

## **DISCOURSE ETHICS TO THE TEST OF ICTS GUEST EDITOR'S PREFACE**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Contemporary technologies renew and broaden the definition of communication far beyond the dichotomy of strategy-agreement, utility and the establishment of a common horizon of mutual understanding. Today, the relational pattern itself is made up of communication and information mediated by technologies. The living habitat of the human is not only the dimension of survival, but also a natural and cultural, social, urban landscape structured not for communicative exchange, but by the communication itself. In these profound transformations of human history, the relationship that human beings have with the world, with other subjects and with themselves is involved. The very meaning of ethics is therefore in question, since the living environment in which human beings constitute themselves and act has changed. In particular, one of the most interesting ethical proposal of the twentieth century, the discourse ethics by Karl-Otto Apel and Jürgen Habermas, must be rethought, since the communicative environment has deeply changed.

### **KEYWORDS**

ICTs, technology, discourse ethics, Apel, Habermas

1. Tackling the issue of the intersubjective relation today no longer means, as it has since Husserl, focusing on the ontological existence of the relation, but rather questioning its ethical tenor. This is especially the case given the deep penetration of the technological apparatus into communication through the “information and communication technologies”. Contemporary technologies renew and broaden the definition of communication far beyond the dichotomy of strategy-agreement, utility and the establishment of a common horizon of mutual understanding. Today, the relational pattern itself is made up of communication and information mediated by technologies. The living habitat of the human is not only the dimension of survival, but also a natural and cultural, social, urban landscape structured not for communicative exchange, but by the communication itself.

The novelty of new technologies can be understood as such in the light of their intrinsic disruptiveness and their capacity to break with the previous paradigm of

human-environment relationship. We are witnessing a geometric progression of the speed of technological developments as such. Thus, we have to take as our point of observation the interest in our relationship with new technologies, in the way they produce a change in our mentality and customs. With regard to new information and communication technologies, i.e. all those technologies that retrieve, store, process and transmit data, Luciano Floridi recently spoke of a real revolution, the fourth. First came Copernicus, who removed us from the centre of the Universe, where we had been placed by a creator God: the exploration of space that continues to this day has given new meaning to our very lives as humans on a small and fragile planet. Then came Darwin, who showed that every living species is the result of an evolution over time from common ancestors through a process of natural selection: removed from the centre of the biological world, the only consolation remained the fact that we are important in other respects and play a central role in other contexts, such as our mental life . The third revolution was sparked by Freud's psychoanalysis, with the discovery that much of our inner life takes place in the dark, that we are not masters in our own home. A fourth revolution found a new point of attack in the further breeding ground of pride, within which humans have entrenched themselves. We could still believe that our special place in the Universe had nothing to do with astronomy, biology or the transparency of the mind, but resided in our superior capacities for thought.

The nature of human intelligence is vague, elusive, and this would have undermined the scope of this last line of defence based on the presumption of being better than animals and of being at the centre of the infosphere, with no other earthly creature occupying that place. It was Pascal himself, who had identified human thought as our dignity, undermined the foundations of this line of defence by building an arithmetic machine, the Pascalina, in the 17th century. It was an instrument capable of influencing the history of calculators and surprising the inventor of the binary number system, Leibniz. A few years later, Hobbes defines reason as the calculation (addition and subtraction) of the result of general names connected with each other, for the purpose of fixing and expressing our thoughts. to think is to reason; to reason is to do maths; and to do maths is what Pascalina already knew how to do. Here are the first germs of the fourth revolution which, through generations of Pascalines and calculators, have removed us from our centred role as the sole intelligent agent in the infosphere. Alan Turing deposed us from the privileged and exclusive position we had in the realm of logical reasoning, the ability to process information and act intelligently.

The new information and communication technologies, by bending the original meaning of *techne*, affect human ability to build its own environment, to give itself a world.

2. Not only are the natural and artificial dimensions becoming increasingly blurred. We are witnessing a quantitative and qualitative increase in the power of technology. The quantitative novelty can be seen in the extent to which the power deployed today is not even comparable to that of previous technological apparatuses. The qualitative novelty consists in the fact that this human technological power also ends up turning against the human itself, retroacting on it, and thus either amplifying its action out of all proportion or, on the contrary, destroying itself. The more the technological potential grows, through the implementation of certain processes and the belief that they can always be regulated, the less it can be truly governed, both individually and collectively.

In these profound transformations of human history, the relationship that human beings have with the world, with other subjects and with themselves is involved. The very meaning of ethics is therefore in question, since the living environment in which human beings constitute themselves and act has changed. In particular, one of the most interesting ethical proposals of the twentieth century, the discourse ethics by Karl-Otto Apel and Jürgen Habermas, must be rethought, since the communicative environment has deeply changed. The transformation of the conditions for the existence and realisation of communication invites to ask whether the universal conditions that Apel and Habermas chose as principles of discourse are sustainable and able to be defended. We need to return to *Diskurethik* to reflect on whether it still has critical potential in a social environment and political context so heavily penetrated by information and communication technologies. We have to rethink these issues in a historical horizon, moreover, in which technological devices are active participants in communication as transmitters or receivers of messages. We live in a reality in which ethics get into touch with the power of technology and must also contemplate the existence of realities capable of learning and of mimicking the human in its transcendental dimensions.

This raises a series of major questions for contemporary thought. How does communicative action change in contact with information and communication technologies? Are there normative principles intrinsic to the new communicative dimension? Which ones? How does the search for a dimension of co-responsibility, justice, and solidarity change in a communication that is so mediated and mostly aimed at strategy? How is the communication community transformed and how do we regulate “communication” with non-human entities? What does the entry of new technologies into the relational horizon represent for ethics, law, and politics?

The community of communicants, which Apel defined as unlimited, has unexpectedly actually expanded beyond any conceivable boundary, involving non-intentional agents: this calls for a reflection on the moral principles structuring discursive action, whose groundedness and universality are called into question in

the face of the profound penetration of a heterogeneous logic, that of the technologies we use.

Apel and Habermas both favoured the search for agreement over strategic elements. Yet the mediatisation of public communication, and its circulation on virtual networks promising a broadening of the debate, means that the latter now play a central role in public discourse. The circulation of communication on virtual networks, the opening up of social platforms, and the accumulation of huge amounts of information in reservoirs called “big data” engage right in the regulation of inter- and trans-national dimensions that no longer refer to political communities clearly defined by the liberal-democratic State as those to which the *Diskursethik* referred. New organs, formal and informal, are intertwined in the governance of processes that go beyond the domain of national parliaments. Political and juridical philosophy is called to work on the ways deliberative itineraries change.

3. In the first contribution, Žarko Paić notes that communication takes place primarily as a technical process of dialogue and discourse between networked machines-body computers and mobile smartphones. Thus, cultural-social processes are considered from the point of view of managing, regulating and monitoring the environment in which such a process takes place. This implies the transition from content analysis to form analysis in media theory, which corresponds to the transition from text analysis to the analysis of the language of communication or cultural techniques of communication. Cultural techniques become technologies with their aesthetic matrix of communication in a complex environment. We have to study the relationship between the technosphere and the biosphere. In fact, the true subject of communication in the digital age is not society in its complex relations of mediation of needs, interests and desires, but the technosphere itself as the entropy of all social relations in general. In the place of society comes communication, in the place of the paradigm of the text, we have the visual network, and in the place of the material form of the work in reality and the material sign of the event whose symbolic value constructs reality as entropy comes emergent autopoietic system.

The network enables communication to have the semblance of the immediacy of touching the Other through the game of proximity and distancing of those who sacrifice the freedom of individuality in exchange for solitude. When there is no longer either privacy or publicness in the classic model of the liberal idea of freedom, digital nomads strive to create a semblance of intimacy between virtual walls. The perfect apocalyptic utopia of digital communication represents a machine that produces the event of artificial life from the very essence of the technosphere. Can this dizzying speed in the videology of digital appearance not only be controlled but also ethically curb the uncanny condition of communication

transgression where all notions of social stability have become obsolete and, in their place, has come to the entropy of the non-human?

In his contribution, Paolo Capriati poses the problem of the ethical subject of communication in the technological environment in which we are immersed. And to pose this issue, he questions the nature of the subject in Habermasian discourse ethics: can machines play the role of the subject of communication assigned by Habermas' ethics? To fulfill this function, interlocutors must be able to understand each other and must have legitimate interests. Are machines really capable of understanding? And do they have interests? After a series of arguments, Capriati hypothesizes that machines can enter the communicative exchange. But communication would not be linguistic in the strict sense, and this seems to put Habermas' discourse ethics offside. However, Capriati notes how the problems that human-machine communication confronts us are not at all dissimilar to those intercepted by the German philosopher's reflection.

Fabio Mazzocchio compares the philosophical proposal of Karl-Otto Apel and that of Jürgen Habermas, finding divergent details regarding the notion of truth within a consensualist paradigm, the relationship between universal and contextual aspects, and the question of justification from an epistemic perspective. Once the two philosophical itineraries have been specified, the author undertakes to put them to the test in a context marked by the dematerialisation of relations and communication between human and non-human entities.

Although starting from a similar perspective on the transformation of Kantianism through the theory of communicative action, Apel and Habermas structure different models in terms of reference to the historical and transcendental dimensions. The limitlessness of the community remains problematically linked to an underlying optimism of a Kantian nature. The renewal in Habermas, in recent decades, of the theme of recognition and its dialectical substratum, makes it possible to read the distorting elements of communicative processes more adequately than in Apelian formalisation, and shifts the focus to the material and social conditions that determine the systemic level. A communicative conception of the human condition leads to the acknowledgement of the different possibilities of access to the linguistic game. The grammar of recognition is, from Mazzocchio's perspective, the very heart of discourse ethics and, at the same time, of communicative anthropology. Recognising ourselves as bearers of an openness to otherness allows us to rediscover the priority of the "we" over the "I" and the interpersonal constitution of subjectivity.

Explaining the possible link between the dynamics of communication and recognisable authenticity, the author proposes a hermeneutics of today's human condition as marked by flexible aggregative forms, characterised by extemporaneity. The fragile communities born with social media have become light aggregative forms that bring together lonely individuals in search of relationships that satisfy the

need to be recognised, but in an occasional way and mostly free from a commitment to stable bonds. The social horizon seems to be heading towards a deconstruction of the places that unite us. Virtual communication seems to be affected by chatter, dispersion and, behind an apparent existential empathy, extraneousness. This, at the same time, supports and confirms how today, in everyday human relations, a boundless sense of freedom unravels, which envisages ties accepted only, to a large extent, if they are functional to one's own benefit, hence the manifestation of elements of fragility on the community level, which thus exposes itself to the risk of communicative inauthenticity.

Finally, Paolo Monti deals with the increasingly effectiveness of AI writing systems. They produce original texts based on simple inputs about topic and style, through a training process that constantly engages with fragments of public discourse as found in internet webpages, books, and articles. Their outcomes are often indistinguishable from those of human writers.

In addition to many problematic uses of AI technology, such as deep fakes, the presence of AI-generated discourse in the public sphere is increasingly widespread and raises serious normative issues. Public communication can be produced by non-human authors and penetrate democratic deliberative itineraries.

These issues are addressed by Habermas on two occasions. First, he points out that the moral status of artificially-made subjects is problematic because of their structurally unequal position in public discourse. When the nature of some participants has been artificially pre-determined by the intentions of others, non-peer relationships within the community of communicants become inevitable. These structurally non-horizontal relations are exclusionary in the case of genetically modified humans but also pose a problem with the inclusion of AIs without a personal status in the public sphere. Secondly, Habermas argues that the social formation of the person through the practice of exchanging reasons with peers seems irreducible to the naturalistic understanding of the mind as a computer. Unlike the case of human speakers, AI participation in human discursive practices does not lead – so far – to the formation of intentional and responsible agents.

In light of these insights, Monti suggests an ethical assessment of the moral status of AI writing systems that acknowledges them as a special kind of co-participants in human discursive practices. AIs writers are not moral or epistemic peers with humans but can partake in the same public conversation as co-authors. Their contribution is not merely instrumental. However, it is through the agency of human members of the linguistic community that their contribution acquires full intentionality and can be construed as a form of communicative agency.