Communication is one of the most basic of human activities, a process by which we engage ourselves with others for understanding, for cooperation, and the accomplishment of a variety of goals. To exist as a human being is to interact with others, to influence others, and to be subject to their influence upon ourselves.

We are, as one has observed, "a persuading and persuaded animal" (Johnstone, Henry 306.) The interaction may be as complex as that of a family with a complicated web of relationships that extends over the lifespans of its members. The interaction may be as simple as a request for information from a stranger on the street whom we will never see again.

However complex or simple our interactions, we impinge on each other in multiple ways. It is a short jump from recognizing that we influence each other through communication to recognizing that communication is not a neutral activity. We do not simply influence each other; we influence each other in positive and negative ways, for good and for bad. Phrases from our daily rounds of communication indicate the kind of judgments we make about the worth and value of the communication: "She should never have told me that;" "He was very helpful;" "The government is engaged in another cover-up;" "She said what needed to be said;" "He's lying!" "She told it like it was."

When communicating, we do not simply choose words; we choose words for the effect they will have on our audiences, on ourselves, and ultimately, on society. Thus, when we communicate, we cannot escape ethical questions, questions which ask how helpful or harmful our actions are. An awareness of the ethical dimensions of communication provides us with a deeper understanding of ourselves and of our potential as human beings. Communicating ethically is important because it has the greatest positive impact for others and, ultimately, ourselves. This chapter examines the subject of communication and ethics by looking at the nature of ethics, how communication and ethics interlock, and at some guidelines for making ethical choices in communicating.

The Nature of Ethics

Ethics is the discussion of the judgments we make about the appropriateness, the right or wrong, of our actions and policies be those actions communicative, political, social, personal, or a mixture of areas. Ethics is the study of what, ultimately, is the best course of action: How should we behave to have the most positive effect upon society and to become the best individuals we can?

The question is certainly not a new one; the search for answers is both ancient and cross-cultural. With its text dating back to 2,400 BC, The Egyptian Book of the Dead contains a kind of creed or standard of behavior which the virtuous were expected to recite to pass successfully from the world of the living to the realm of the dead. Among the statements, the virtuous are asked to affirm that "I have not oppressed the members of my family," "I have not defrauded the oppressed one of his property," and "I have not cut a cutting in a
canal of running water," an important consideration in an arid land (Budge 360-71). In ancient India, in its religion and philosophy, "truthfulness means more than a moral obligation to avoid deceit. It is revered as one of the greatest of human accomplishments and the greatest service one person can render another" (Kirkwood 213).

Both the Jewish and Christian scriptures have clear indications of how one is to behave. The Ten Commandments (Exodus 20: 1-17) and the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), for example, both contain guidelines for religion, marriage, treatment of others, honesty, and respect for the truth. The Confucian codes of China, dating from the sixth century, AD, detail how one should behave in a benevolent and virtuous way. In his Nicomachean Ethics, circa 325 BC, Aristotle discusses what contributes to the creation of a good and just society. His view is that ethics is a kind of "practical philosophy," the application of good judgment when faced with decisions about courses of action. Through the use of our rationality, we seek a virtuous path, one that avoids the extremes of overreaction. For example, Aristotle views generosity as a virtue which consists of giving "to the right people, the right amount, at the right time . . . ." By practicing generosity, one avoids the vices of extravagance, spending too much on oneself, and stinginess, spending too little on others (1120a). By seeking the mean, one creates "happiness," a term which for Aristotle meant "living well," leading a rewarding and fulfilling life (Ostwald xxi).

The discussion of ethics has continued to be an area of discussion and research from its earliest beginnings until the present time. Even a quick search of listings in a university library will yield a lengthy list of materials ranging from a general discussion of ethics in society to discussion of ethics in specific fields such as medicine, education, and law.

**Ethics as an Integral Part of Communication**

In contemporary society, when we consider questions of ethics, we often turn immediately to the world of politics, not without reason. The administrations of presidencies in this half century have all faced, and in some cases bungled, questions of truthfulness. The most famous case of presidential truth or consequences was that of Richard Nixon. In 1972, during the election campaign, an attempt was made to burglarize the Democratic National Headquarters located in the Watergate Building. The Congressional hearings, judicial investigations, revelations, and public outcry stemming from that incident forced Nixon to become, on 8 August 1974, the first president to resign from office.

By its very nature, the democratic process creates decisions that are often difficult for its participants if they subscribe to a high ethical standard. How should a candidate behave in order to be elected? How does a voter choose between two candidates, neither one of whom is particularly desirable? How do elected officials balance the often conflicting needs and desires of their constituencies?

When we turn to non-political questions, we sometimes think that ethics is a matter of debating major issues such as euthanasia, war, or capital punishment (Williams 196). These are certainly significant matters, but the "major ethical issues" that most of us will face will be matters of how to behave in our daily lives and in our relationships with those with whom we have personal contact at home, at school, or at work.
Because it is relational, communication brings us face to face with questions that contain ethical judgments. We must decide what is the purpose or purposes of a relationship in which we find ourselves. We must decide how to behave. We must choose how to respond in that situation. Our responses will be based on how we regard the other party or parties and what the consequences of our actions will be. All of these are basic ethical questions in that they involve our deciding what is the "best" course of action.

Discovering the ethical element in our communication does not mean that we go through a complete ethical inventory every time we engage in communication. Rather, we make basic assumptions about the nature of people and our responsibilities to them and then act on the basis of those assumptions.

It does not take long, however, before we find ourselves in situations in which we must attempt to satisfy conflicting demands. Then we come consciously face to face with the ethical issues in communication. How do you respond when a friend comes to you and asks, "How do you like this shirt?" and you think the shirt is hideous? How do you balance the conflict between sparing the person's feelings and saving the person from public embarrassment? What do you say or do?

A friend reveals to you that she has a six pack of beer hidden in her dormitory room, and you both know alcohol is prohibited by regulation on campus. Later, the resident counselor comes to you and asks if you know of anyone on the floor who has alcohol in her room. What would you say or do in response? How would you frame your communication with your friend and the counselor?

What if, in a more serious case, your friend insisted that she was not drunk and was perfectly capable of driving her car, but you could tell that she was completely intoxicated and a threat to herself and others on the road? How would you persuade her to stay off the road? Would it be ethical to lie to her to separate her from her car keys? If she proved unresponsive to your persuasion and drove off, would you call the police to alert them to a dangerous driver? If she were arrested for "driving while under the influence," how much of your role in the affair would you reveal? In what ways, if any, would your reactions differ if your friend were a "he" instead of a "she"? How would you respond if the person involved were a family member, a parent or grandparent?

In a more public setting, let us imagine that you are part of a committee presenting a proposal to your housing unit about parking facilities. Close to the time you are to present your proposal, you discover that a key piece of evidence is outdated and the latest information is damaging to your case. Do you simply present the evidence? Do you present the data with a qualifier about its timeliness? Do you leave it out entirely?

While the answers to these kinds of questions may be difficult, we have to make decisions and live by the consequences. The decision to communicate and the decisions made within the communication event carry with them ethical implications.

**Ethical Communication**

To make the best decisions in our communication, to communicate ethically, we must give thought to the manner in which we communicate. Formulating a list of rules to be applied in the different communication situations in which we find ourselves would be a futile endeavor. The situations are too vast and too varying. Rather, we would do better to
suggest guidelines for ethical communication, considerations which should shape communicating practice.

**Ethical Communicators are Respectful of Their Audiences.**

Communication is a two-way process. Communication implies a party other than ourselves and an attempt on our part to influence that person or party in some way. As one scholar has put the matter, "A communicator, with particular motives, attempts to achieve a specific end with a specific audience by employing (intentionally or unintentionally) communicative means or techniques to influence that audience" (Johanssen 16).

The nature of the influence we have on others will depend to a large extent on our attitudes towards our audiences. As several have observed, an ethical communicator is one who regards other persons as possessing inherent dignity and worth (Jaska and Pritchard 81; Nilsen 14). Human beings are to be regarded not as means to ends but rather as valued participants whose welfare is a significant and considered part of the interaction.

In terms of practice, this principle means that audience analysis is an important part of communication. We cannot respond appropriately if we are ignorant of the people with whom we communicate.

Respect for audiences includes respect for the ideas and feelings of the people with whom we interact. If people possess dignity and worth, then they need to be treated as such even when we may disagree with them strongly. One student was addressing an issue which some saw as racially charged. His response to those opposing his ideas was, "Get a life." His reaction demeaned not only those disagreeing with him but his own ideas as well.

**Ethical Communicators Consider the Consequences of Their Communication.**

We do not communicate in vacuums. Our communication endeavors are never isolated one from the other. How we respond at school influences how we respond at home and that in turn affects how we respond in our public lives. Having considered the natures of our audiences, we need to consider further the effect of our communication on them and upon ourselves.

Sam is chairing the planning committee for the Outing Club's spring break trip to Isle Royale. Committee members are all doing their work except for Larry who has missed several meetings and has not had his committee reports ready on time. Larry is slowing down the committee's progress and threatening the success of the trip. Sam has to talk to Larry about the problem and is frustrated enough to bawl him out about his poor work. Telling Larry off in loud and uncertain terms may make Sam feel better, but if Sam is an ethical communicator, he will consider the possible outcomes of his communication with Larry.

If Larry's work is late because he has been sick, an outburst may leave Larry resentful and even less willing to perform the necessary work. Relations will be strained more. The trip may be further endangered. Whatever the situation, Sam's best choice will be an approach that encourages Larry to be a contributing member, reduces the possibility of conflict, and ensures the success of the projected trip rather than just venting his feelings.
Ethical Communicators Respect Truth.

A great deal of the ethics of communication involves a respect for truth. Indeed, as one has put it, the assumption of truth undergirds the very concept of communication itself: "an inherent end of speech is the communication of belief" (Kupfer 118). If we cannot trust the other party, we cannot accurately judge how to respond. If we cannot accurately judge how to respond, then our communication becomes increasingly ineffective. If the lack of trust is pervasive enough, it is destructive finally to society. As one person has observed, "This is why some level of truthfulness has always been seen as essential to human society, no matter how deficient the observance of other moral principles" (Bok 18).

Let us say that an instructor receives a call from a student just before the student is scheduled to make a presentation in class. The student tells the instructor that he cannot make his presentation because he is sick. He says that he has a fever and has been up all night with nausea. His voice sounds hoarse and tired. The instructor is sympathetic and offers to let the student make up the presentation later. Two hours later, the instructor goes to lunch and across the restaurant, sees the same student. The student is active, lively, and in animated conversation with his friends. It is apparent that he is not the least bit sick.

The student has created trouble for himself, but he has also created trouble for other students. Once deceived, the instructor will be less likely in the future to accept reasons for missed work. Rather than accepting the word of the student, the instructor may demand proof of the illness and move the relationship toward a more legalistic level.

Instructors are not immune to disrespect for truth. An instructor assigns a five page paper due in two weeks and lists the penalties for turning in the paper later. You work hard and hand your paper in on the day it is due. After collecting the papers, the instructor says that he put the deadline and penalties on the assignment to get them in so he would have time to grade them, but he will not enforce any penalty if the work is late. Several people turn in their work the next week and receive the same grade as you. Given another week, you might have made your paper even better. You would probably feel that you have, to some degree, been cheated. The instructor not only gave different people different deadlines but deceived the class as to the true nature of the assignment. The instructor's credibility has been damaged so that you will probably be leery of anything the instructor says. In short, you will have increased difficulty making your judgments about the intent of what is said and what course of action you should follow.

Ethical Communicators Use Information Properly.

Adequate Information

As an ethical communicator, a respect for truth means being informed on a topic before posing as any kind of authority on the subject. Certain professions such as law, medicine, and education have formal standards of expertise and knowledge that must be met before one can be a practitioner. We would be appropriately appalled to discover that the physician who just treated us had never attended medical school.
The same principle applies in communication situations. If we are going to provide information to people, much less persuade them, we need to be well prepared for the occasion. To talk about "How Students Can Handle Their Finances" with little or no background would be giving limited, if not false, information. To speak with any authenticity on the subject, we would need to look into such items as educational costs, credit card use, banks and credit unions, and work opportunities.

**Accurate Information**

In addition to securing information, we also need to consider the accuracy of the information and the accuracy with which we use it. When we communicate, we expect people to react in some way to what we say and do. When we use inaccurate information to influence others, we cause difficulty for them and for ourselves.

Accurate information is information that is timely, up to date, and applicable to the situation. In making a presentation on where to attend college, a speaker might quote a reference work that listed information about schools such as tuition, majors, and academic standing. If the reference book, though, were ten years old, the information would be of little use. Out of date information about other significant topics such as the environment, drug use, or crime rates would be as useless.

Along with finding timely and adequate information, an ethical speaker will use quotations, facts, ideas, and figures accurately. Quotations will, for example, reflect the intent of the larger passage from which they are taken.

A recent *Consumer Reports* article evaluates commercial diet plans. Several of the statements made in the article could be used to persuade people of the merits of the plans. A psychologist specializing in eating disorders says, "Weight Watchers is the only place I ever send anyone" ("Losing Weight" 355). In another place, the article evaluates a well known program by saying, "People who tried Optifast lost 45 pounds on average . . . ("Losing Weight" 357).

These quotations sound like endorsements of the plans until one sees their larger context. The psychologist is characterized as someone who "generally warns clients away from the very idea of dieting." The information on the success of the customers of Optifast adds that the customers "had gained back 15 pounds six months later." The article's conclusion? "Despite their sales pitches, there is no evidence that commercial weight-loss programs help most people achieve significant, permanent weight loss. If you want or need to lose weight, you would probably do well to try to reduce on your own, or through a free hospital-based program, before spending money on a commercial weight-loss center" ("Losing Weight" 357). Misquoting could give a very biased view of the information.

**Ethical Communicators Do Not Falsify Information.**

Worse than the distortion of information is falsifying information. Failing to find information useful to our goals, we make it up. Lena Guerrero, a person active in Texas politics was appointed to an important state commission by the governor. Part of Guerrero's credentials were notations of her graduation from the University of Texas and membership in Phi Beta Kappa, a prestigious honorary society. As the featured speaker at a college graduation, she waxed sentimental about her own graduation, saying, "Now, I remember
well my own commencement, and I think I can guess what you're feeling about now" (Burka 125). Investigative reporters discovered some important facts about her college years: Guerrero attended college but fell nineteen hours short of the required minimum. She had no college degree; she never graduated. Nor was she ever a member of Phi Beta Kappa. She had lied about the situation. Such invention of information is highly unethical.

Another way of falsifying information is through plagiarism. Plagiarism is a kind of theft, intellectual theft. We plagiarize when we use the words or ideas of another and fail to credit the source. Instead of attributing the material to its original creator, we pretend the words or ideas are our own. When writing, we acknowledge sources by the use of quotation marks and include a citation of the source. When speaking, we acknowledge sources by naming them in the context of the speech.

If one were speaking, for example, about the problem of dealing with aging pets, one could make the problem vivid for the audience by describing the behavior of an old beloved dog. The loyalty, affection, and trust of the dog and the owner's conflicting feelings could be poignantly pictured by a phrase such as "putting 'their kids' old dogs to sleep, friends that drool and quiver and stumble hobbling to our hands.'" If ethical, the speaker, though, would give credit where credit is due by acknowledging the author: "As Walter McDonald aptly describes in his poem . . ." (McDonald 24).

The most blatant form of plagiarism is appropriating the entire work of another. This type of plagiarism occurs when instead of composing their own speeches, students give speeches created by people other than themselves: their roommates, their friends, family members, or even professional writers. Besides constituting a lie about the true composer, such plagiarism subverts the educational process. We do not learn to communicate by using a stand-in any more than we learn to swim by having someone else take swimming lessons for us.

**Ethical Communicators Respect the Rights of Others to Information.**

A respect for truth and an ethical consideration of others also means respecting the rights of others in regard to information and access to information. Collecting information is an integral part of the research process, but stealing information is theft, taking something that does not belong to us. Beyond the personal act of theft, stealing information is unethical because it prevents other people from securing information and unnecessarily makes their lives more difficult.

For example, a periodical article may be useful to our speech, but we should either take notes on the material or photocopy it rather than tearing it out of the magazine. Tearing out the article robs others of the opportunity to read it and creates added expense for the library which must replace it. That expense, along with similar expenses, adds to the financial burden of the school and eventually, its students, including the person who tore out the article.

**Conclusion**

For the sake of our audiences, ourselves, and the people affected by our interactions we need to recognize the ethical component of our communication. Ethics is not just a matter of political or social policy but is a part of our personal policies as well, an integral part of our behaviors and our regard for others. Ethical communication will incorporate a re-
spectful view of its audiences, a consideration of the consequences of the communication for all parties involved, and a respect for truth. Such a view is both a challenge and a reward.

**Sources and References**


Holy Bible.


