do you know? Women and men have different physical and mental endowments—how can they be equal? It is not right to say so--it violates tradition, religious beliefs, commonsense. You can’t be serious. You are talking gibberish.

Habermas is primarily concerned with truth and rightness claims. When such claims are questioned, we can discuss them. I can explain and give reasons for my position. You can do the same for yours. Valid claims are those that can gain the willing agreement of all participants in a discussion that meets the conditions of an “ideal speech situation,” which means a discussion where all participants are free to speak their minds, and where there is no force except the unforced force of the better argument. Thus, Habermas reconstructs the concept of reason and the associated idea of validity on the basis of the intuitions and presuppositions of the everyday practice of reasonable discussion, what he calls “communicative action oriented toward mutual understanding.” The ideal of domination free discourse where claims and arguments could be evaluated on their merits is a basic presupposition of academic discourse as well as of democratic politics.

The most developed corollary of Habermas’s theory is the ethical theory he calls discourse ethics, where he stipulates a discursive procedure for the vindication of moral claims. Morally valid claims are those that can gain the agreement of others under conditions of ideal domination-free discourse. Habermas encourages us to think of discourse ethics as an expansion of Lawrence Kohlberg’s theory of moral reasoning (*Moral Consciousness*, 163-170). Kohlberg identifies six stages of moral development. At the highest stage, moral reasoning is characterized by the ability to think of moral issues in terms of universal principles of justice and human rights. Discourse ethics adds a seventh stage, where moral competence is characterized by the ability to engage in the free and open discussion of moral issues. Discourse ethics thus connects the principle of

justice, with the ethical ideal of the symmetrical reciprocity of moral agents, and the democratic ideal of free speech.

Most of the objections to Habermas point out that real discussions are generally far from the ideal, that power imbalances are inherent in all speech situations. Habermas responds by saying that of course, domination-free discourse is counterfactual, but it is nevertheless a norm that is invoked whenever one speaks—all of us speak with the expectation, even when there are power imbalances, that our cognitive and moral claims will be evaluated on their merits. (In the academy, for example, faculty members have this expectation when they talk to the dean.)

Following Habermas, I will finesse the issue of power. I do not mean to deny the discursive effects of power, but this theme sometimes functions as a reductive framework that obscures some other important issues, in the current case, issues pertaining to the structure of communicative interaction. Let me give an example that locates the problem with Habermas' theory not in the difference between ideal and actual discourse, but in Habermas's model of communication.

The example is from *White Bucks and Black-Eyed Peas*, Marcus Mabry's memoir of his life in an elite prep school in New Jersey. In his senior year, Mabry was asked to say a few words at a MLK day assembly. Here is what he said.

It is necessary to remember [MLK and what he stands for].

But people have a way of saying—So what? How does this apply to me? I can hardly end racism in America, or even in my own dorm, so why even talk about it?

Well, there are a few reasons to talk about racism, and the Black Struggle, which is actually part of a greater Human struggle for liberty and equality.

The first reason is the simplest. . . .

By speaking out for what one believes, and by breaking the silence, in essence, by “making freedom ring,” you make people remember. . . .

The image of the chained, oppressed, beaten slave must be remembered.

The image of walking skeletons being led to slaughter in Nazi Germany must be remembered.

And the silence must be broken!

Another reason [is that] to put it simply you can help end racism by trying to guard against it in your own thoughts, and your own perception of others.

Every human being is prejudiced, yet you can make an attempt to rid yourself of this negative. . . . emotion. . . . There are many racists sitting among us right now. . . I can’t change prejudiced thoughts with a few words between lunch and E Period.

The only way to overcome prejudice is through individual experience. You have to see, firsthand, that stereotypes are false. . . .

Through recognizing other people as individuals and not stereotypes we cut through the myths and slowly deteriorate racism within ourselves—and that’s the only way to do it!!

And when we see each other as individuals and not so much as colors, racism will die. It will be a long time from now. No one sitting here will probably ever know that day of equality, yet one day it will, it must arrive!

Let us all be determined to make [MLK’s] dream a reality! (pp. 131-134)

Later, one of Mabry’s classmates stopped him and said: “Wow, Marc. . . . that was a radical speech you gave today.” (134) Mabry comments:

The look on his face told me he didn’t mean radical as in ‘totally awesome.’ He was flushed and shaking his head with disbelief. I had self-consciously tried to be tame and respectful, lest I be considered an angry black man, and to deliver a positive message. My classmate said it was all fire and fury. (134-35).

Note, first of all, that this is a case of communication across social – i. e. racial-- difference; and secondly, that this is an example of the failure of communication. It indicates the difficulty—perhaps, even the impossibility, of mutual understanding across racial difference. Philosopher Miranda Fricker would identify Mabry’s experience as an example of “epistemic or hermeneutic injustice.” The friend’s unjust interpretation of Mabry’s speech is a function of the social power that he enjoys. Or, to borrow Charles Mill’s very useful term, the friend’s response stems from an “epistemology of ignorance” that is part of the cultural machinery for the production and reproduction of racial and class privilege.

Looking at this example within the framework of a theory of communication, what went wrong? Why did Mabry’s communicative project fail? The usual approach (consistent with Habermas) places the burden of effective communication on the speaker. Mabry needed to understand the expectations of his predominantly white audience. They were expecting him to show appreciation for the scholarship that allowed him to attend the school; they would have been pleased to be congratulated for their commitment to diversity, most visibly evident in the fact that he was chosen to address the assembly. Also, he should have understood that certain phrases—e.g. “The Black Struggle,” “There are many racists sitting among us right now,” and the invocation of the parallel images of the “chained, oppressed, beaten slave” and the “walking skeletons being led to slaughter in Nazi Germany”—would turn off some members of his audience. A wiser, more skilful speaker would have explicitly expressed his gratitude, and avoided pushing negative buttons that could interfere with his positive message.

In Habermas's ideal scenario, Mabry will tell his friend: "No, no, I was not angry. I did not mean to imply that you are a racist. I am grateful for the generosity of the white people who donated the money that allowed me to come to this school and get a good education. My message is really positive—we should all work together to make Dr. King's dream a reality." And his friend would say: "You may not have meant to be angry, Marcus, but that was how you came across. You really should be careful about saying things that make white people feel they are being accused of racism. You are doing exactly what you say is wrong—you are stereotyping all white people as racists. You should make it very clear that you are criticizing the system, not individuals, etc."

In the end, the two boys will come to an agreement about the "positive" message Mabry was trying to communicate. However, this agreement will have different meanings for the two parties. Mabry will walk away disappointed and frustrated—thinking that his friend will never understand. He might shrug and say to himself: "Well, it is not really his fault; he is really a good person; his social location keeps him from understanding." But his friend is likely to walk away feeling satisfied that Mabry understood his response, and pleased that he had given his friend helpful tips on how to be a more effective communicator next time.

The scenario described above approximates Habermas's domination-free discourse: Marcus and his classmate have equal opportunity to speak freely. However, the symmetrical distribution of free speech rights masks the unequal distribution of the burden of understanding, especially in communication across race, gender, sexual orientation, class and other categories of social difference. The felicitous conclusion of the conversation—the apparent mutual agreement that allowed the preservation of

friendship—happened because Mabry “understood” his friend, and an important element of this understanding is forgiving his friend for failing to do justice to his own communicative project.²

Now, what is wrong with Habermas’s account of communication? The short answer, Habermas’s model identifies communicative action with speaking. One becomes an agent, one communicates, when one speaks up. Silence equals non-action. However, if we look carefully at everyday communicative practices, we see that communication does not happen between speakers, but between a speaker and a listener. There are, in other words, two different modes of communicative action—the expressive mode of speaking, and the receptive mode of listening. “I speak, you speak” really represents two intervals of communication: “I speak, you listen;” “you speak, I listen.” The symmetrical reciprocity that is the basis of Habermas’s ideal of mutual understanding is actually an *achievement* built on the successful (cognitive and moral) management of the intrinsically asymmetrical relationship between two actors in different communicative roles, speaker and listener.

To sum up, the problem with Habermas is not that his theory is defeated by the concrete reality of power imbalances; but rather, that his theory is based on an erroneous speech-centered model of communication that underestimates the receptive agency of the listener. One problem with the theme of power is that it attributes injustice to the violation of the ideal of the symmetrical reciprocity of self and other, and implies, as Habermas does, that justice will follow from the absence of structural imbalances. However, if we recognize that there are two forms of communicative agency—the expressive role of speaking, and the receptive role of listening—and, if, like Habermas

we regard communication as the basic form of human interaction, then, it follows that interactions between self and other, are, at bottom *always* asymmetrical. Any discourse ethics derived from everyday communicative practices must comprehend the cognitive and moral problematics of asymmetrical relationships. Communicative justice is an achievement conditioned on successful communication – speaking and listening -- across this basic asymmetry.

II. Now to reading.

That reading is an activity with ethical implications follows when we see it as a receptive form of communicative action analogous to listening.³ In theories that privilege oral communication, it is easy to make the mistake Habermas makes—to overestimate the agency of the speaker and to underestimate that of the listener. It is difficult to examine the activity of the listener—who, in her silence, appears to be doing nothing. However, reading is *clearly* an activity different from writing, and literary studies offer various accounts of the receptive practice of reading.

Let me turn to one such work: “Why Write?” a classic essay by Jean-Paul Sartre. “It is not true,” says Sartre, “that one writes for himself. . . . the operation of writing implies that of reading as its dialectical correlative and these two connected acts necessitate two distinct agents. . . . It is the conjoint effort of author and reader which brings upon the scene that concrete and imaginary object which is the work of the mind. There is no art except for and by others.” (36--37) It follows that the fate of the writer’s project is in the hands of the reader.

[The] literary object, though realized through language, is never given in language. . . . it is by nature a silence and an opponent of the word. . . . The hundred thousand words aligned in a book can be read one by one so that the meaning of the work does not emerge. Nothing is accomplished if the reader does

not put himself from the very beginning and almost without a guide at the height of this silence; if in short, he does not invent it and does not then place there, and hold on to, the words and sentences which he awakens. (38)

Since the writer's work can find its fulfillment only when it is read, "since the artist must entrust to another the job of carrying out what he has begun, . . . all literary work is an appeal. To write is to make an appeal to the reader that he lead into objective existence the revelations which I have undertaken by means of language." (40)

Sartre identifies two characteristics of the ideal reader. The first, not surprisingly, is freedom: "the writer appeals to the reader's freedom to collaborate in the production of his work." (40) Of course, one can have no confidence in responses produced in the context of coercive force. However, Sartre also warns against authorial attempts to overwhelm the reader: Literary works seek to move us emotionally, but the feelings they elicit "have their origin in freedom; they are loaned." The reader "descends into credulity which, though it ends by enclosing him like a dream, is at every moment conscious of being free." (44)

The second characteristic identified by Sartre is generosity. He calls reading "an exercise of generosity." "What the writer requires of the reader is . . . the gift of his whole person, with his passions, his prepossessions, his sympathies, his sexual temperament, and his scale of values." (45) Unfortunately, Sartre does not persevere in elaborating the intuitions that led him to identify generosity as a readerly virtue. Instead he assimilates the theme of generosity into the theme of freedom—a "feeling [is] generous [to the extent that] it has its origin and its end in freedom." In other words, generosity follows from the absence of compelling force; it explains why a reader would choose to devote herself willingly to the completion of another's project.

Sartre's truncated treatment of the theme of "generosity" may be attributed in part to the privileged status normally accorded to "freedom" as the most important western value. Another contributing cause is the pressure to arrive at the *correct* moral picture—to end with a theory that is consonant with the ethical ideal of the symmetrical reciprocity of self and other. It is noteworthy that Sartre's effort to fit the dialectic of writing and reading into this ethical ideal is not entirely successful. The theme of "generosity" – arising from the recognition that the fate of the writer's communicative project must be entrusted to the agency of the reader – ushers in moral connotations that exceed the theme of "freedom." Had Sartre persevered in developing the theme of generosity as a readerly virtue, he might have seen the basic asymmetry underlying discursive relations, and therefore, all human interactions.

Of course, the association of generosity with good reading is not new. When I was in graduate school, I wrote papers that reflected the intellectual and moral energies awakened by feminism. Most of my professors wrote questions, comments and counterarguments on the margins of my papers. However, one professor simply wrote: "Your reading might have been more convincing had it been more generous." At the time, this struck me as an *ad hominem* comment. It irritated me that instead of arguing with me, he is accusing me of being bitchy. I thought: "Either my argument is valid, or it is not. Generosity has nothing to do with it." Today, given the success of the feminist critique of the androcentricism of the dominant literary and critical tradition, I am able to recognize that "generosity" is a legitimate issue; able, even, to attribute my professor's comment, at least in part, to the valid intuition that a "fair" reading has to be built on a

“generous reading.”⁴ Going back to the example from Mabry, I would say that his classmate’s interpretation of Mabry’s speech is *unfair* because it is *ungenerous*.

III. Discursive Justice and the Ethic of Care

From a speech centered model of communication, Habermas derives a discourse ethics, which defines justice in terms of ideal of a symmetrical reciprocity of self and other, and consistent with the democratic principle of equal free speech rights. However, as I have argued above, this model suffers from an erroneous model of communication.

The problematics of the receptive form of communicative action become inescapable when we shift our attention from an oral to a written situation. Sartre’s discussion of the dialectic of writing and reading corrects Habermas’s model in that it portrays communication as involving two forms of action—the expressive role of writing (and speaking), and the receptive role of reading (and listening). In light of Sartre’s essay, we see that the domination-free discourse stipulated by Habermas is a necessary but not sufficient condition for mutual understanding. The writer is dependent on the reader to do for her what she cannot do for herself—understand, appreciate, interpret, in a word *receive*--what she has written. The completion of the writer’s project is conditioned on the reader’s freedom *and* generosity—her willingness and ability to undertake the readerly work of completing of the writer’s project.

If, like Habermas, we take communication as paradigmatic of intersubjectivity, it should follow that all human relations are conditioned on asymmetry. In other words, that dependency is the universal condition underlying human sociality, and the comprehension of the various dimensions of asymmetrical, dependency relations is the

first task of ethical theory, and certainly the first task of one that is built on a theory of communicative action.

In 1982 Carol Gilligan published *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, and in 1984 Nel Noddings published *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*. The idea of an ethic of care proposed by these authors initially met an enthusiastic reception both in academic and popular circles. Although the idea of an ethic of care different from the dominant ethic of justice continues to be appealing to many women, its theoretical development has been hampered by the uncongenial environment of post-structuralism and post-modernism. It is useful to recall that Gilligan's work is a critical response to Kohlberg's theory of moral development. (Habermas has commented on Gilligan, but his comments are brief, and by no means generous. See *Moral Consciousness* pp. 175-81).

Noddings's distinctive contribution is the analysis of caring as an asymmetrical relationship between two people in two different roles: the role of the one-caring and the role of the one cared-for. Although people may alternate in these two roles, Noddings insists that every interval of care is asymmetrical—consisting of the one-caring providing care, and **the** one-cared for accepting the care provided and using it to further her projects. To complete an interval of care, one person must provide care, and the other must accept it. Care cannot happen when one responds to an appeal for care by expressing one's own need to be cared for, nor when one responds to offers of care by insisting on being the one caring.

According to Noddings, the role of the one-caring has three elements: engrossment, motivational displacement, and a duality of perspective. Engrossment

refers to a receptive, attentive, solicitous mode of consciousness toward the one cared-for. We might be inclined to take “engrossment” as a synonym for “empathy” or “identification.” However, Noddings insists that the engrossment required of the one-caring is other directed, and requires a degree of self-forgetfulness that is antithetical to the projection of self -- putting oneself in another’s shoes, understanding an other by imagining what one would feel or do in her situation—that is often associated with the more familiar terms. For example, in responding to an infant’s cry, a mother tries to figure out the source of the distress and its seriousness; she does what is needed to remedy the problem. It is not necessary for her to identify with the infant, to feel what the infant is feeling, or to put herself in its place; on the contrary, these self-focused approaches may be obstacles to effective care giving.

Moreover, caring is more than a feeling of attachment or receptivity. Caring requires motivational displacement. The one-caring deploys her cognitive, moral, emotional energies in the service of the project of the cared-for. Parents help children to grow into good, healthy, sane, productive human beings; teachers promote the intellectual development of students; nurses and doctors help sick patients to get better. Caring involves work in the service of another.

Finally, Noddings distinguishes the concern for another in caring from the loss of self and complete absorption in the other associated with romantic infatuation. Because effective caring requires that the one-caring be capable of an independent point of view, the one-caring needs to develop a duality of perspective; she needs to double her consciousness, so that she could lend one portion to the cared-for and her project, while reserving the other for her own autonomous perspective.

The asymmetry and directionality of the caring relation makes it a good analog for communication, and Noddings' analysis of the role of the one-caring offers an excellent framework for exploring the cognitive, moral, and emotional characteristics of the receptive role of the listener and reader. In light of Noddings we can revise Sartre: To write is to appeal to be cared for; and to read is to respond as one-caring.

According to Norman Holland, readers always read so as to reproduce their own "identity theme." While there is no doubt that readers can and often project themselves onto the texts they are reading, the question is not what readers can and often do, but rather what they ought to do. Is it cognitively and morally valid to appropriate all texts into one's own identity theme? Is it right to be able to understand others only to the extent that they can be interpreted so as to serve one's own interests? Is it right to be incapable of reading texts that are not amenable to the reproduction of one's identity theme? The engrossment that Noddings finds in effective caring practices involves a receptive quality that is reminiscent of Keats' idea of negative capability, and is in sharp contrast to Holland's portrayal of reading as a necessarily self-centered and self-reproducing activity.

Moreover, reading like caring requires work—the displacement of one's motive energies in the service of another's project. The gift of oneself that Sartre looks for in a reader includes, above all, the gift of one's cognitive, moral and emotional *labor*. The fate of the writer's project depends on how well the reader is disposed to do the *work* of understanding what another has written.

Finally, the reader is in a predicament similar to that of one-caring. Both need to make use of their subjective resources—experience, knowledge, intelligence, moral

judgment, emotional disposition—to do the work that is required; and yet they must not allow their subjectivity to dominate their understanding of the other. They must give the gift of their whole personality, and at the same time they must restrain the impulse to let their own concerns, interests, and feelings determine their understanding of the texts they are reading. They must, as Sartre says, render themselves credulous, but they must not allow themselves to be overwhelmed into intellectual and moral submission. To manage these contradictory requirements, the reader, like the one-caring, needs to have the capacity to maintain a duality of perspective, the ability to induce a doubling of consciousness, so that one portion can be put at the disposal of the writer's project, and the other can be reserved for the reader's independent point of view. The duality of perspective Noddings associates with the one-caring is characteristic of the critical understanding that Wayne Booth and others attribute to good reading practices.

Going back to the example from Marcus Mabry's MLK day speech, Marcus's communicative project failed because his friend was not able (or willing) to meet the three requirements of his receptive role: engrossment, motivational displacement, and duality of perspective. He could not get past his expectation that Marcus was lucky to be there, and hence must be grateful, and his inclination to defend himself against the suggestion that (by virtue of his being white) he might somehow be complicit with racism. The friend's response is an elaboration of his identity theme—he is a good person, a good and kind friend, and should not be made to feel guilty of racism simply because he is white. He could not put his cognitive and moral resources at the disposal of Marcus's communicative project. He could not do the work necessary to understand his friend. And he failed to induce in himself the duality of perspective that would have

allowed him to comprehend Marcus's point of view and also preserve his own standpoint as a good person. This example suggests that communicative justice, particularly when communicating across social difference, is an achievement that must be built **by** the successful management of the sort of asymmetrical relationship indicated by an ethic of care.

Conclusion

My revision of Habermas portrays communication as an asymmetrical interaction between agents in different roles—the expressive role of speaking or writing, and the receptive role of listening or reading. Studies of listening (e.g. Ratcliffe) typically emphasize openness and intimacy, and the willingness to sympathize with the other—in other words, the qualities and processes that are associated with engrossment. Focusing on reading practices foregrounds the two other elements: the work one must do to understand another's utterance, and the training and education needed to enable the duality of perspective required for doing this work competently.

Let me mention one last idea about what it means to understand the utterance of another. We have seen that one has to do the negative work of controlling the impulse toward androcentric, ethnocentric, egocentric readings. But there is also positive work to be done. Reading, understanding the utterance of another, involves a kind of advocacy. The role of the reader as advocate is evident in the critical tradition. The immortality of certain authors is a function of the continued advocacy of critics.

But whether or not the “reading” one eventually writes reflects readerly advocacy, in the process of understanding, which comes before one composes one's interpretation, the reader must let an other “speak” to her. And this can only happen to the extent that

she undertakes the work of speaking for the other. Thus, to guard against ethnocentric, androcentric, self-serving interpretations it is not enough to insist on inclusive discourses where the other can speak for herself. If the other is to speak to me, I must speak for her. Advocacy is a pre-condition for understanding. Exploring the dialectic between advocacy and critical judgment is one of the crucial tasks of reception studies.

¹ For a succinct summary of the “potted history” of the controversy about moral criticism, see Booth, “On the Standard of Moral Taste,” in *The Essential Wayne Booth*, pp. 242-45.

² The current presidential campaign of Senator Barack Obama offers an excellent opportunity to examine the dialectic of speaking and listening in communication. Senator Obama needs to speak clearly, effectively, and responsibly; but his rhetorical project presupposes a voting public that will give him a fair hearing.

³ For an extensive discussion of reading as a receptive mode of communicative action, see my “Understanding the Other: Reading as a Receptive Mode of Communicative,” in Goldstein and Machor, 3-22.

⁴ And I like to think that the A I got on that paper is further evidence of this intuition--that, in spite of his annoyance, my professor managed to be generous, and therefore fair.

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