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**The chapter represents one of my areas of scholarly interest, and it pursues a project I’ve been working on for many years: Connecting communication with philosophy in order to help both disciplines improve people’s lives.**

**I argue here that previous understandings of “ethical choice” have been oversimplified, and that those interested in applied ethics need to recognize that choices have effects that are collaboratively constructed in people’s communicating.**

**A COMMUNICATION CONTRIBUTION TO ETHICAL THEORY AND PRAXIS**

**John Stewart**

Ethics, every school child knows, is a philosophical topic. As a result, since at least the early twentieth century, almost no responsible western scholar associated with any discipline outside philosophy has undertaken a project focused on ethics without acknowledging that he or she could only be a visitor to this intellectual terrain, perhaps an informed one, but more likely a kind of conceptual voyeur, never a native. Anthropologists and educational theorists interested in epistemology have suffered from the same status as strangers, as have cognitive theorists and neuroscientists interested in philosophy of mind and even some theologians interested in making ontological and metaphysical claims.

Early in his important book, *Experiments in Ethics* (2008), Kwame Anthony Appiah reminds his readers how short-lived and wrongheaded this narrow disciplinarity actually is. “Plato and Aristotle had almost physiological theories about the nature of the soul and the nature of life,” Appiah notes (p. 7). Descartes devoted much of his attention “to geometry and optics, and for a period he was revered among scholars as, principally, a sort of mathematical physicist. . . . He also spent time and energy dissecting cows and other animals” (p. 7). Similarly, Immanuel Kant developed theories of the winds of the earth’s rotation, dispensed advice about training the young, and wrote, *Concerning the Volcanoes on the Moon* (p. 11).

Whether Plato’s interpreters are to be blamed for focusing philosophy on the noumenal world, or Appiah is right that philosophy was narrowed to conceptual analysis after World War II, today it is at least uncomfortable for any scholar with a terminal degree in another discipline and no publications in *Ethics* or *Philosophical Quarterly* to undertake a project on a topic as closely associated with the philosophical silo as is ethics.

But Appiah argues that ethical inquiry has much to learn from empirical work. In fact, he writes, it would not be “novel” for philosophy to turn to “experimentation.” “What’s novel was the turn away from it” (p. 6). Appiah effectively makes the case that philosophical projects can and should profit from work done in such empirical disciplines as psychology and social psychology (his favorites), and, by apt extension, communication. The present volume clearly responds to some elements of Appiah’s call. It reminds readers not only of the important ethical dimensions that are warp and weft of the fabric of interpersonal, organizational, cultural, and mediated communicating, but also of the contributions to ethical analysis and theorizing that emerge from studies of events of verbal-nonverbal articulate contact; that is, of communication. In other words the contribution-line runs in two directions.

**Globalization**

From the empirical vantage offered by communication and its sister human studies, globalization is the primary twenty-first century reality that contextualizes any consideration of ethics.[[1]](#endnote-1) What “information” and then “technology” were to the end of the twentieth century, globalization is to the beginning of the twenty-first. As Joanne Myers (2008) puts it,

Although there was a time when it was possible for citizens of one country to think of themselves as owing no obligation to the people of other nations, admittedly that was long ago. Today national borders have less meaning as issues of trade, environment, and health, along with incredible technological advances of the last century, have left us with *a legacy of connectedness we cannot ignore* [italics added]. Globalization has changed the way societies work and the way individuals think and interact with one another. In such a world, what do we ethically and morally owe our fellow human beings?

Although Myers’ characterization of globalization is abstract, every citizen in developed countries and nearly every one in developing countries can tell personal stories about their concrete experiences of the effects of globalization, including international job outsourcing, OPEC’s impact on corporate and personal finances, security responses to terrorism, air and water degradation across international borders, global cell network communication, threats and realities of pandemics, and world music and media.

The first, and often the most lasting and influential outcome of these concrete, empirical experiences of globalization is contact with Otherness, the sometimes stark and, for some people, intensely uncomfortable realization that people with whom I am in contact really don’t see and do things the way I do. In philosophy, Michael Theunissen (1984) identified “the problem of the Other” as an historically prominent one “in ethics and anthropology, in legal and political philosophy” (p. 1). In a complementary project, Maurice Friedman began *The Confirmation of Otherness in Family, Community and Society* (1983) with Martin Buber’s urging that people develop the ability to affirm that our conversation partner is

essentially other than myself, that this one or that one does not have merely a

different mind, or way of thinking or feeling, or a different conviction or attitude,

but has also a different perception of the world, a different recognition and order

of meaning, a different touch from the regions of existence, a different faith, a

different soil. (Buber, 1965, pp. 61-62).

As Buber’s works and attempts to apply this view verify, the challenge to consistently affirm Otherness in this way is daunting.

Of course, every human experiences a version of the contact with Otherness in the childhood recognition that a sibling or cousin is “different from me” and that adults have priorities that seem unusual. But the Caucasian high school student shocked by the raucous verbal play of African American classmates, the western Jew’s or Christian’s discovery of radical Islam’s rationale for suicide bombing, the traveling European college student’s direct encounter with tribalism and AIDS in central Africa, and the western businessperson’s face-to-face work with a Chinese entrepreneur all produce a more profound and often more troubling realization: My ways are not the only ways; sane people act on what seem to me to be alien values; nothing in my experience equips me to predict what some present people will do.

Again, the initial response to this experience is as predictable as it is ethically-freighted. “They’re wrong.” “How could she do that?” “I can’t accept that people actually believe those ideas.” One important goal of secondary and tertiary education is to moderate this ethnocentrism that is such a familiar first response to contact with Otherness. But the educational project is complex and often frustrating. Most learners begin without the awareness that their attitudes and actions embody presuppositions—cultural values and beliefs that are initially as invisible as the air they breathe. When—or if—the educator succeeds in facilitating the discovery that unreflectively adopted presuppositions have this power, learners then have to cope with the fear that accompanies the loss of comfortable cultural certainty. Then, the cure can seem as threatening as the disease. “If I can’t apply my values, where do I turn? Am I really supposed to honor standards that are foreign to me?” Not many years ago, substantial populations were born, lived, and died without confronting Otherness and being forced to cope with its implications. But today, as Myers writes, all of us inhabit “a legacy of connectedness we cannot ignore.” The empirical facts of globalization confront virtually every world citizen with the inescapable necessity of mediating between conflicting value systems on issues that matter. In this way, globalization broadly and deeply prioritizes applied ethics.

**A Conceptual Invitation from Communication Scholarship**

Many disciplines host programs for responding to the ethical challenges engendered by globalization, including philosophy, anthropology, psychology, sociology, education, business, and communication, and this volume focuses in part on the contributions of the discipline of communication. For hundreds of years, communication scholars have helpfully highlighted ethical dimensions of communication events in politics, organizations, and families. Aristotle left both *The Rhetoric* and *The Nicomachean Ethics*; Quintilian and the pedagogical programs based on his work blended communication ethics and rhetorical effectiveness; Kenneth Burke (1996) integrated elements of Spinoza’s and Kant’s ethical works into his analysis of the centrality of the human as “inventor of the negative;” and a list of contemporary communication scholars focused on ethics would include at least Christopher Lyle Johnstone, Richard L. Johannesen, Josina M. Makau, Julia T. Wood, Clifford G. Christians, Pat Arneson, Kenneth E. Andersen (Arneson, Ed., 2007), and every contributor to this volume.

But I believe that communication scholarship can contribute something more to ethics than analyses of ethical dimensions of varied interactions, important as those are. Influential works in communication theory address presuppositions that are central to ethical theory and practice, and I want to outline and trace implications of one of them here. I believe that communication theorizing about the problematic of choice has produced insights into ethical praxis that invite ethicists across the human studies to reconsider central theoretical and practical issues, especially in the context of globalization.

**Choice**

Ample literature indicates that it is almost impossible to undertake an analysis of ethics without the construct of choice. Sissela Bok (1999), for example, titles her influential book *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life,* and begins her chapter, “Truthfulness, Deceit, and Trust” with a section on “Lying and Choice,” which starts with the claim, “Deceit and violence—these are the two forms of *deliberate assault* [italics added] on human beings” (p. 18). Bok also argues that, not only does lying centrally involve choice, it also affects others’ choices. As she puts it,

Such a manipulation of the dimension of certainty is one of the main ways to gain

power over the choices of those deceived. And just as deception can initiate actions

a person would otherwise never have chosen, so it can prevent action by obscuring

the necessity for choice. (p. 20).

Bok’s remedy has a parallel focus. She writes, “What paths, what means of inquiry into the troubling questions of truth-telling and lying remain if systems help so little? I believe that any method, to be of help, should originate with the actual choices people make” (p. 54).

Ethics of communication scholars interviewed by Pat Arneson (Ed., 2007) expressed similar positions. For example, in 2001, Richard L. Johannesen identified as a central challenge in the development of communication ethics the question, “Can we develop a viable concept of the ‘self’ as an ethical agent in communication?” (pp. 126-127). In Arneson’s book, Johannesen notes that he does not differentiate between rhetorical ethics and communication ethics: “I think both of them have a communicator with the intent or purpose to influence others in some way to some degree. Both involve choices among communicative means “(p. 38).

Similarly, in 1969, James Chesbro identified the “universal humanitarian” as one of four “categories” of communication ethics, and Arnett, Arneson, and Bell’s (2007) contemporary appropriation of this category emphasizes that it embodies “the Enlightenment commitment to rational discernment of the truth” (p. 157), where rational beings are understood as choice-makers. Arnett, Arneson, and Bell approvingly cite Christopher Lyle Johnstone’s argument that “This humane knowledge . . . is always a potentiality inherent in the relating of one human being to another. When we attempt to ‘reason together’ in order that we might live together productively and happily, we lead each other and ourselves to the edge of the human soul” (Johnstone, 1981, p. 188).

Communication professor Elaine Englehardt introduces the first reading in her *Ethical* *Issues in Interpersonal Communication* (1999) with closely related claims:

Ethicists generally hold that while reason is not the only guide the [sic] truth, it provides

the best direction. Ethics involves our analysis of and reflection on moral choices and

judgments. Other guides to truth may involve religion, intuition, or advice from trusted

others. However, within the study of ethics and interpersonal ethics, each of us must

accept the difficult challenge of rationally defending our choices and actions (pp. 2-3).

Englehardt’s description of “the five moral systems’ (duties, rights, utility, virtues, and relationships) highlights the importance of intentional “human actions.” For example, deontological or “duty” ethics focuses on how “moral action discharges duty,” “rights” ethics highlights how “moral action preserves individual rights,” and utilitarian ethics clarifies how “moral action produces favorable consequences” (p. 18).

Englehardt’s book also hosts communication scholar James Anderson’s (1999) argument that “answers to questions of right and wrong” depend on an understanding of the self as “acting agent—the entity we would point to in answer to the question, ‘Who did this?’ . . . First, the agent is a particular and identifiable *agent of* action. . . second the agent is an *agent for* some recognizable intersection of cultural signs. . . . The self acts within some domain of agency” (p. 37).

Clearly there is a tradition among scholars in the human studies generally and particularly among communication ethicists to consider centrally the intentional choices of the individual moral agent, the rational subject, the choice-making communicator. Many classic western ethical theories have been built around this construct, and a great deal of ethical advice focuses on the communicating subject’s willingness and ability to make appropriate, humane, reasoned, empathic or otherwise principled *choices.*

**The Invitation to Reconsider Choice**

Volumes of late-twentieth and early-twenty-first century scholarship challenge the efficacy of understanding the human as a Cartesian rational *cogito*, the choice-making “subject” of Enlightenment theory and practice, including structuralism and poststructuralism, philosophical hermeneutics, and much of what has been termed “postmodern.” But before many of these works were written, and before many seminal European writers were translated into English, a group of communication theorists and practitioners working in the U.S. challenged the centrality of choice when they produced, in 1967, one of the late 20th century’s most influential books about human interaction, *Pragmatics of Human Communication*. The authors included transplanted Austrian psychotherapist, Paul Watzlawick, young social psychologist, Janet Helmick Beavin, and psychiatrist Don D. Jackson, all of whom were strongly influenced by their collaborations with British anthropologist, semiotician, and linguist, Gregory Bateson. The book they published has been translated into German, Dutch, Spanish, French, Italian, Portuguese, Japanese, and Greek, and 42 years after publication, it still generates 232,000 Google references. Its contents continue to appear in multiple accounts of communication by both interpretive and social scientific interpersonal, organizational, rhetorical, and cultural communication scholars and authors of textbooks for courses in multiple disciplines.

The first chapter of *Pragmatics* outlines a Batesonian, ecological “frame of reference” that substitutes a *relational* perspective focused on “organism-environment interaction” for the dominant “monadic” view of humans (p. 29). The guiding metaphor of this frame of reference is the mathematical concept of “function” in which “variables do not have a meaning of their own; they are meaningful only in relation to one another” (p. 24). This frame of reference significantly includes central constructs from systems theory and cybernetics, and when it is used as a lens to view human interaction, the first insight that emerges is, as Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson (WB&J) put it, is “the impossibility of not communicating.” The authors express this insight as the first of five “tentative axioms of communication,” “One cannot not communicate” (pp. 48-51). They reason to this tentative axiom in three short steps: First, there is no such thing as nonbehavior; one cannot *not* behave. Second, all behavior in an interactional situation has message value, i.e., all behavior that is in any way observed may be interpreted; it “means something” to the observer. Thus, “it follows that no matter how one may try, one cannot *not* communicate” (p. 49), because, regardless of one’s intent or choice, others can construct meaning from one’s behavior.

Subsequent distinctions outlined in *Pragmatics* have functioned powerfully as theoretical, empirical, and clinical heuristics, including the distinctions between content and relationship “levels” of communication, between symmetrical and complementary relationships and between analogic and digital communication codes. But the first axiom, with its catchy syntax and compelling intuitive coherence, has the potential to re-orient the work of virtually every theorist and practitioner in the human studies who fully understands and adopts it. No longer is it satisfactory to understand humans communicating in Aristotelian-Quintilian-Ciceronian terms as speakers inventing, arranging, clothing, memorizing, and delivering ideas in and with language, or as a linear process involving a source, encoder, channel, decoder, destination, and noise, as information theorists argued, or even as a process linking Sender-Message-Channel-Receiver as outlined in David Berlo’s influential *The Process of Communication* (1960). All these subject-, intent-, choice-, and for the most part verbal-centered conceptualizations are undercut by the effacement of the crucial notion of *purpose, choice, or intent.* If all behavior in an interactional situation may be interpreted as meaningful by others, then one’s choices do not determine the outcomes of the behavior. If “one cannot not communicate,” then one’s communicative intent (purpose, choice) is only one among many parts of the puzzle. Elements that make up a communication event are meaningful in relation to each other, just as the elements are that make up a mathematical function. What one means is disconnected from what the other(s) may take one to mean. “Communication” thus becomes a label for *outcomes emerging in relationships* from interpretations of verbal and nonverbal cues. The term can no longer be simply a noun for the *effects* of *choices*, as in “He communicated his determination” or “Her communication was not ethical.”

One indicator of the heuristic value of Axiom #1 was the publication of several essays that explored, clarified, and critiqued it (Weiner et al., 1979; Motley, 1990a; Motley, 1990b; Bavelas, 1990; Beach, 1990). Some respondents argued that the axiom claimed that “all behavior is communication,” which led Wiener et al. (1972) and later Bavelas (1990) to emphasize that Axiom #1 applies only to behavior in an interactive situation. Others took issue with Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson’s disinterest in cognitive or “covert” operations that, they assert, “find their way into ongoing overt interactional behaviors” (Motley, 1990b, p. 616). Motley (1990a, 1990b) argued that the decision whether to attend to or ignore cognitive operations is methodological, and that “communication” may fruitfully be studied from either perspective. Bavelas (1990) and subsequently scholars self-identified as social constructionist (Gergen, 1994; Gergen & Gergen, Eds., 2003; Pearce, 2007; Stewart et al., 2005) countered that the decision to highlight or efface such cognitive operations as purpose, choice, or intention is much more than merely methodological. Gergen (1994), for example, described how the deconstruction of authorial intent in works by Derrida (1978), Wittgenstein (1953) and Rorty (1979) contributed to what is widely-known as the “crisis in representation,” a critique of the fundamental claims that language externally manifests internal states and that words “represent” aspects of “the world.” The epistemological version of this claim is, in Gergen’s (1994) words, that “The terms and forms by which we achieve understanding of the world and ourselves are social artifacts, products of historically and culturally situated interchanges among people” (p. 49). Especially because it focused on “situated interchanges among people,” WB&J’s “pragmatic” perspective shared with social construction these fundamental assumptions. Axiom #1 and the theoretical and empirical projects that have appropriated it demonstrate that communicative outcomes cannot be adequately accounted for as merely or even primarily the external manifestations of covert cognitive operations such as “intent” and “choice.”

As my reference to social construction indicates, the meta-theoretical move that is made in Axiom #1 is familiar to students of contemporary intellectual history. In the last third of the 20th century, dozens of authors identified as postmodern essayed implications of the effacement of the Cartesian *cogito*. To cite just one example, Hans-Georg Gadamer (1989) announced in the Foreword to the second edition of *Truth and Method,* “My real concern was and is philosophic: not what *we do* [italics added] or what we ought to do, but what happens to us over and above our wanting and doing” ( p. xxviii). Choice, in other words, does not determine outcomes, and Gadamer was interested in significant outcomes.

There are also accounts in the recent ethics of communication literature of what can emerge when choice is effaced. For example, Ronald C. Arnett (2008) begins his reflection on terrorism with Levinas’ rejection of “the sanctity of the originative communicative agent, displacing our understanding of ethics grounded in an individual agency” (p. 70). Arnett argues that, when guided by Levinas, the ethicist’s concern with “the autonomous moral agent” is replaced by a relational understanding that, when applied to his topic, leads to the conclusion that “terrorism does not live merely in the lives of those who contend against us, but within any effort, including our own, that defaces another. . . . Levinas calls us to take humanism [and choice] off the map in order to remind us to attend to the face of all, even those who seek to deface our own” (p. 85).

In a conceptually-related essay, Leslie A. Baxter and Chitra Akkoor (2008) demonstrate how Mikhail Bakhtin’s dialogism replaces subject-centered understandings of romantic love with an understanding that decenters the sovereign self, its choices, and its intent. Baxter and Akkoor argue that, for Bakhtin, consciousness is not monadic but “a mutual process of authoring, an ongoing dynamic of joint action” (p. 27). Bakhtin (1990) terms this mutual authoring “answerability,” which he views as “the ethical obligation of being human.” “In essence,” Baxter and Akkoor note, Bakhtin’s position is that “our very consciousness as human beings depends on answering an Other—giving the Other the ‘gift’ of our excess of seeing” (p. 27). Concretely, answerability occurs in three “intertwined” events: empathy, difference, and meeting. First, “I must experience—come to see and to know—what he experiences” (p. 25). The second moment is a return “into myself, a return to my own place outside. . .” (p. 26), and the third “interanimates” unity and difference in human meeting. Baxter and Akkoor apply this analysis to an understanding of romantic love by contrasting monologic ideologies of romantic love that identify it with internal emotion, self-interested pursuit of similarity, or a finalized outcome of attraction (pp. 30-34). From Bakhtin’s vantage, love is “the ongoing accomplishment of respectful attention” that emerges as partners mature together. The relational or social construction understanding of romantic love that Baxter and Akkoor develop positions them to clarify how love understood in this way is often deeply fostered in arranged marriages between subcontinent Indians. The authors conclude that when “romantic love is conceptualized as a psychological construct, communication is positioned as a conduit—a way to transmit to the Other one’s feelings of love” (p. 40). A relational alternative is to “position communication as constitutive. It is through communication between persons that love—mutual, lingering attention—is constituted” (p. 40).

**The Invitation Refused**

Arnett, Baxter, and Akkoor are three communication scholars who have begun to consider the concrete impact of a relational understanding of communication on ethical praxis. But a glance at the current literature that is assigned to hundreds of thousands of English-speaking communication students—and read by at least many of them—demonstrates that this relational understanding is not yet a widely-adopted part of communication pedagogy. Discussions of ethics in contemporary communication textbooks still generally treat choice as an unproblematic construct.

For example, the 2007 edition of one of the most widely-adopted interpersonal communication texts (Verderber et al., 2007) begins its discussion of the ethics of interpersonal communication with, “In any encounter we choose whether or not we will communicate ethically” (p. 12). “When we communicate,” the authors continue, “we make choices with ethical implications. So we should understand the general ethical principles that form a basis for ethical interpersonal communication” (p. 13). They elaborate five of these choice-guiding principles: truthfulness and honesty, integrity, fairness, respect, and responsibility.

Several recent texts begin their ethics discussions with Richard Johanneson’s argument that ethical issues are those that arise when behavior has significant impact on other persons, when the behavior involves conscious choice of means and ends, and when the behavior can be judged by standards of right and wrong. One authorial team writes, “We need to understand that because ethical choices can have lasting physical, emotional, financial, and psychological consequences, a sense of ethics should guide us on a daily basis” (West & Turner, 2009, p. 37). Another widely-adopted text dependent on Johanneson begins with eight “principles of interpersonal communication,” the third of which is “Interpersonal communication involves ethical choices” (Wood, 2007, p. 30). Importantly, the first principle is, “We cannot not communicate” (p. 29), but this author does not clarify how her first principle significantly changes the meaning of the third. Similarly incomplete accounts of choice can be found in many other widely-adopted communication texts (E.g.,Beebe, Beebe, & Redmond, 2008; Canary, Cody, & Manusov, 2008; DeVito, 2007; McCornack, 2007).

Incomplete analyses of choice-making also appear in accounts of applied ethics authored by philosophy teacher-scholars and others outside the discipline of communication. Since the 1970s, philosophy bibliographies have reflected increasing interest in practical ethics related to decisions about such topics as sexuality, family, abortion, treatment of animals, environmentalism, gender, race, privacy, immigration, and euthanasia. Some of these works display the ethical elements of debates over these issues without directly addressing the impact of varied analyses on individual choices (e.g., Cohen & Wellman, Eds., 2005; Baggini & Fosl, 2007; Singer, 1993). Others foreground choice in ways that echo the advice from communication textbook authors. For example, Scott B. Rae’s *Moral Choices* (2000) focuses on “the moral life and moral decision-making” (p. 11). Similarly, James R. Otteson’s *Actual Ethics* (2006) is dedicated to helping its readers “develop good *judgment*. . . . And we do so only when we enjoy the freedom to make decisions for ourselves and enjoy or suffer, as the case may be, the consequences of those decisions. . . .Judgment cannot develop if we are not required to take responsibility for our decisions” (x). Rita C. Manning & Scott R. Stroud (2008) include a chapter about communication in their book, *A Practical Guide to Ethics*, but their analysis focuses primarily on strategies for “finding the purpose of your speech,” organizing ideas, gathering support, and developing effective delivery (pp. 130-138). These authors approvingly cite Foss and Foss’ (2003) “invitational rhetoric” without appearing to recognize inconsistencies between elements of that view and their simplistically choice-focused analysis.

**Ethics, Choice, and a Nexting Helix**

What justifies calling these analyses “simplistic?” What is praxically problematic about these accounts of choice? My response, as noted earlier, is that they fail to acknowledge that *individual choices cannot assure ethical communication outcomes*. As Axiom #1 clarifies, one person’s choices do not determine the outcomes of the communication events in which he or she participates—not the informational outcomes (whether “the others get it” or “I am understood”), the affective outcomes (the emotions experienced by the persons involved), or the ethical outcomes (whether participants are perceived to be respectful, fair, honest, etc.). This much is clear in a great deal of contemporary communication theorizing: What happens when people communicate is a function of events much more complex than the effects of any person’s choices. Outcomes of communication emerge from multiple-events-in-context.

Does this mean that personal choices don’t matter? Not at all. Each individual’s choices contribute importantly to the complex from which communication outcomes emerge. But when one attends to the empirical realities of persons communicating, the critical piece of practical communication advice, for all aspects of communicative transactions (informational, emotional, ethical, etc.), is that one must endeavor consistently and continuously to attend and respond to what happens *next*. Especially because of the pervasive and local influence of globalization on emergent outcomes, every person wishing to engage ethically in communicating needs not only to make careful choices but also to attend the outcomes of these choices *and* to respond appropriately to the uptake from Other(s). In other words, one must attend not only to his or her own considered and principled choices but also, and continuously, to the outcomes affected by those choices as they inform and promote subsequent choices. This is the advice that follows from the combination of full awareness of Axiom #1, a relational understanding of communication, a commitment to ethical communicating, and acceptance of the reality of globalization.

Karen Zediker, Saskia Witteborn and I (Stewart et al., 2005) call this practice “nexting,” and argue that it is “the most important single communication skill” (p. 46). We also describe how choices reveal ethical standards and commitments (pp. 37-38) while cautioning readers that “no one individual has complete control” over communication outcomes and that “all of our choices are made within the context of our personal experience and are evaluated in accordance with cultural norms and expectations” (p. 38). Our discussion of nexting, however, does not thoroughly explain the connections between that vital skill and the ethics of communicating. I hope the present discussion helps remedy this shortcoming.

The topics and insights that I am attempting to integrate here—applied communication ethics, a relational understanding of communication, Axiom #1, and globalization—lead me to suggest that teacher-scholars of ethical praxis might want to respond to the invitation to reconsider Enlightenment accounts of choice by exploring the effectiveness of the metaphor of a “nexting helix.” As is well-known, a helix is a three-dimensional curve that lies on a cylinder or cone, so that its angle to a plane perpendicular to the axis is constant (*American Heritage Dictionary,* 1992, p. 839)—the threads of a wood screw. Visually, the figure of a helix depicts ongoing circular movement that never returns to itself—as does the line of a circle—but that continually changes incrementally. Communicating individuals might usefully visualize themselves as moving together along this helical line, integrating individual and shared expectations and actions with new interpretations that result in outcomes being more than just “the same thing over and over;” in other words, understanding that outcomes are *continuously emergent.* If ellipses or infinity symbols are added at the beginning and end of this helix, then the figure can also represent the fact that communication was ongoing when each of us was born and will certainly continue after our death. This means, as Bakhtin (1986) emphasized, that every communicative contribution that any person makes can be understood to be responsive to what preceded and contextualizes it *and* that communicative outcomes, what Gadamer termed “what happens to us over and above our wanting and doing,” are continuously emergent—always opening out into what happens *next*.

Bakhtin’s (1986) insight about responsiveness is particularly apt here, because he explains how the realities of what he terms “speech communicating” illustrate the over-simplified quality of choice-based accounts. Bakhtin (1986) writes,

Thus, all real and integral understanding is actively responsive, and constitutes

nothing other than the initial preparatory stage of a response (in whatever form it may

be actualized). And the speaker himself is oriented precisely toward such an actively

responsive understanding. He does not expect passive understanding that, so to speak,

only duplicates his own idea in someone else’s mind. Rather he expects response,

agreement, sympathy, objection, execution, and so forth. . . . Moreover, any speaker

is himself a respondent to a greater or lesser degree. He is not, after all, the first

speaker, the one who disturbs the eternal silence of the universe. And he presupposes

not only the existence of the language system he using, but also the existence of

preceding utterances—his own and others’ (1986, p. 69).

Neither speaker nor listener, in other words, is originating the interaction they experience together; both are responding to global and local elements that contextualize their communicating and affect what emerges between them.

A.J. Conyers (2009) highlights the contrast between this understanding of responsiveness and the focus on choice in his explanation of the Christian concept of “vocation.” Conyers argues that one residue of Enlightenment thinking was a subject- based philosophical anthropology that eventuated in the “distinctly modern prejudice” that “might be called the ‘Invictus’ principle. We think for ourselves; we are the masters of our souls” (p. 19). Our choices, in other words, determine the outcomes we experience. “Over against this,” Conyers (2009) writes,

is the understanding of life that has always struck human beings as belonging to the province of common sense. We came into a world that existed before us. We leave this world long before things resolve themselves. . . . So, in order to live here with any semblance of wisdom, purpose, and order, we need “the guidance of another” (p. 19).

From Conyers’ theological vantage, this guidance comes as a call from the human’s divine author. And this “is the opposite of ‘choice,’ or of freedom in the sense of self-determination” (p. 17).

But the acknowledgement that human life is fundamentally responsive is valid with or without the theological overtones, especially human life with others. Choices clearly make a difference, and one must make choices in order to engage the people and topics one encounters. But individual choices do not determine outcomes.

One important benefit of using this helical figure to understand each communication event—face to face, on-line, at home or work, with intimates or enemies—can be that one becomes continuously aware of what happens *after* one’s own communication choices, and that this awareness can direct one’s decision about what to do *next*. Importantly, the helix does not imply that what happens *after* happens simply *because* of what I do; the Other(s) is (are) living out consequential choices, too. But insofar as I attend to emergent outcomes, I am positioned to choose next actions consistent with my preferences, values, goals, etc. One’s choices are wide-ranging. I may choose to withdraw in order to protect myself from, or to reduce the escalation of, certain outcomes. I may choose to restate, engage in face-saving or face-repair, defer, cite more evidence, apologize, circumscribe, or insist. But in each case, insofar as I am attending to emergent outcomes and integrating them into my next-actions, I am being response-able. And response-ability, understood as the willingness and ability to respond, is a key feature of ethical communicating. As Buber (1965) wrote, “Genuine responsibility exists only where there is real responding” (p. 16).

There are significant differences between this approach and treatments of applied ethics anchored in an Enlightenment understanding of choice. In *Ethics for the Real World* (2008), Stanford professor of management science and engineering Ronald A. Howard and his co-author Clinton D. Korver offer “practical advice on how to make more effective decisions every day” and “to create a personal ethical code” (cover) These authors argue that ethical decision making involves four phases:

In the first phase, we develop awareness of ethical temptation and compromise. . . .

In the next phase, we learn how to use ethical logic and principles to foster clear

thinking. . . . In the third phase, we learn to make ethical choices. . . . In the final

phase we go beyond ethical basics to using ethics as a lever for better living (pp. 5-6).

The central chapter of Howard and Korver’s book, “Choose Action: Systematic Ethical Decision Making,” presents a guide to “quality decisions,” by which the authors mean “decisions where we have followed a high-quality process and adhered to proven principles” (p. 93). In this chapter, they detail each of the crucial “phases:” Clarifying the salient ethical issues, creating alternatives, evaluating alternatives, and making a best choice. These authors do note that, if one’s ethical position is consequentialist, one must “add three steps to our process: Characterize consequences of each alternative. Assess uncertainties. Evaluate trade-offs” (p. 106). But their focus is consistently on consequential actions, not *next*-actions. As the authors themselves note, their focus on “high quality” choices and actions

“ is not to be confused with high-quality outcomes, the results of the decision. None of us can know the future, which means we can make a good decision and end up with a bad outcome; or we can make a bad decision and end up with a good outcome. Of course, in most cases, the worse the decision, the worse the outcome” (p. 93)

These authors reiterate in the final paragraph of their book that they focus on “find[ing] convincing reasons to take right action” (p. 154).

Problems arise if one attempts to follow this advice, especially in a global context. For example, Irene’s acculturation as traditionally Japanese may have contextualized her awareness of what Howard and Korver call “ethical temptation and compromise” and her development of “ethical logic and principles” to the point that she chooses to respond to a moral challenge with face-saving deference. Although she understands the challenge and privately supports the position she hears, Irene smiles, lowers her eyes, speaks softly, and offers neutral or mitigating comments. David, her traditionally North American conversation partner, interprets Irene’s actions as indecisive, compromising, and morally suspect—far from what she intended. He doubts Irene’s ethical courage and has no evidence that she supports the position he articulated. David responds with scorn, an outcome which puzzles and threatens Irene, who attempts to respond again with more conflict avoidance, to the point where the two end their conversation in mutual misunderstanding. In this situation, both Irene and David may be effectively following the advice of applied ethicists and communication ethics scholar-teachers to make considered and principled choices. But because they are not focused on outcomes-and-next-choices, their communication is less than effective or satisfying.

If Irene were understanding the exchange helically, she would be paying attention not just to her choices but also to the outcomes of her choices-in-context and their implications for her next actions. When the outcome—in this case David’s scorn—reveals the nature of his uptake of her turn at talk, Irene would be positioned to repair the misunderstanding, for example, with metacommunication—“I don’t mean that I don’t care”—or an alternative expression of her position—“That happened to me when. . . .and I decided that I definitely believe. . . .” Of course, since these options require Irene to move culturally toward David’s position, they presume that she is bi-culturally competent and motivated to connect effectively with David. In a parallel way, if David were understanding the exchange helically, he might respond to Irene’s defensive uptake of his scorn with his own repair attempts. A helical frame for understanding does not guarantee outcomes that are consistently ethically apt, but it does position conversation partners to make optimally effective next-choices.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Of course, the example of Irene and David is oversimplified, because cultural commitments are virtually always multi-faceted rather than simply “traditionally Japanese” and “traditionally North American.” Hybridity is the norm. Living, spontaneous human events mix multiple embodiments of gender, age, ethnicity, class, and other cultural influences. This complexity makes it even more difficult to predict or control the outcome of one’s ethical choices and thus even more important to attend and respond to what happens next.

It may appear that I am only proposing an incremental change in applied communication ethics, from a focus only on first choices to consideration of all choices that communicators make. But I understand this position to be transformational, not just incremental. The combination of a full awareness of Axiom #1, a relational understanding of communication, a commitment to ethical communicating, and an acceptance of the reality of globalization results in a conceptualization of communication that is fundamentally different from the model that is implicit in most current accounts of ethical choice-making. The majority of those accounts are monadic, or at best, interactional. They presume *actions* performed by individual *subjects* engaged in processes understandable as *causally* related and thus producing predictable *effects*—She confused me.” “He lied,” “She told the truth but he took advantage of her.” These accounts’ focus on choice embodies either the assumption that choice will cause the desired outcome and/or that the individual communicator’s “responsibility” ends when he or she makes a carefully considered choice. But when one understands communication as relational and emergent, and one focuses on outcomes, the inadequacy of these assumptions becomes apparent. There is no direct, causal relationship between choices and outcomes. Responsibility, understood as the willingness and ability continuously to respond, does not end with one’s choices. When accounts that embody these assumptions are mobilized in the service of applied ethics, they generate the kinds of subject-centered advice reviewed earlier in this essay. From this incomplete perspective, a primary feature of ethical awareness is ethical integrity, understood as the sense that *one* can (and should) “choose what’s right.”

But ***one’s*** *choices cannot “rightness” make*. And this is why the understanding outlined here embodies more than an incremental change. In practice, “rightness,” to continue the awkward construction, cannot be guaranteed by an individual’s choices; rightness is an outcome that may emerge-in-context. No one individual determines the ethical outcomes of a communication transaction, whether face-to-face, on line, in print, or otherwise mediated. Meanings or understandings are a function (cf. WB&J) of the multiple contributions that make up each communication event. Especially because of the pervasive and concrete effects of globalization, one should never focus exclusively or even primarily on the processes of ethical choice-making and implementation, as challenging as those processes are. Rather than assuming closure or finality in ethical events, one should focus continuously on the uptake of choices by others, as they move with us through next events. As Howard and Korver (2008) emphasize, “. . .we can make a good decision and end up with a bad outcome; or we can make a bad decision and end up with a good outcome” (p. 93). What Howard and Korver fail to recognize, however, is that this realization should compel students of communication ethics to move beyond simplistic analyses of choice to something akin to the helical understanding proposed here.

An undergraduate discovered first-hand the inadequacy of “Choose what’s right” advice when, over several months, she witnessed an escalating relationship between her roommate and a young, charismatic faculty member. Many evenings, the faculty member made himself available at neighborhood bars for conversations with students about their science projects. He saw himself as mentor and coach, and students appreciated his accessibility and attention. But it became obvious, especially to Anna, that the professor and her roommate were becoming more than friends. Anna’s awareness of ethical issues and principles had been enhanced by her involvement in a campus-wide ethics-across-the-curriculum program. As Anna told the story, she felt torn between her friendship with her roommate and her realization that the professor’s relationship with Beth was inappropriate. Anna and Beth had been roommates for three years, and many shared challenges and celebrations had made them best friends. Anna couldn’t bear the thought of betraying Beth, but she also knew that what was happening between Beth and the professor was wrong. After listening to an on-campus speaker discuss the importance of ethical courage, her anguish escalated to the point where it seriously interfered with her sleeping and eating. Finally, Anna confided in a trusted faculty member who accompanied her to the dean’s office, where Anna tearfully recounted what she’d seen and heard.

It was obvious to the professor and the dean that Anna understood the ethical dimensions of the situation and knew what was right. She acknowledged this herself. But she was unable to act for many weeks primarily because of what she believed would happen *next*, after she implemented her ethical choice. For her, the advice, “Choose what’s right,” was not praxically adequate. Anna was convinced that if she said anything about the relationship, she would lose her best friend, seriously damage the life of one of her favorite professors, and be condemned by her student friends who were also enjoying the professor’s attention. The faculty member in whom she finally confided did his best to present other possibilities—her roommate might be grateful rather than enraged; future young women would be protected from the professor’s predatory behavior; Anna would be respected for her courage. He and the dean promised to help Anna cope with what happened after she made her choice.

The university corroborated Anna’s testimony, confronted the faculty member, and, when he admitted the inappropriate relationship, terminated his employment. But Anna experienced first-hand the practical challenges of what she had studied in her ethics classes. She discovered that when one develops what Howard and Korver (2008) call “awareness of ethical temptation and compromise” it can be as painful as it is enlightening. She discovered that, to her credit, she did know “how to use logic and ethical principles to foster clear thinking” (p. 5) and arrive at a right ethical choice. But, as an intensely practical matter, she was for a long time unable to act because of her assumption that, when she made her choice, that would determine what happened next, and the outcomes would unquestionably be negative. She had been taught that individual choice, right action, was the end-goal of applied ethics, and she knew otherwise. She was effectively paralyzed by her beliefs about what would happen after she made her ethical choice. Anna was able to move forward only when she discovered resources to help her cope with movement along the helix, in this case, a supportive faculty advisor, and an institutional system willing to deal decisively with inappropriate faculty behavior. She also found support for what would inevitably happen after she spoke up. She was protected from public scrutiny, discovered peers who respected her courage and affirmed her action, and, over time, was even able to repair important aspects of her relationship with Beth.[[3]](#endnote-3)

**Conclusion**

In 2009, while this essay was being completed, a Forum sponsored by the editors of *Communication Monographs* and *Journal of Applied Communication Research* was addressing the question, “Has communication research made a difference?” Invited essays by Celeste Condit (2009), Matthew Seeger (2009), Lawrence R. Frey (2009) and Mary Lee Hummert (2009) set the stage for next turns-at-talk invited from interested readers, and the Forum was scheduled to be concluded by statements from Dennis S. Gouran and Charles R. Berger. One theme of the first four contributions to this Forum was that, like other academic projects, some communication research has made some differences, *and* the discipline’s scholars could do much more to make their findings accessible and relevant to policy-makers, activists, and other change agents.

This chapter responds to a similar impetus. Communication research can indeed make a difference, because the focal interest on what I have called verbal-nonverbal articulate contact (Stewart, 1995) that distinctively characterizes the work of communication scholars empowers researchers in this discipline to critique and re-formulate assumptions about human contact that can significantly affect theorizing and empirical efforts across the human studies. In this essay I offer one example of this potential. I argue that the shift in focus by communication researchers and teachers from linear, subject-, intent-, choice- and for the most part, verbal-focused models of communication to relational, social construction understandings requires a reformulation of at least one basic construct that is central to applied ethics, the construct of choice. When verbal-nonverbal articulate contact is understood helically, as sketched here, ethical advice becomes focused not simply on individual choices but on the complex of choice-uptake-outcome-next-choice. . . , with the ellipsis an important part of the formulation. When applied ethics scholar-teachers across the human studies accept the invitation of communication scholarship to reconsider choice, this, it seems to me, is where their acceptance might fruitfully lead.

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1. Appiah (2006) prefers the term “cosmopolitanism,” because, he argues, ”globalization. . .once referred to a marketing strategy, and then came to designate a macroeconomic thesis, and now can seem to encompass everything, and nothing” (p. xiii). p. xiii. But his preference has not yet been adopted. Hence, I use the more widely-accepted term. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Conversation analysis (Hopper, Koch, & Mandelbaum, 1986; Arundale & Good, 2002) is one empirical approach to the study of communication that takes seriously the helical understanding outlined here. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Elements of this story have been changed to protect the identities of the parties. “Beth” gave permission to publish this version. The story is less an example of Anna “doing nexting ethically or well” and more an illustration of the practical, concrete inadequacies of choice-based advice and of how the nexting helix can facilitate a nuanced understanding of a complex and poignant human communication situation. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)