

## THE ETHICAL SENSE OF “WORLD” 4 IN THE ERA OF GLOBAL COMMUNICATION

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For much of the history of Western ethical thought, “world” has named an ordered whole that orients human conduct by fixing the ethical sense of particular acts and of the contexts in which they occur. Examples of this range from Immanuel Kant’s intelligible world, postulated by pure practical reason and valid for all rational beings, to the more particular, concrete worlds of the university, medicine, baseball, etc. Making use of the philosophy of language advanced by the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, I will argue in this paper that we can understand these worlds and their normatively orienting forces as products of communication. But I would also like to argue that in our contemporary era of globalized communication, worlds lose much of their normatively orienting function. I will conclude, then, by looking to Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of language for resources to help us rethink the relation between world and ethical obligation.

### Communication and the Intersubjective World

I would like to begin by explaining the idea that worlds fix the ethical sense of particular acts. There is no clearer example of this idea in the history of philosophy, I believe, than Immanuel Kant’s categorical imperative, according to which one must “act as if the maxim of [one’s] action were to become through [one’s] will a **universal law of nature**” (Kant 1785: 4:421). That is to say, we are to imagine a moral world, analogous to the natural world, that is thoroughly determined by universal laws. In this imagined intelligible world, persons would act in accordance with moral laws as a matter of course, in just the same way that natural objects act in accordance with natural laws. For each act that we propose to undertake, we formulate the universal law under which it would fall. Finally, we determine whether a moral world with such a universal law is a possible world at all. If the moral world with that universal law would be an impossible world—that is, if it would entail a contradiction—then the act that falls under that law is morally impossible, i.e., contrary to duty. So, to borrow one of Kant’s own examples, I might find myself in financial difficulty and contemplate borrowing

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money from a friend, knowing fully well that I will not be able to pay it back. I orient myself from a normative point of view by asking myself whether the moral law that would determine such an act is a possible law of a moral world. The law governing the act of making a false promise, according to Kant, would be this: "If I believe myself to be in pecuniary distress, then I will borrow money and promise to pay it back, although I know this will never happen" (Kant 1785: 4:422). Such a law, imagined as a universal law of a moral world, would contradict itself, presupposing that there are such things as promises and at the same time undermining their possibility. (If promises were never kept, then promises would never be accepted, and this would effectively destroy the practice of making and accepting promises.) As we see, the question whether a particular act is morally permissible or not is answered with reference to whether or not it could have a place in world governed by universal moral laws.

To show how this normatively orienting world has its basis in the phenomenon of communication, I would like to begin with what Merleau-Ponty calls the tacit thesis of perception:

The tacit thesis of perception is that at every instant experience can be co-ordinated with that of the previous instant and that of the following, and my perspective with that of other consciousnesses—that all contradictions can be removed, that monadic and intersubjective experience is one unbroken text—that what is now indeterminate for me could become determinate for a more complete knowledge, which is as it were realized in advance in the thing, or rather which is the thing itself (Merleau-Ponty 1945: 54).

To perceive an object, in other words, is to perceive its place within a consistent, orderly whole of experience. This whole, which is not itself given but toward which perception tends, functions as the measure for the reality of the objects that are given in perception. The whole provides the measure for the reality of the individual objects that we perceive. If, for example, I perceive a sheet of water ahead of me on the road, but I no longer perceive it as I get closer, then I will judge the sheet of water to have been an optical illusion. It does not have a place in the coherent world that is given as a horizon in the act of perception.

We can recognize an analogous world-oriented movement in the process of communication. Just as we perceive an object as adumbrating the whole world in which it has its place and which functions as the measure of its reality, so we understand another's words as adumbrating a larger world of meaning in which they have their places and which functions as the measure of their sense. In developing this conception of communication, Merleau-Ponty borrows from Saussurian linguistics the central idea that "in language, there are only differences

without positive terms" (Saussure 1965: 171). It follows from Saussure's central insight, or at least from Merleau-Ponty's development of it, that communication cannot adequately be understood as a simple exchange of signs, where the addressor would translate her thought into signs and transmit them to the addressee, who would then translate the signs back into the thoughts they represented (Merleau-Ponty 1960: 42). That model of communication could only function if signs were, to use Saussure's formulation, "positive terms." A language, according to Merleau-Ponty, "is less a sum of signs (words, grammatical and syntactical forms) than a methodical means of differentiating signs from one another and thereby constructing a linguistic universe of which we later say—once it is precise enough to crystallize a significative intention and to have it reborn in another—that it expresses a world of thought" (Merleau-Ponty 1969: 31). To communicate, then, is to find oneself oriented toward a world of thought that is given at a distance, that emerges with, and does not pre-exist, the act of communication itself.

Merleau-Ponty provides as an example of this phenomenon the experience of reading a novel. In order to make himself understood, the novelist must make use of words whose meanings are relatively fixed and intersubjectively known. But on the other hand, if the novel were composed of nothing but stock expressions, then its words could never give us food for thought; they would function as "no more than monitors which notify the [reader] that he must consider such and such of his thoughts" (Merleau-Ponty 1960: 42). Obviously this is not what the experience of reading a novel is like. To read a novel is to enter into the world created by its author. "I have access to Stendhal's outlook through the commonplace words he uses. But in his hands, these words are given a new twist. The cross references multiply. More and more arrows point in the direction of a thought I have never encountered before and perhaps never would have met without Stendhal" (Merleau-Ponty 1969: 12). Stendhal meets me where I am, making use of a language that he and I share, and from there shows me the way to his world. But in coming to dwell in Stendhal's world, I do not leave my own world completely behind. I am by no means confronted with an all-or-nothing choice, accepting the invitation to Stendhal's world of meaning or remaining wholly in my own. Rather in reading the novel, the world of meaning that I bring with me to the encounter remains my own, but becomes bigger and more inclusive.

The same kind of thing happens in communication that goes both ways: the worlds of meaning that the interlocutors bring with them develop in the direction of a common world of meaning. Because signs are more than mere representatives of thoughts that would be wholly inside the mind, because they signify only through adumbrations, we as language users find ourselves open, whether we like it or not, to

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worlds of meaning that are not already our own. Because of this, we cannot help being practically oriented to common, intersubjective worlds. Of course in our concrete, lived experience we do not typically find ourselves oriented toward a world as common and as abstract as Kant's intelligible world, which would serve as a normative measure for all of us just insofar as we are rational beings. But we certainly do find ourselves practically oriented toward smaller-scale worlds, such as the world of professional philosophy or of U.S. politics, or even of wristwatch collectors or fans of a particular rock band. These worlds of meaning give the measure for the rightness and wrongness of particular acts that take place within them. Sometimes the wrong act is merely gauche, e.g., bragging to wristwatch enthusiasts that your \$20 Casio digital watch keeps more accurate time than another person's \$15,000 Jaeger LeCoultre Reverso. It is true that the Casio keeps better time, but to point that out misses what is essential to the meaning of a Reverso in that world. Sometimes, on the other hand, the wrong is offensive in a more explicitly moral sense, e.g., in cases of sexual harassment, where one takes the meaning of a fellow worker primarily as "potential sexual partner" and not as "co-worker." In both of these cases, as different as they are, we can recognize the same phenomenon of practical orientation: to understand the moral sense of particular acts is to refer them to their possible place within the world of meaning that provides the context for those acts.

#### **Communication as *Mondialisation***

What I would like to argue in what follows is that in the era of globalized communication, facilitated by advances in information technologies such as the Internet and the mass media as well as by increases in cross-border population mobility, worlds of established meaning lose some of their normatively orienting power. It is often suggested that the processes of globalization make the world smaller, and certainly this is true to an extent. But I believe that the space of globalized communication is better represented by a different spatial metaphor: instead of a smaller globe, it is helpful to view the space of communication as a handkerchief that can either flattened out or crumpled up. On the flat handkerchief, spatial distances are constant. People who occupy the same area can be understood roughly as sharing, or at least having access to, the same worlds of meaning. But on the crumpled up handkerchief, someone who is spatially distant can be understood as very near, or at least potentially very near, in terms of communication (Serres and Latour 1990: 60). With contemporary communication and transportation technologies, we are brought into close contact with people whose worlds of meaning we do not share. In these conditions, the

dynamic that Merleau-Ponty described, whereby communication brings us out of our existing worlds of meaning and draws us together toward a common world, functions much less smoothly. To return to Merleau-Ponty's own example, I am able to catch onto the sense of the world that Stendhal presents in his novel in large part because I already share a significant part of his world: I read French, am familiar with the history of Europe, and am accustomed to the literary conventions of which his writing makes use. Convergence toward a common world, in sum, presupposes an already existing commonality, even if that commonality is not explicitly thematized. Without that commonality, our different worlds come to seem less coherent, more heterogeneous, and thus less capable of functioning as measures for the rightness and wrongness of our actions.

I believe that we can find in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of language resources for rethinking the relation between world and normativity in a way that is appropriate to the era of global communication. Instead of focusing on the common world of meaning toward which communication tends, I would like to emphasize the point of encounter at which something like a world first becomes possible. In what follows, I will make use of a distinction articulated by the contemporary French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy between the French terms *globalisation* and *mondialisation*. The term *globalisation*, according to Nancy, suggests the idea of "an integrated totality," a whole that is global in scope. On the other hand, *mondialisation*, which can be translated as world-forming or world-creating, emphasizes not the world as end-product, but rather the singular acts through which a world is brought into being (Nancy 2002: 28). What I want to argue is that instead of taking our practical orientation from the world conceived as a whole of meaning, we can find a basis for ethical thought in the acts of communication by which worlds are formed.

To approach the idea of communication as *mondialisation*, which I find implicit in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of language, it will be helpful to begin by addressing the question, How can it happen that the act of communication draws me out of my already-constituted world of meaning and toward a more inclusive, more common one? What are the conditions of possibility for such a movement? Merleau-Ponty answers this question explicitly in *The Prose of the World*:

There can be speech (and in the end personality) only for an "I" which contains the germ of a depersonalization. Speaking and listening not only presuppose thought but—even more essential, for it is practically the foundation of thought—the capacity to allow oneself to be pulled down and rebuilt again by the other person before one, by others who may come along, and in principle by anyone (Merleau-Ponty 1969: 19-20).

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Exposure to alterity, on this account, is the condition of possibility for the movement that takes place in communication toward an inter-subjective world. The other in communication is of course a determinate other, an other whose meaning we grasp at least in outline. The other is one’s daughter or one’s boss, or perhaps someone unknown, such as a fellow passenger on the airplane. When we communicate with these people, we do so in ways that are oriented by the meaningful roles that we occupy in our respective worlds: I might scold my daughter for having an untidy room, for example, but I would not scold my boss for having an untidy office. But the other, *qua* other, also exceeds his or her established worldly meaning. Prior to being a significant other, so to speak, the other is given “as a *force* drawing me toward a meaning” (Merleau-Ponty 1969: 20. emphasis added). I experience the other not merely as a determinate other, with a place already assigned to him or her in my already established world of meaning, but also as a force that destabilizes my world of meaning, that puts it into question. This conception of the other is not the product of any kind of romanticism of ethical consciousness; it is, according to Merleau-Ponty, rather a *conditio sine qua non* for communication, and thus for the emergence of any meaningful world at all.

Communication, understood in this way with an emphasis on its function of *mondialisation* or world-forming, can provide a kind of ethical orientation that has traditionally been provided by the idea of world as ordered whole that gives a determinate context for actions. Communication as *mondialisation* cannot provide orientation in the same way, however. It does not allow us to refer actions to an established context of meaning in order to determine whether or not they have a place in that context. It is precisely that context that is put into question by the drawing force of the other. Indeed looked at in this way, it makes sense to say that communication actually disorients us, rendering us less certain of the rightness or wrongness of our actions. But in disorienting us in this way, communication re-orient us to something else that is at least as important from a moral point of view, viz. the singularity of the very person with whom we are communicating. That is to say, communication as *mondialisation* orients us to this person not *qua* brother or coworker or bank teller, but *qua* this unique person, to whom my obligations are not fixed by the place she has in my world of meaning. I do not know exactly what my determinate obligations are to the other, but I do know at minimum that I would wrong her by reducing her to the meaning she has in my world. I am obligated to maintain a stance of openness toward the other, keeping open the possibility that there are dimensions of meaning at play that are not yet clear to me, but that would make an important difference in my understanding of what I owe that person if those dimensions of meaning

were clear. Of course maintaining a stance of openness toward the other is not the whole of our obligation. Singular others remain determinate others, and that makes a difference from an ethical point of view. I have specific sorts of obligations toward my family, for example, that I do not have toward the person who takes my order at Starbucks. Those different sorts of obligations derive from the meanings that those people have in a world that most of us still do share in common. Nonetheless, in an era in which our lives are more and more closely bound to the lives of others whose worlds we do not share and whose points of view we are unlikely to understand, the aspect of our obligation that emphasizes the other's singularity and the excessiveness of her meaning to what we have already appropriated, becomes more important than ever.

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