Prologue

Transmission and/or Understanding? On the ‘Postal’ and ‘Erotic’ Principles of Communication

Two Preliminaries and a Problem
How can the meaning of media be thought about in such a way that we acquire an understanding of our relationship to both the world and ourselves? How can a concept of the medium be developed that encompasses our experiences using media? How can we determine what media ‘are’ in a way that embraces both generally accepted (voice, writing) and newer forms of media (computer, Internet)? How can media be conceptualized in a way that enables not only a reformulation of traditional philosophical questions but also a new conception of philosophy? Assuming first of all that one media concept could actually address all of these various questions, wouldn’t this concept remain so abstract and general (in a bad sense), wouldn’t it turn out so bare and tenuous, that it would say nothing and therefore not provide any answer at all?

As in most cases, it depends on the attempt. And in order to let the cat out of the bag immediately let me state that this attempt will address the question ‘What is a medium?’ in the context of the idea of the errand. The messenger thus represents a primal scene of media transmission. You could even say that the messenger represents the force behind these reflections on media, and my claim is that this relationship – measured against the present state of the debate over media – provides a new perspective on the phenomenon and concept of media.

Isn’t this a strange or downright outlandish effort? The messenger appears to be a relic of an epoch when the technical support of long-distance communication was not available, and it became obsolete with the development of the postal service or at the very least with the invention of the radio, the telegraph, and the telephone – not to mention the computer. What could the archaic institution of the messenger offer to modern media theory, whose reflections and explanations must address more advanced media? This provocative impression, which is often evoked by references to the messenger, is further reinforced by two associated preliminaries and an intruding problem:

(i) First Preliminary: ‘There is always an outside of media.’ Messengers are heteronomous. The messenger perspective thus challenges attempts to conventionalize media as autonomous sovereign agents or the solitary
causes of cultural-historical dynamics, and it contradicts the conception of media as a foundational a priori in the sense of a ‘medial turn’.

(ii) Second Preliminary: ‘The bulk of our communication is not dialogical.’ Messengers are necessary when there is no unmediated interaction between sender and receiver; in other words, when communication lacks reciprocity and is precisely not a dialogue. The errand is – to start with – a unidirectional, asymmetrical situation. In the messenger perspective, therefore, reflecting on media means at the same time challenging to a certain extent the fundamental dialogical orientation of the philosophical concept of communication.

(iii) The Problem: ‘Can transmission be creative?’ Messengers transmit what is given to them. They are supposed to pass their messages along across space and time with the least distortion possible, and they should by no means change them. How then can our understanding of the phenomenon of transmission ever take into account the creative impulse, which is commonly associated with communication? Yet even computer-mediated communication is not a matter of data transmission but rather data processing, and it thus concerns not the conservation of order but rather its transformation. The rehabilitation of transmission will therefore only be compelling when it incorporates the innovative dimension of transmission and reconstructs the creativity of mediation.

It is therefore no small task to explain and substantiate a media theory of the messenger. This perspective forces us to question previously trusted philosophical assumptions, and it once again problematizes what now seems natural or self-evident.

To reflect on media philosophically therefore does not mean seeing media as more or less a seamless continuation of a philosophical tradition. In order to understand how our reflections on media require a willingness to question our own self-evident and trusted assumptions and thereby see them in a new light, I will now provide an introductory sketch using the example of ‘communication’.

The Postal and Erotic Concepts of Communication
Hardly any other word has experienced such a rhizome-like diffusion in our everyday language and our disciplinary vocabularies as the word ‘communication’. Communication even functions as a central perspectival vanishing point in our conceptual image of ourselves at the end of the twentieth century: practically everything that affects our civilized self-understanding can somehow be structured and described with the help of this word. There is ‘communicative action’, which complements the goal-directed utilitarian
considerations of instrumental action that constitute an ethos oriented towards self-understanding; there is the description – sometimes even conceptualized as a priori – of language as a medium of communication, which reduces perception, experience, and recognition to the structures of linguisticity; there is the labelling of problems as ‘communication problems’, the difficulties of which are neutralized and casually associated with the promise of feasibility; there is ‘man-machine communication’, which signals that the scope and limits of information technologies constitute a key phenomenon of contemporary civilization and which moreover shows that communication is not limited to the interpersonal realm; there is the vision of a globalization that conceptualizes communication as a world-spanning network; and finally we should not forget the laconic assertion that one cannot not communicate.

It would be easy to continue this list. Considering the ubiquity of the word ‘communication’ and the range of its possible uses, it is no surprise that critics are increasingly critical of this concept. Botho Strauß dismisses the word ‘communicate’ as the ‘non-word of the age’ and characterizes it as a ‘garbage disposal word’. Uwe Pörksen remains somewhat more objective in his description of ‘communication’ as an ‘amoeba-word’ (or also ‘plastic word’): it conceals its metaphorical character, enters the everyday after passing through the mathematized sciences and is then used both unhistorically and imprecisely as the minimal code of industrial society: ‘Communication’ is deployed like a ‘Lego brick’, which is arbitrarily combinable and practically envelops our entire living space in its word net.

Nevertheless, the imprecision that Pörksen attributes to the word ‘communication’ conceals an obvious tension and divide that is characteristic of the contemporary usage of the word ‘communication’: in the present discourse the word leads a conceptual double life. It appears in two mutually opposed contexts, which I will refer to as the ‘technical transmission model’ and the ‘personal understanding model’ of communication. The technical transmission model is elaborated in the communication theory developed by Shannon and Weaver, who studied the technization of information flows, from information transmission to data processing. The output problem in the technical transmission model consists of the spatial and temporal distance between the sender and the receiver. Both the sender and the receiver are considered instances, which could be human beings or objective nature, that form the beginning and end points of a linear chain that consists of essential interlinks either in the form of a medium (a channel) or an external disturbance. What happens along this chain is the relaying of signals or data; in other words, the transmission of uninterpreted entities.
The process of data transmission is thus physically specifiable and mathematically operationalizable. The transmission is considered successful when something material is transported from one side (the sender) to the other side (the receiver); there is no such thing as immaterial signals. The basic problem of communication thus consists in keeping signal structures stable in the face of the erosion of this order through external disturbances. The technical connection is successful, in other words, when it keeps the ‘disruptive third’ away from the transmission event that occurs between the sender and the receiver.

The approach of the personal understanding model, whose design is embodied in Jürgen Habermas’s communication theory, is entirely different. Here communication is considered an interaction between people, which is dependent on mutual understanding with the help of symbols that convey meaning – preferably a language. Communication thus becomes an expression of human being-in-the-world. The output problem consists in the heterogeneity of people and thus in the question of how intersubjectivity is possible at all under the conditions of individuality. Communication thus represents the basic process that enables coordinated action, which results in the formation of community. It is conceived as a reciprocal process of social interaction. Intersubjectivity is made possible through dialogue, which is presented as the primal scene and established norm of communication, and the goal of dialogue is understanding. Unlike the technical approach, the performance of communication consists not only in establishing a connection across distance, but also in fostering agreement and creating a unified society whose goal is precisely to overcome distance and difference. When dialogical communication is successful, those who communicate with one another in a sense become ‘one’; if the goal of understanding has been achieved, then it is as if they are speaking with one voice.

While communication-as-understanding is conceived as a symmetrical and reciprocal process, communication-as-transmission is conceived as asymmetrical and unidirectional. Transmission is precisely not dialogical: the goal of technical communication is emission or dissemination, not dialogue. We can thus clearly distinguish between the personal principle of understanding and the postal principle of transmission.

The postal principle presents communication as the production of connections between spatially distant physical instances. On the other hand, the dialogical principle presents communication as the synchronization and standardization of formerly divergent conditions among individuals. We could thus say that there is a latent erotic dimension to the telos of this personal perspective (i.e. the merging of people who were separated from
one another). In order to emphasize the differences between these two notions of communication in an intentionally ironic way, we could even refer to them as the ‘postal’ and ‘erotic’ concepts of communication.

Both of these concepts presume a distance that can also be described as a qualitative difference: difference constitutes one – if not the – universal precondition of communication. According to the postal principle this difference lies between the sender and the receiver, and it is generated through the spatial and temporal distance between them. According to the erotic principle it is the difference between individuals with their heterogeneous and initially impenetrable inner worlds. In each of these cases, however, communication provides an answer to the problem of how to bridge distances. These concepts thus represent different strategies for dealing with distance and difference. The technical concept of communication bridges distance without annihilating it; indeed, it is precisely through and in the successful transmission that the sense of being distant from one another is stabilized and reinforced. The goal of the personal concept of communication, on the other hand, is to overcome and abolish distance and mutual inaccessibility. It thus presumes the existence of difference without endorsing or stabilizing it; instead, it attempts to transform the different into the identical, which is actually divided among the participants and becomes something ‘communal’.

When we ask which role media are assigned to play in each of these different approaches, there will obviously be various answers. For the transmission model, media are indispensable; they occupy the position between the sender and the receiver, and without them it would not be possible at all for the sender to ‘post’ something that would reach the receiver. The medium neither annihilates the distance between the sender and the receiver nor enables any unmediated ‘contact’ between them; rather, it establishes a connection despite and in the distance that separates them. For the understanding model, on the other hand, media are peripheral and negligible vehicles that provide undistorted and unmediated access to something that they themselves are not, much like transparent window panes. Because the dialogical relationship results in the annihilation of distance and the direct experience of reciprocal understanding, which happens precisely when two individuals in their own inner worlds agree and ‘merge’, there is no more space for a mediator or a medium.

Just as media are seen as indispensable for the postal aspect of communication because they make mediation itself possible, they are also seen as detrimental to the immediacy of the dialogical. While transmission media are designed to minimize disturbances, media themselves cause
disturbances in dialogical situations. The elusiveness of the voice thus
meets the ephemeral status of communication media; and conversely: the
more the materiality of the medium is shown to be technical, opaque, and
compact, the more the notion of communication understood as dialogue
(which is then still possible) appears distorted.

This description of the confrontation between the technical/postal and
the personal/erotic approaches to communication is obviously exaggerated.
Using names like Shannon and Habermas as a form of shorthand to invoke
these theoretical approaches also clearly lacks the reflexive subtlety that
would somehow do justice to the ingenuity and the potential compatibility
of these approaches. However, this was not the reason for sketching out
these radicalized positions for the purposes of a prologue. The opposing
models and meanings of communication that have been emphasized in
this outline are intended to show why the use of a messenger perspective
demands at the same time the surrendering of convictions and attitudes that
are commonly taken for granted. From the point of view of a philosophically
substantial concept of communication, there is no question that dialogue
and mutual understanding are more worthy of description and explanation
than the phenomenon of transmission and the one-sided sending of signals.
As a theoretical framework for the description and explanation of what
happens when people communicate with one another, the postal principle
of technical communication appears utterly inadequate. To express this in a
more exaggerated way, one might say that the letter carrier cannot possibly
provide a figure worthy of explanation for a philosophically sophisticated
theory of communication.

The concern of this book is not to elevate the status of the letter carrier,
but rather to rehabilitate the postal principle and thus the transmission
model of communication. In contrast to the privileging of dialogue as the
unalterable essence of communication and the privileging of reciprocity as
the primary structural principle and emancipatory norm of communica-
tion, the following reflections on mediality are inspired by the insight that
most community-building and culture-founding forms of communication
precisely do not follow the standards of dialogical communication. The
‘erotic’ communication in the speech act of confluent differentiality is
indeed one possibility, but interpreting it as the ideal or merely the general
form of communication constitutes a form of Romanticism.

From Communication to Perception?
And yet this is not a book about communication, as it debates the question
of ‘What is a medium?’ in terms of transmission processes. By introducing
the figure of the messenger as the primal scene of media, it indeed appears
that from the very beginning I have set a course for a communication-
centric mediation; the unidirectionality and asymmetry of the transmission
process, which culminates in the messenger figure, also raise the question
of whether media-theoretical mediations concern not the categories of
communication and understanding, but rather those of ‘making percep-
tible’ (Wahrnehmbarmachen) and ‘making appear’ (Erscheinenlassen).
Can the gimmick of the messenger perspective thus lie in a shift from
communication to perception? In this light, the non-dialogical – if this
can be conceived as an attribute of perception – to a certain extent loses
its potential for irritation. The conventional view being challenged here is
the categorical and categorial separation between ‘communication’ and
‘perception’, according to which the definitive foundation of sociality is
a communality made possible through communication, not perception.
Could a goal of this media reflection thus lie in problematizing not only
the philosophical preoccupation with understanding-oriented, reciprocal,
‘media-free’ communication, but also the marginalization of perception
that this preoccupation necessarily implies? Could the ‘rehabilitation of
the postal principle’ thus also rehabilitate the community-building and
culture-founding functions of perception and the ‘making perceptible’?

Questions upon questions. Before beginning to look for answers, however,
I will first reveal my method, which is inspired by a ‘metaphysical gesture’
that is in need of explanation.