

Individualistic vs Common Good Ethics in the World of Interconnection

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A little over 10 years ago, Apple's introduction of the iPhone disrupted communication patterns across the world. Building on earlier technologies, the iPhone brought together computing power, telephony, and network services into one easily used handheld device. It also brought home to many the world of interconnection. This communication tool—seemingly overnight—changed how people did almost everything: they texted rather than talked; they received updates rather than read the newspaper; they watched videos from sources like YouTube rather than watched television; they streamed music rather than purchased CDs; they followed status updates and posts from “friends” on social networks; they used apps rather than maps for travel. This list could go on but it gives a brief look at how the smartphone, with its seemingly endless capacity for apps became a universal tool based on network connectivity. Any one of us can now connect with pretty much any part of the world through a multitude of communication channels.

One metaphor that communication studies uses to make sense of something like the smartphone is that of an ecosystem, an ecology. Just like the proverbial ecology of an isolated pond in the forest whose established stability or balance the introduction of a foreign species disrupts, our communication or social world's balance or stability faces disruption when we introduce something new—whether a technology, a practice, or a set of ideas. Sometimes that change occurs slowly and sometimes rapidly, triggered by something like the smartphone.

The ecology model of communication helps people analyze either particular moments of communication change or broad change over time. The model also points out the extraordinary complexity of our communication interaction. Communication environments are much more than a few media or media companies, much more than the affordances new tools open before us. Communication ecologies include ideas and ways of thinking that extend beyond communication. A look around indicates hundreds of communication elements (both visible and invisible, from architectural and art choices to wireless bandwidth to languages) balanced to allow us to communicate with each other. And all of these are interconnected.

That kind of interconnectivity is not new; it simply describes how people relate to one another. What is new for us is its scope or scale. For most of human history, people had similar connections only with those in closest proximity, a situation that began to change when writing allowed communication across space and through time. Writing leads to greater interconnectivity; the mass or automated writing of the printing press expanded the scale and speed of communication and dramatically changed things only in one key regard—the desire to read privately. Other quasi-communication technologies like ocean-going sailing ships expanded the reach of networks of trade and interaction. Electronic communication brought the language of networks (telegraph networks, telephone networks, radio networks, television networks) along with it—and this expanded the scale of communication by expanding its speed. And the Internet began the task of putting them all together.

The technical tools, though, describe only one part of the ecology of communication. The communication system brought changes in thinking, new ways of seeing, new ways of hearing, and new understandings of human interconnection. We understand ourselves differently when we imagine ourselves alone or as members of a family or as members of a nation-state or as

members of a church or as members of a global world. We also understand our obligations to one another differently. And, most of the time, we take this imaging for granted, letting the tools we use shape us.

Both economic rationality and ethics exist in this larger ecology of human interconnection.

Based on the media ecology, my sense is that the common good tradition and the individualism more recently seen in the West along with individualist ethics and ideas of economic and other rationality all have links to communication practices, to the interconnection that people experience. In other words, all respond to different degrees of interconnection.

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Interconnection is not new. It reflects something deeply human, a connection that goes back to the very beginnings of human community. We find similar connections to our technologically mediated ones among people—though on a much smaller scale—in family units, village units, and even in early city states. Much of the common good ethics tradition arises out of these kinds of connection, of people’s working together for a very visible united commonality. My somewhat naive sense is that common good characterized smaller groups since the very survival of the smaller groups depended on the common good.

But the scale of connection has changed, going through periods of different ways of thinking about how humans should act, from the default common good of the small group to the much more elaborated codes of ethics in our interconnected world.

Catholic social teaching, though articulated only in the last 150 years, reflects an older view of human being. In fact the Scriptures themselves provide one source for such a view, for

example, in the image that St. Paul proposes of the body of Christ. “You know that your bodies are parts of the body of Christ,” he writes in 1 Corinthians 6:15. And all the parts of the body act together for the good of all. St Paul continues in 12:4, “I want you to think about how all this makes you more significant, not less. A body isn’t just a single part blown up into something huge. It’s all the different-but-similar parts arranged and functioning together.” Christians are to think of themselves as one body and thus act for the good of that body, with the action of one individual affecting all the others. The various characteristics of Catholic social teaching, which we have just heard, seem to build on this.

As a reminder, the characteristics of Catholic social teaching include the principle of human dignity, the principle of the common good, the principle of solidarity, the principle of subsidiarity, the guideline of the preferential option for the poor, and the guideline of integral ecology and sustainable development. Various Vatican documents addressing communication ethics draw on the same tradition and include some additional principles. The document, *Ethics in Communication* (2000), notes that “solidarity, subsidiarity, justice and equity, and accountability in the use of public resources and the performance of roles of public trust are always applicable. Communication must always be truthful, since truth is essential to individual liberty and to authentic community among persons.” The document goes on to spell out a more comprehensive view:

Ethics in social communication is concerned not just with what appears on cinema and television screens, on radio broadcasts, on the printed page and the Internet, but with a great deal else besides. The ethical dimension relates not just to the content of communication (the message) and the process of communication (how the communicating is done) but to fundamental structural and systemic issues, often involving large questions of policy bearing upon the distribution of sophisticated technology and product (who shall be information rich and who shall be information poor?). These questions point to other questions with economic and political implications for ownership and control. At least in open societies with market economies, the largest

ethical question of all may be how to balance profit against service to the public interest understood according to an inclusive conception of the common good. (no. 20)

Finally, *Ethics in Communication* summarizes its principles by combining the appeal to the common good with an appeal to the personalist philosophical tradition as spelled out by Pope St. John Paul II. “In all three areas—message, process, structural and systemic issues—the fundamental ethical principle is this: The human person and the human community are the end and measure of the use of the media of social communication; communication should be by persons to persons for the integral development of persons” (no. 21).

Each of the principles of Catholic social teaching and the applied communication ethics drawn from it reflects an ethics that makes almost intuitive sense when we see it in smaller units. We readily recognize the dignity of our family members and act in solidarity with them. We acknowledge the demands that a neighbor has upon us when we see the person immediately in front of us.

The main traditions of common good ethics show a similar rootedness in other systems that begin in human relationships. For example, the emphasis on family values arising out of Confucianism provides an intercultural model of common good ethics. Each of the key relations in Confucianism (parent and child; husband and wife; siblings; friends; ruler and subject) point to the common good. Similarly, contemporary feminist ethics often starts with personal relationships such as we find in nurture and care for one another and the interdependence shown in relationships (Gilligan, 2008). Even the tradition of Aristotelian ethics that we now know as virtue ethics reflects a loyalty to the city state, in the development of virtues which best serve that state (Vallor, 2016).

The individualistic approach to ethics arises out of different circumstances. Largely the

product of Enlightenment thinkers like those of the Scottish School, Immanuel Kant, and later, John Stuart Mill, individualistic ethics asks how a particular person should behave. Rather than beginning with the group, this approach begins with the individual, stressing individual independence and liberty—freedom from interference of the state, society, or other institutions. The calculus of these ethical systems looks to particular goals—the greatest good for the greatest number, the categorical imperative, the principle of duty, and so on, things that an individual can consciously choose. “Ethical Individualism, then, is the position that individual conscience or reason is the only moral rule, and there is no objective authority or standard which it is bound to take into account” (Mastin, 2008).

The various kinds of individualistic ethics begin with the single individual, envisaged as a kind of solitary actor, uninfluenced by external forces. This “individual” is a construct, existing abstracted from others. Society consists of the collection of these individuals, each making a rational choice to act in such a way as to fulfill personal duty, treat others as one would wish to be treated, or determine the greatest good for the greatest number. While each of these individualistic ethics traditions attends to interaction, the systems they propose begin not with the “ecosystem” but with the actor.

Individualist ethics serves as a guide for people who understand themselves as individual actors. The ecology, if you will, of such individual ethics arises from the greater sense of the individual which we see emerging in the West with Descartes and with the 18th century Enlightenment thinkers. Those who follow the media ecology approach to communication study argue that the development of Enlightenment thought reflects the mix of communication patterns that came to dominate before the Enlightenment, particularly the idea of individual reflection fostered by private reading. The printing press shifted learning, teaching, and expression to a

more privatized experience (Eisenstein, 1979, pp. 129ff). One needed not listen to lectures or debate in public places, but one could sit quietly with a book and imagine oneself apart from a community, as an individual actor, whose rights the various groups—state, church, institution—must respect. Thinkers began with the individual because they experienced themselves and saw themselves as solitary thinkers and actors—a very different situation from just a generation earlier in John Donne’s 1623 poem, “No Man Is an Island.” Individualist ethics arises out of that developing sense of person.

The ethics reflected in Catholic social teaching comes out of a different understanding of the ecosystem, one shaped by a kind of return to the earlier understanding of society. This mirrors the change in the communication world as it became more closely linked by the various electronic media, a phenomenon identified years ago by thinkers like Marshall McLuhan as “shrinking” the world to a village (1962). In an environment like our present one which focuses largely on the individual and on harms from seeking individual ends, the Church speaks up in protection of the larger collective. This, of course, reflects the Church’s basic self-understanding as the Body of Christ. In taking this perspective, the Church balances the rights and supremacy of the individual conscience and the demands of the whole body. In this sense, both individualistic and common good ethics constitute valid ethical approaches, but begin from different understandings of the self and its relation to the whole.

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Economic theory and economic rationality also develop from Enlightenment ideas, with the classical economic thinkers of the 18th and 19th centuries. Asking how we can best understand human life and human economic activity in the face of larger systems like nation-states, these thinkers sought various approaches to liberty in trade, business, manufacturing, or

organization through proposals that sought to maximize the good of the whole through individual choices.

The rational economic actor makes choices in such a way that the combination of each individual's choices or actions together leads to a maximized growth for the good of the whole. Professor Enderle's paper points out that this does not always result, as he notes conflicting anthropological and methodological assumptions and even conflicting purposes of the economic system. He suggests a benchmark against which to assess the various purposes: "The purpose of the economic system is the creation of wealth as the total amount of economically relevant private and public assets including natural, economic, human, and social capital" (p. 15). Such a benchmark allows us to attempt to adjudicate conflicting business models; by identifying both private and public assets, the benchmark also points to the origins where individualistic ethics diverges from common good ethics.

Later Catholic social teaching, at least as employed in *Ethics in Communication*, attempts to reconcile the two by combining the common good philosophy with the personalist philosophy of John Paul II. These are the same issues that the communication technologies of interconnection and privacy raise. Some communication technologies simultaneously create both connection and distance, as demonstrated by print. These focus on the individual: the author, the solitary reader. Others, such as the telephone, radio, and the Internet's social media, highlight connections in real time, creating a sense of community where the group or the social move to the center of attention. This level of connection demands a new understanding of the person, whose individual liberty reaches fulfillment only in solidarity.

The world of radical communication interconnection asks us to think about what it is to be human in a way different from individualism and common good. Communication

interconnection bridges the two. The world of such social media asks us to imagine ourselves as individuals who exist as a part of a larger whole. We still find that imagining difficult as our interconnections can highlight our differences as well as our similarities. The economic system that Professor Enderle describes also asks us to imagine something greater than the individual decisions of the rational actor where economic actions are simultaneously private and public.

Perhaps another, different, communication example can provide an image of this combination of public and private, of common good and individual, of individual action with a common resource: language. Language belongs to us all but only has expression individually.

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