
Love and Communication: A Review Essay

J. D. Peters. 1999. *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. ISBN 0-226-66276-4

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Speaking into the Air is, quite simply, the most original and thought provoking book on communication that I have read. It is dazzlingly and sometimes obscurely erudite yet with a clear and coherent argument that challenges our current commonsense views about communication. I am persuaded by this argument, though less so by the point at which John Durham Peters himself takes leave of it. That point seems to me to be oddly, uncomfortably, strange; something which, in itself, needs some explanation. It's partly to do, I think, with the Americanness of the book and partly its religiousness. Neither of these two points, I hasten to add, are implied criticisms. But they might begin to account for its strangeness, for this *is* a weird and eccentric book, voyaging in strange seas of thought alone, far from the busy, crowded lanes down which the usual academic shipping travels.

The book's subtitle is 'A History of the Idea of Communication' and starts from the uncontentious proposition that communication has emerged as a key concern for us all (not just academics) from the late 19th century onwards. And this is intimately connected with the rise of new technologies of communication from the telegraph to the internet. At the heart of this concern is a continuing, still unassuaged anxiety about mediated communication and the ways in which it manipulates and distorts reality and truth. Sincere and genuine, direct and

immediate communication seems to be all the more important in the face of the manifold potential of ‘the media’ to bear false witness: interpersonal communication ‘became thinkable only in the shadow of mediated communication’ (Peters 1999, 6).

The scandal of mediated ‘miscommunication’ prompted those well known critiques of mass society and culture first and most clearly articulated in Weimar Germany by Lukacs and Heidegger in the 1920s and, a decade later, by Adorno and Horkheimer and Critical Theory. The liquidation of individuality by impersonal economic, political and cultural powers was a common theme, in the inter-war period, shared by intellectuals from opposite ends of the political spectrum. In this scenario the individual is prey to dark social forces that threaten to overwhelm the lonely integrity of the self. The tyranny of the-many-as-one (Heidegger’s *das Man*) overwhelms the individual potential to be (to become) its own and authentic self. In retreat from the standardisation and uniformity of collective powers individualism lapses into the solipsism—the besetting sin of all theories of the subject from the Cartesian *res cogitans* through to Kant’s autonomous, rational subject and on into a myriad forms of thinking in the last two centuries in which Thought is locked in an endless conversation with itself. Transcendental loneliness is a theme that runs through Peters’ book and echoes plaintively in its title, ‘Speaking into the Air’. Is there anyone out there? Or do the winds forlornly blow the words back in one’s face?

The *desire* to communicate with others (communication *as* desire) is a potent theme that Peters traces with great ingenuity and subtlety. Dialogue—the self in communion with the Other—redeems subjectivity and offers the joy of inter-subjective communication. Philosophically it was, perhaps, most clearly expressed as an antidote to current anxieties in Martin Buber’s *I and Thou* (1923). But Peters is not out to offer an intellectual history—the usual trajectory of histories of ideas. A great part of the fascination of his book lies in his uncanny ability to recognise what intellectuals think as symptomatic of much wider historical anxieties and concerns. Communicative loneliness takes many forms. The desire for perfect true communication with another, the desire of the living to communicate with dead, the desire of the human species to get in touch with other species and, finally, our cosmic anxiety that no life exists outside our small and lonely planet are all wondrously considered: the first in terms of angelic communication, the second in terms of that (to us) bizarre preoccupation with spiritualism of the late 19th and early 20th century, the third in terms of thus far vain efforts to communicate with apes, whales and dolphins, and the fourth in terms of SETI, the Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence. ETs have not yet phoned us even though we would like to believe that they’re out there as Hollywood has imagined on behalf of us all.

Of all these longings perhaps the most poignant is the desire for perfect union with one another, a true fusion of souls—angelic communication. There is a long tradition of speculation in Christian thought about God’s messengers who, now and then (as in the Annunciation), reveal to mortals what He has in mind for them. They are like us but, freed from the corruption of the body, are purely spiritual. The sexuality of angels has been a matter of learned dispute. Are there male and female angels and if so, what would their sexual union be like? Milton thought that they somehow just co-mingled and tingled for a bit, and Donne believed that the love of men and women had ‘just such disparity As is twixt air and angels purity’. Angelic communion is a perfect meeting of minds, the harmony of two hitherto separate souls which have now become one: ‘Our two souls, therefore, which are one, If they be two endure not yet a breach But an expansion, like gold to airy thinness beat’. Something of what Donne’s love poetry expressed continues to underpin much modern commonsense thinking about what *ideally* love between two people should be like; passion or perfect bodily union as the incarnate expression of the union of souls. Of course this is not the way we put it nowadays, but the premium we place on sincerity and authenticity in intimate relationships is precisely indicative of our continued longing for ‘true’ communication. Surveys, whether in popular magazines or sociological texts, show that ‘good communication’ is perhaps the most desired quality in modern relationships. There must be no secrets or locked doors between intimates. Each should be fully, genuinely and sincerely open to the other; truth as mutual self revelation.

This is the first great variation on the theme of love and communication that runs through the book. The alternative that Peters, in many ways, prefers is non-reciprocal (or one-way) communication. While in some respects Peters’ historiography is fairly orthodox—he examines two historical moments in the last century (the 1920s and 1940s) as key moments in which ‘new’ takes on communication theory were worked out—in other respects it is not. There are moments in the past, he argues, that have an elective affinity with the present. The trick is to spot them and their expressive representatives. The first chapter identifies two great variations on the theme of love and communication—dialogue and dissemination—with which the rest of the book will be concerned. Each is a principle and a practice and their exponent practitioners were Socrates and Jesus. It is part of the book’s genius to treat them both as if they were part of our today; not ghostly voices from the dead past but present and relevant to our concerns. We hear them afresh because that is how Peters hears them. I have suggested elsewhere that we read with our ears. Neither Socrates nor Jesus committed themselves to writing. Our versions of them both are dependent on their followers or disciples: Plato on the one hand, the four gospel writers on the other. What each thought, said and did, and the differences between them, may serve as ‘a deep

horizon' (34) against which to view our contemporary dilemmas in a new light. This is the book's radical historiography. The dead whom it resurrects contribute to a highly original reconfiguration of philosophy, politics and religion. The dialectic of the written and the spoken, the letter and the spirit, the living and the dead, *logos* and the word made flesh—these fundamental issues remain at the heart of contemporary concern with the *problem* of communication.

We tend, today, to think of dialogue as genuine (real, true) communication because we think it offers, in principle, the possibility of coming to true and mutual understanding. Habermas's hugely influential theory of communicative rationality rests firmly on normative assumptions that he shares with Socrates; the ideal of a co-operative, critical inquiry oriented towards coming to the best and truest understanding on matters of common concern through conversational question and answer. Socratic dialogue and the Habermasian ideal speech situation are variations on a common theme. Each is underpinned by a faith in relations of presence. When we meet face to face we attentively see and hear each other. We encounter each other in a two-way, I-Thou, inter-action. Presence is the basis and guarantee of witnessing. The English suffix 'ness' substantiates a state of being: gladness (sadness, madness and so on) is the essence of *being* glad. The ontology of witnessing is knowing-ness (OE *witan*: to know), being (in a position) to know. Presence guarantees knowledge and truth. This is what privileges face-to-face communication. A dominant mid-20th century definition of communication was in terms of 'knowledge transfer'; getting 'a message' across without interference, loss or distortion. Hi-Fi was, for the 1950s, what DAB is for us today; the dream of perfect transmission in which the technology preserves the auditory quality of the original source and nothing is lost.

Presence and absence; direct and indirect communication—these are central themes of the *Phaedrus* in which Plato (who wrote it) imagines the older Socrates in conversation with the younger Phaedrus outside the walls of Athens. It's a conversation about speech and writing, love, friendship and philosophy. It culminates in the famous critique of writing which spells out the themes of *Speaking into the Air*. Socrates does not like writing because you can't ask it questions, and for Socrates asking questions was his discourse and his method. Moreover, once something gets written down it loses all sense of propriety, 'reaching indiscriminately those with understanding no less than those who have no business with it, and it doesn't know to whom it should speak and to whom it should not' (quoted in Peters 1999, 47). In sum:

Socrates provides a checklist of enduring anxieties that arise in response to transformation in the means of communication. Writing parodies live presence; it is inhuman, lacks interiority, destroys authentic dialogue, is impersonal and cannot acknowledge the individuality of its interlocutors;

and it is promiscuous in distribution. Such things have been said about printing, photography, phonography, cinema, radio, television and computers. The great virtue of the *Phaedrus* is to spell out the normative basis of the critique of media in remarkable clarity and, even more, to make us rethink what we mean by *media*. Communication must be soul-to-soul, among embodied live people, in an intimate interaction that is uniquely fit for each participant (Peters 1999, 47).

Then as now love is normatively thought as that which is between two people, alive and present to each other. What passes between them (love as communication: communication as love) is a joining of bodies and a union of souls. Conversation as the art of (mutual) seduction is the prelude to the former. Conversation as philosophy is a prelude to the latter—a marriage of minds. The ideal human relationship is the fusion of both.

The discourse of Jesus and his method stand in sharp contrast with Socrates. Both are exemplified in the parable of The Sower; a story with a message told to a large crowd on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Instead of Socratic one to one, two-way communication we have one-way communication between a single speaker and an anonymous mass of listeners. The story of the sower makes explicit the significance of communication as mass dissemination or *broadcasting*. Before radio gave the word its current meaning to broadcast was an agricultural term for the scattering of seeds abroad. The sower in the parable scatters his seed indiscriminately. Some, as Jesus tells it, fell on stony ground and was pecked up by the birds of the air. Some fell among thorns and was choked as soon as it sprang up. Some fell on shallow soil, grew quickly but soon withered and died. And some fell on fertile ground and yielded a good harvest; thirty fold, sixty fold, a hundredfold. It is, of course a parable about parables—Jesus's own account of his way of spreading the Word.

Socrates, Peters tells us, argued for insemination as more virtuous than dissemination. Insemination is to implant the seed in another where it will bear fruit. Dissemination is like the sin of Onan who spilled his seed upon the ground. It is a wasteful scatter for there is no guarantee that the seed will, in due course, bear fruit. Put like this, Christ's method of communication is scandalously inefficient. But that, Peters stunningly argues, is its disinterested kindness and generosity. The parable of the sower makes manifest, in its form as much as its message, that the love of God (*agape*) is indiscriminately available for all, not just the few that are open and receptive to the Word. Broadcasting is a fundamentally democratic form of communication. But more than this, and crucially, it is like the love of God in that it is non-reciprocal. It gives without any expectation of a

return. It neither expects nor requires acknowledgement and thanks. The love of God is one-way and unconditional and for anyone and everyone anywhere anytime. It *cannot* be reciprocated. Something like this is the blessing of broadcast communication and its indiscriminate scatter.

Peters, then, offers two paradigms of love and communication; one a dialogue of intimacy and reciprocity, the other of indiscriminate mass dissemination. It is a contrast between personal and impersonal, individual and social, present and absent, embodied and disembodied relationships. Today we mostly, naturally, take the intimate paradigm as normative and the impersonal paradigm as swerving from that mark. Peters makes clear that in his view, the quest for the union of souls is the pursuit of a communicative Snark and much of the book is taken up with accounts of quaint human attempts at making contact with the spirits, the dead, the animal kingdom and the cosmos beyond the world in which we dwell. Much of this is fascinating and illuminating. Occasionally it begins to feel like a Victorian cabinet of curiosities. Now and then it is downright odd. What *is* it about dolphins? Am I missing something? But it all goes to show and substantiate a basic premise of the book: in the age of communication we have all sorts of anxieties about it. Communication is, Peters frequently asserts, a problem, a trouble for us. Break-down seems to be the norm.

What then is the obverse of this? What is good, untroubled communication? How should we recognize it, and how does it work? Here Peters is less clear. Partly he argues for bodily rather than spiritual union: a squeeze of the hand (the title of the concluding chapter) is a better way than words of keeping in touch with each other. 'The other, not the self, should be the center of whatever "communication" might mean' (1999, 264):

To treat others as we would want to be treated means performing for them in such a way not that the self is authentically represented but that the other is caringly served. This kind of connection beats anything the angels might offer. Joy is found not in the surpassing of touch but in its fullness. (1999, 268-9)

But we still seem stuck in some kind of I-Thou, self-and-other, do-as-you-would-be-done-by relationship. We have not escaped the self (though it has become less selfish and more saintly) and demands of reciprocity. To emphasise the other simply inverts but does not transcend the problem. The Other seems mostly to be thought as a proximal and always particular someone. Relations of presence or, more generally, the life-world (not a term that Peters uses) remain privileged. In the end what is not followed through are the issues raised by the parable of the sower.

‘Speaking into the air’, the book’s title, heads the discussion of radio (206-225). It’s from a passage in Paul’s letter to the Christian community at Corinth in which he advises them to be cautious in their practice of glossolalia (speaking with tongues):

So likewise ye, except ye utter by the tongue words easy to be understood, how shall it be known what is spoken? for ye shall speak into the air. There are, it may be, so many kinds of voices in the world, and none of them is without signification (1 Cor. 14:9-10, King James Version)

Is broadcasting a glossolalia, a confused babble of voices? Was Christ speaking into the air when he addressed the crowd? Was anyone listening? Does broadcasting actually *work* and, if so, how? Peters’ discussion of radio never quite gets to grips with these questions. It is written exclusively in terms of American radio in its formative years and serves to remind those of us on this side of the Atlantic of the distance between us. In Britain the public service model of broadcasting was understood, from its beginning, in terms of Christ’s parable. Broadcasting House, the home of the BBC from 1932, has a famous sculpture over the entrance of Prospero and Ariel. Inside, in the foyer, there is another less well known carving by the same Catholic sculptor, Eric Gill, of The Sower. The key feature of the British model from the start, its core commitment, was to the universal dissemination of its radio service as an inclusive public good. Public service has been, and remains to this day, the dominant and still valued form whereby truly *broadcast* services are delivered in Britain and other Northern European countries. Nor does it exist in isolation from other public services—health and education. The continuing political will of electorates to support such services, in spite of the neo-Conservative challenge of the 1980s, indicates the direction taken by Britain and other northern European countries since the 2nd World War as one that favours *social* democracy. The USA of course has favoured a different version of democracy; one that is strongly libertarian, that favours individual endeavour, that rejects central government and is suspicious of any notion of the public good. The wholly marginal position of public service broadcasting in the USA (an audience share of 2% and largely dependent on voluntary donations) is indicative of this.

Broadcasting, as the parable makes quite clear, is inefficient communication. It is scandalously uneconomic and, indeed, from the start more efficient methods of distribution have been sought, by those who regard radio and television as a business like any other, that target only paying ‘consumers’: pay-per-channel, ideally pay-per-view, *narrowcasting*, in short. The political demand, in the UK today, to justify public services in economic terms is, while understandable (value

for tax-payers' money must be demonstrated), in the end paradoxical. The reasons and justifications for public services are, ultimately, ethical; they are concerned with what we think a good society should be like. They are underpinned by a commitment to common goods. Economic rationality is normatively thought in terms of individual goods—profit is private, and rational choice theory presupposes self-interest as its start and end point. It may help to rationalise the delivery of common goods, preventing waste and corruption, but it can never justify them. Americans are cynical about their radio and television services because they see them simply as businesses and, therefore exploitative. They're in it for the money. Their job is selling audiences to advertisers. They are intrinsically manipulative. From such a perspective it's hard to take seriously the actual services provided. You'd better not believe what you see and hear from 'the media industries, whose economic well-being depends on convincing audiences to trust the sincerity of distant testimonials' (Peters 1999, 224).

Americans, de Tocqueville observed, treat their media as kings do their courtiers—they enrich and despise them. For Peters the question is, 'Can you take part without being there in the flesh? Can an audience be said to participate in a remote event?'—obviously not, if you don't trust the media who provide access to such occasions. Maybe this is why Peters insists on 'the bodily context of all communication', but this is an argument that deserves to be challenged. What warrants the privileging of the body and haptic communication? Touch is as potentially fraught as everything else. 'To be in touch' may be desirable, but 'touchy' folk are hard to live with. Every family should have a good hugger according to the late Princess of Wales, but I would be worried if I was embraced by, say, that well-known family hugger, Tony Soprano. Judas betrayed Jesus with a kiss. The emphasis throughout the book on the erotics of communication confirms its normative preference for touchy twosomes. Sex between two is a good thing, but mass sex is nowhere advocated: those anonymous, impersonal, multiple and public couplings that take place in orgies or love-ins as they were quaintly called in those far-off hippy times of *Hair* and the dawning of the Age of Aquarius. Peters is of course right to insist on the holiness of the body and incarnate human love between two people. He does not offer us though a thought out vision of the love of God which, in the parable, is transcendent, impersonal, non-reciprocal and universal. And yet, I think, in strictly non-theological terms one *has* to argue for this as the transcendent character of the ordinary, everyday human world in which we live today and, indeed, of humanity itself.

An alternative starting point for thinking about communication, then, which I prefer, is not the individual, nor 'language', nor self and other, but the world. I have always been struck, ever since I started work on it, by the essential *worldliness* of broadcasting. That is why I was so bowled over by Heidegger's stunning analysis of the *umwelt*, the round-about-me everyday world in which 'I', in each

case, dwell. We encounter the world and all its everyday things as *zūhanden*, as ‘ready-to-hand’ or, simply, handy—a pragmatics, not an erotics, of touch. From reading *Being and Time* I at last came to understand the world as interactively communicative in all its parts and as a whole; the world ‘as a relational totality of involvements’. Everyday things are indeed *pragmata* but we should pause to consider exactly how it is that they are so and not otherwise, and it is part of Heidegger’s extraordinary genius to remind us of this. The world and everything in it are not for the few, the initiates, the clever ones, but anyone and everyone. Grice thought that the logic which, he argued, underpins the communicative structure of talk also underpins all kinds of non-linguistic human actions and interactions. He did not develop this claim, but I want to suggest that his analysis of ordinary language points in the same direction as Heidegger’s analysis of the ordinary world; namely that in its parts and as a whole they both (the world and language) have as the necessary precondition of their *availability* (their intelligibility and usability to all practical intents and purposes) an immanent communicative logic that anyone can understand and accordingly interact with and put to good use. It is our task, as I see it, to explicate this communicative logic; to show in detail how it is so, how it (the world and language) works in this way. Reading Peters makes me want to add one more thing. I now see the communicative infrastructure of the world has having the same characteristics that are indicated by the parable of the sower. It is impersonal. It is available to anyone. It demands no return. And this is as indicative of worldly as of divine love—*amor mundi*, the world’s care-for-itself—and our transcendent human, *historical* essence.

When I was child I was taught that the three great virtues are faith, hope and charity. I was touched, this summer, to see them represented as angels hovering above the good and wise ruler in the marvellous allegorical fresco of *Good and Bad Government* by Ambrogio Lorenzetti in one of the great rooms of the Palazzo Pubblico that towers over the beautiful shell-shaped campo at the heart of the Tuscan city of Siena. I found myself reflecting how well they understood, in 13th and 14th century Italy, the relationship between religion and politics expressed, in so many ways, in the art and architecture of the place. The town’s great religious building, its Duomo, is in its own and separate space from the campo and palazzo. It is said that the towers of the cathedral and the palace were planned to be exactly the same height so that neither should be seen to dominate the other. We have long since lost that equitable poise between secular and sacred existence which the Commune of Siena and many other Italian towns and cities achieved centuries ago, and we are the poorer for it.

The thinking of John Durham Peters has a rare quality today: it is naturally and essentially religious. It informs the ways in which he thinks about society, politics

and communication. It is redemptive thinking that gives us back the possibility of recognising something we no longer understand about ourselves. How can we speak today, for instance, of love and communication in any public, political, worldly sense? But Peters does and I am thereby encouraged to think that faith, hope and charity continue to underpin the communicative structures of today's world and our everyday existence in it. Public service broadcasting, for instance, *is* an ethical communicative practice that is underpinned by what were once thought of as the three great theological virtues. Faith, hope and charity all presuppose each other. To act in good faith presupposes hope in a good outcome. The former underpins our present actions while the latter expresses what we wish for as their future prospects. Charity, or love, is the mediating agency, the grace (the holy spirit) that is between faith and hope. It is their condition and guarantee, the unity of their practice and desire. That love, like the love of God, is immanent in all those anonymous worldly institutions, artefacts and practices that *give* without any expectation or demand of a return. Much of the everyday world is like this, although we seldom see it as such. Mass mediated distant communication is greater than immediate communication between present twosomes. Non-reciprocal love surpasses reciprocal love. It is more blessed to give than to receive. I have thought about these things since reading *Speaking into the Air* and have more to say on them; but that would take me beyond the scope of these reflections on the wonderful book that John Durham Peters has given us.