

The Theory of Perfective Drift

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--Again, perfection is a notion which haunts human imagination. It cannot be ignored. But its naïve attachment to the realm of forms is entirely without justification. (Whitehead)¹

The theory of which I aim to sketch a basic outline here has to be understood as a philosophical theory of communication. Our first task, then, will be to clarify what sets a philosophical theory of communication apart from other communication theories. It is here that the contemporary scholar feels deep gratitude to the work of Richard Lanigan. For he has, over many years and in many publications, drawn our attention like few others to the specifically philosophical aspects of communication as a concept and as a phenomenon. In particular, I wish to refer here to his seminal explorations in the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty.² Any reading of Merleau-Ponty's mature philosophical writings cannot fail to give us the strong impression that questions of communication were central to his investigations, but it is the contribution of Lanigan, and others, to have shown just how central the theme of communication is to Merleau-Ponty's embodied phenomenology or relationality and expression and more so to have begun to make this phenomenological approach fruitful for the whole field of communication studies.

In an early publication on this topic, Lanigan highlighted the dialectical relation that exists between perception and expression in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology.³ These functions are, as it were, two sides of the same coin, what Lanigan calls the *synergic function of intentionality*. Both perception and expression are characterized by what I would like to call

a reaching-out, a real relating or communicating, that creates and pervades the togetherness or synergy of being. Perception is then understood as a relation of signs that connect subject and object while expression is understood as the synthesis of a sign system and its use in concrete occasions of the projection of a self into a world that surrounds it. This process, the process of speech, then has two modalities, an existential and an empirical one. Lanigan shows how both interpersonal communication as well as intrapersonal communication can be understood along the lines of the mutual dependency of perception and expression. The point to note here is that perception and expression are understood as ontological factors. They are the way in which being is constituted in its nature as a dialectical going-together of unity and plurality, of one and many. Because perception and expression are, in Lanigan's interpretation of Merleau-Ponty, the two sides of the single process that we call communication, we begin to see that communication has a much more fundamental role to play in philosophy than we often think. To put in a slightly laconic formulation: *the point is not to understand communication as a mode of being, but to understand being as communication*. I would like to expand on the leads that Lanigan's work gives us to develop such an understanding in a bit more detail.

The profound depth of the connection between communication and the specific nature of philosophical thought has been explored, albeit implicitly, by Merleau-Ponty in his beautiful and arresting inaugural lecture, *In Praise of Philosophy*.⁴ As true beginning always comes in the fullness of time, it is perhaps fitting in this Festschrift to use this text, which marks the beginning of a professorial career at the Collège de France, as a starting point to clarify the nature of philosophical thinking. It will be particularly apt to do so, as it will turn out that the theory of perfective drift requires the kind of viewpoint Merleau-Ponty develops here in order to be understood correctly.

The lecture investigates the function of the philosopher; by giving a critical assessment of those that held the philosophy chair at the Collège de France earlier, Merleau-Ponty

articulates his own view of what the task of philosophy consists in. The lecture ends in a eulogy of philosophy in the form of a eulogy of its patron saint, Socrates. It is clear that for Socrates philosophy exists in communication, its home is the living and open conversation between people, seeking understanding collectively in the knowledge that they don't know. But this is just the first aspect of the obviously communicative dimension of philosophy. For Merleau-Ponty shows that the particular position that Socrates assumes, and makes available to all of us, is not just that of acknowledging that truth has to be found and legitimized in a collective investigation, but that of someone who has taken possession of him- or herself as a speaker, as someone who expresses to others in order to understand. The philosopher stands for that part of ourselves where we experience our existence, and indeed that of the world, as not understood, but as perhaps, waveringly, provisionally, open to being understood. The philosopher stands for that part of ourselves which Merleau-Ponty describes in terms of a negative, an openness in being, or indeed "a weakness in the heart of being": over against the solidity of religion, theology, history and discourse, with their modes of explanation, the philosopher is aware of the radical individuality of her existence in which no other ground for assent to any of the claims of religion, science, politics or history can be found that one that has been established in "a turn toward the personal conversation that develops within us and that we are". Philosophy "investigates the power of expression which other symbolic complexes merely exercise".⁵ This makes the philosopher, "the human being who awakens and speaks", the unwelcome guest he or she is in the company of those who insist on certainty, dogma and convention.⁶

It is clear from these formulations that Merleau-Ponty invites his readers to an existentialist view of philosophy. In philosophy we grasp our own existence as finite, but as related to others and to being, in ways that remain open, to be clarified and explored and above all, to be given a place in the way we live and think. Philosophy does not seek

explanations – for how, as Merleau-Ponty asks himself, can a weakness in the heart of being explain anything? – rather, it seeks to put us in a certain position vis-à-vis ourselves, the others and truth, a position that involves an inversion or conversion from our normal positions, in which we play along, or act out, our implication in the various symbolic complexes. Philosophy does not demolish those – Socrates was faithful to Athens to the very last – but it puts them in a different light by articulating our relation to them, as individual persons, as those beings who express themselves and by expression seek understanding. The philosophical position is, thus, for Merleau-Ponty not one of pleading one's cause or of challenging, not one of seeking to contribute to the solidity of existing discourse, but to speak in such a way that freedom, this point of openness, shows itself in the theories the philosophical practice develops. Here lies the function of the philosopher. He concludes: “the mystery of philosophy (and of expression) consists in this, that sometimes life is the same, for oneself, the others and the true. These are the moments that justify philosophy. For the philosopher only these matter”.⁷ We can conclude that the, or at least a, task of philosophy is to make available to us, in understanding and action, expression as lived, related and relating reality, here and now.

Such a task for thought does not coincide with science, or religion, or art, or politics. Perhaps it contributes something to all these pursuits, but it is not the same. The difference has already been indicated by speaking of a conversion that is required of our normal modes of consciousness. Philosophy, in the function we have highlighted here, is not conceptual, not deductive or inductive but rather indicative. Its reflections, mediated as they are by language, logic and conceptualization, point imperfectly to something immediate, an intuitive grasp of ourselves as both related to and distinct from others and caught up in a continuous flux in which the fleeting moment is the primary locus of an elusive truth and an experienced ignorance, the mirror-image of a question we find in each lived fleeting moment and indeed in

the world itself. It seems that all philosophies circle, in one way or another, around such a nearly inexpressible intuition, even if they differ greatly in how they theorize, conceptualise and articulate it. But they have the permanent dual function of pointing out the intuition and then articulating it as best they can, a process which, if it goes well, strengthens both sides rather than only one at the expense of the other. I claim that we can read Merleau-Ponty's eulogy of philosophy as a way of showing the irreducibility of this level of intuition for all our attempts at understanding, at speaking truth and at living together, and safeguarding it precisely in and by its detailed articulation. This is the view of the nature of philosophical theories to which the theory of perfective drift that I develop in outline here subscribes, and which it therefore also applies to itself. This theory does not have many explicit precursors, but the idea of perfective drift combines some of the intuitions of classical metaphysics with a view of communication as a creative process aimed at understanding and meaning making, but not at annexation or incorporation of the other. As such it recognizes precursors in Burke's analysis of religious language as the language of perfection, which formed the basis of his general notion of rhetoric as a perfecting, purifying and identifying effort and, in the wake of this idea, by William Booth's ameliorative view of rhetoric as put down in his *The Rhetoric of Rhetoric*. There Booth quotes Burke: "I never think of 'communication' without thinking of its ultimate perfection, named in such words as 'community' and 'communion'".⁸ Booth makes an explicit connection between rhetoric as ameliorative communication and the religious perspective of the world as imperfect or *broken*. He also suggests, in a rhetorical analysis of the relation between religion and science, that the shared recognition of imperfection is the common ground that makes a communication between religion and science possible.⁹ The theory of perfective drift is not unconnected to these religious roots of the idea of perfection, as they form such an important part of classical metaphysics as well – it suffices here to only mention Aristotle's idea of the unmoved mover to illustrate this point;

nevertheless, I claim that the notion of perfective drift does not require a theistic context in order to be understood or meaningful.

What, then, is the guiding intuition of the theory of perfective drift, and how does it seek to articulate, and investigate, this intuition? Probably the shortest way to say it is that the theory conceptualizes communication as the linchpin connecting a classical view of being and its “perfections” – unity, truth and goodness with a processual ontology for which being is becoming.

The traditional perfections are trans-categorial predicates and are therefore, like the concept of being, necessarily analogical in their application. They articulate what is given with any being at all, insofar as it is. Although such articulation is possible, indeed the whole of classical metaphysics was such an articulation, the only appeal here is to the intuition that, in ways that remain to be worked out, that there are three of such traditional perfections of being. Firstly, all being is one – it is a unity and is itself one within a manifold of beings that somehow displays solidarity. Secondly, all being is true – all being is either itself “true” in an ontological sense (which could mean intelligible) or it is a something that makes a true proposition (about it) true. Thirdly, all being is good – all being participates in perfection, usually as being perfectible. In classical philosophy the “transcendentals” were thought of, onto-theologically, as having their pinnacle in a highest being, God, or “being itself”, in which they were realized perfectly. But for all other spheres of being the transcategorial predicates are also perfections, albeit in a different way, namely as aspects that are inexhaustibly and infinitely capable and in need of further development, both in reality and in our understanding of them (we see this notion of perfection also in contemporary perfectionist ethics).¹⁰ It is not the case that the perspective of the transcendental predicates of being has simply been abandoned with Kant, as facile histories of philosophy sometimes suggest, rather the structure of the transcendentals finds its way into the relation between Kant’s three

critiques, and from there on continues, sometimes nearly unrecognizably, in contemporary philosophy, as has been shown in great detail recently by Aertsen.¹¹ Here we only use the basic and lasting intuition, so aptly expressed by Plato as “the desire and pursuit of the whole” (*Symposium* 193a).¹²

But we don’t find this wholeness in a static, formal perception of an eternally unchanging reality in which we imperfectly participate and which exists somewhere else, fully determined and formed. We find it in the living moment, the position of the philosopher, the Socratic position. It exists only in the flow of mutual interpenetration that we experience within and around us as the unstoppable movement of reality itself. We find it in the river of becoming, into which we can’t step twice, and where sense, as Merleau-Ponty says, is always “sense-in-the-making”, in which truth “lasts only a single moment” and has to be said then, and in which “life can renew itself as it simply follows its course”.¹³ In other words, it is only in the existential now, a moment beyond what has become and which therefore is a transgressive movement into the future or the new, that being “is”; being is its becoming, it is a flux that we miss when we try to dissect it with static concepts, and yet it exists in its articulation or expression, it is in each transgressive now which is an explication of the implicit (or implicate – to use David Bohm’s terminology) wholeness of being.¹⁴

These brief indications are meant to give an initial idea of what “perfective drift” means. The communicative act is conceptualized by the theory as an ontological and transcendental (in the classical sense) moment of self-expression and communication, an active moment of relating to others that provides the space, as it were, for the wholeness of being, which remains implicit, to become explicit. The theory thus articulates an ontological dimension of overflowing or ecstatic being that is generic to what it means to be and it sees this not as an overflowing into nothingness but as a creative seeking out of relatedness to others. What does the theory say to those, and contemporary philosophy is full of them, who

deny such intuitions of wholeness or see them as having been overcome since philosophy declared the end of metaphysics? We would point out that there is no implication here of a traditional vision of a harmony or great chain of being. There is an idea of harmony only in the root sense of a “joining”, which however remains shot through with negativity and difference and finite momentariness. There is the further suggestion that the whole, or one, is only manifest in the way the many actually relate to each other and so when seen as a theory of the one and the many, the theory of perfective drift accords equal status to both, with the see-saw of actuality tipping over the latter side. But, on the positive side, the theory is compatible with the view of the relation between universality and communication that lies at the basis of Whitehead’s process metaphysics, according to which universality is defined in terms of communication (what doesn’t communicate is unknown), rather than the other way around, so the nature of communication determines the nature of the relation between unity and plurality.¹⁵ Finally, in less strictly philosophical but more cultural terms, a reflection on and nuanced theory of, wholeness seems to be more urgent in terms of philosophy’s contribution to developing the conceptual resources, ideas and visions necessary for the world today than a further prolonged insistence on fragmentation. It is precisely the power, and aim, of the theory of perfective drift to find a new way of understanding the nature of the complementarity of pairs such as universal-particular, truth-appearance, community-individual, one-many.

With these preliminary remarks about the nature of philosophical thinking in general and some of the commitments of the theory of perfective drift in particular, we will now turn to a sketch of the theory itself.

The theory of perfective drift brings together two lines of thought: one, the ontology of possibility and process, and then especially as it has taken shape in the utopian philosophy of Ernst Bloch and the work by others that is based on his ideas and takes them further; two,

communication theory as schematized by Robert Craig, i.e. the idea that the conceptualization of communication is inherently pluralistic and geared towards explicating and critiquing what communicators ‘always already’ understand by communication, in various contexts and practices.¹⁶ In Craig’s 1999 charting of the area of communication theory he mentions the possibility of new types of communication theory arising on the basis of hitherto neglected, but clearly present, self-understandings of communicators in the act of communication. One of these aspects is the self-organizing and novelty-creating dimension of communication, the subtle and yet pervasive moment within the communicative act where I as communicator somehow move beyond myself and find the next word – and find myself. We have tried above to indicate it and to show that this moment is intrinsically related to the function of philosophy, and so has to be understood using a philosophical approach. It is a moment in which something that was not yet there finds its way into present being, the realization of a possibility. But I can only engage in this creative way with communication if I am enveloped or implicated (literally: “folded into”) in the communicative act with a basic attitude of hope: that the next word can be found, that I can say what I have to say, that I may, even, be understood, that something - be it truth, be it understanding, be it misunderstanding and falsity - comes from this, my self-expression. I can also only engage in this creative way with communication if I don’t already quite know what I am going to say, if my communication is more than a pre-orchestrated mode of coordination, if I can open up to the curious aspect of consciousness which Bloch called the not-yet conscious, in contrast to the no-longer conscious that we have learnt so much about from Freud. The not-yet conscious, the forward-looking, transgressive threshold of consciousness, is given in hunches, daydreams, pre-appearances of all kinds, longings, wishing, what might be but is not yet. “Longing is the only honest characteristic of all people”, Bloch writes in the introduction to his *The Principle of Hope*, and we could add that, like life, it is no characteristic at all since it is the very sign of,

and sail into, novelty, not tradition.¹⁷ Our desire gives a clue as to the possibility of creativity, and as communication consists in the renewal of relatedness from moment to moment, as communication, at least the dimension we are concerned to conceptualize, consists in the creation of the new as a fundamental layer of existence itself, we have to look to desire to understand communication. So, while it is possible to look at communication from the point of view of system homeostasis (but even that is a goal and as such a to and fro between no-longer and not-yet), here our concern is the other aspect: that of transgression.

The rhetorical tradition has always known about the close link between communication and desire, in a more or less instrumentalizing fashion, as fashions in rhetoric have waxed and waned. Plato's *Phaedrus* – with its double-decker structure of a discourse about rhetoric as the leading of souls and erotic love as the luring of souls, both finding their consummation in the philosophical life of Socrates in which speech is more central than writing, the life we explored above – leaves no doubt as to the close relation between matters of communication and the erotic itself. Kenneth Burke's *Grammar of Motives and Rhetoric of Motives* can be seen as a rhetorical theory that links motivation, so closely connected to desire, to the structure of the communicative act.¹⁸ Without a motivation to influence and persuade there can be no meaning at all, according to Burke. Even the most formal semantic operation takes place against a dramatic background of drive and purpose. "Wherever there is *persuasion*, there is *rhetoric*, and wherever there is *meaning*, there is *persuasion*".¹⁹ The goal of persuasion is, for Burke, identification. We can see the process of identification as an orientation on a not-yet, which might be, whether we are dealing with identification with self (self-expression), relation with others (community; separation) or identification by mystification (his term for what he calls "perfection").

For communication to move in the realm of the not-yet, of motivation and desire (itself, recall, the realm of being as becoming), it has to contain within itself a distance to the

massive identity of the present. There can be, in other words, no communication with a moment of negativity that is built into the communicative act itself. Again, this is not a new insight and we have seen how it almost defines the position of consciousness having taken, to whatever measure possible, possession of itself in its ignorance, the position of the philosopher. Burke held that negativity is a ‘product of human symbol systems’, that the symbol itself is a paradoxical unity of identity and difference, the opening up of a gap in reality itself, but only with an eye to crossing it. The symbol both ‘is’ and ‘is not’ what it signifies.²⁰ For Burke this quality of the symbol puts the human being at a distance from him- or herself, and opens up the need or desire for identification. Here we have the basic insight into the nature of “motivation” and its many shadings that Burke offers us. We can see how the gap between symbol and symbolized only exists when there is a drive to overcome it, and that the drive only exists because of the proleptic identification of symbolic activity with what it symbolizes. Without the drive, the signifying act could not even arise. It is only because word and object have something to do with each other, in one way or another achieve an identity, that meaning can arise in the first place. This is what it means to say that where there is meaning, there is persuasion. Burke sums his point up in his all-famous words “man is rotten with perfection”. The negative inscribes itself into our being as the lack that is co-originary with the drive to perfection, to becoming whole. The metaphor of rot is aptly chosen as the negative is not reducible to an organic category and yet pervades the organic wholeness of the embodied individual. The rot of perfection in the embodied individual, this is another way of saying ‘spirit’ or ‘soul’, not as the form of the body (Aristotle) but as its incompleteness. But also Aristotle understood rot: for in his philosophy the soul as the form of the finite living body is the urge to become infinite, the imitation of the divine.

There is an impossibility about this aim at identification. Identification is given as a goal with the nature of symbolic activity itself and rendered concrete in imaginative

constructions and practices that are themselves only possible on the basis of the availability of symbols, but if identification were ever reached, symbolic activity – and hence communication and consciousness – would cease. On the view we have articulated about becoming as fundamental to being, we might even say that in such a situation being would cease – an absurd conclusion. We can say: identification is a limit notion of communication, and with that of being. The sanity of a symbol-wielding animal might consist in coming to terms with both the necessity of the drive for identification and the impossibility of satisfying this drive. Such an animal might come to the mystical insight that its nature as a symbolic creature *is*, in the final instance, its identity: that it *is* this “gap” in the real, that it *is* the movement of the negative: an *is* that is crossed out as self-identity right from the start. It might then experience a moment of enlightenment, after which it might become possible for this animal to live as what it is: creative, transgressive, expressive advance into novelty, in relation to an implicit whole to which it relates and gives a place in the same act as with which it distances itself from it. This perspective would imply an ethics of what we might call a “purification of desire”, along the lines of Burke’s suggestion that rhetoric and communicative action are purifications of war, which changes our attitude towards our desires and which, by widening our perspective of the dynamics of the relation between self, other and wholeness, might be able to put us in a free relation to our desires, where we do not have to deny them but also are not consumed by them in a narrow, egocentric fashion in which they have more control over us than we over them. But, as other lines of thought indicated here, this point cannot be elaborated now.

Burke was very clear about the ontic regionality of negativity. Nature did not partake in it. For him, only the human world is constituted by the triad symbol-identification-perfection. Nature is what it is and as it is. This view implies that language is not part of nature, that this very statement says something about nature that nature itself has no dealing

with at all: the opposition nature-human is absolute and not open to mediation. Burke displays here a lingering commitment positivism, one which the theory of perfective drift resolutely breaks with. It sees nature, this self-contained ‘other’ of symbolic activity, as itself an imaginative or virtual construction, a pre-appearance of identity as coinciding with oneself and as such as a pole of the process of realization that is always, not just in the human realm, a process of communication and relation, of setting up and traversing the gap of the negative, of living into the unknown possible new. “Nature” means then either what is self-identical because it is dead and past, or the image of a union of opposites in which life lives and moves and yet is what it is: this is the conceptual structure at the base of most religious, mystical and utopian visions of perfection, the wolf lying down with the lamb and not eating it, a world in which we can be at home.

We can clarify and give further structure to the theory of perfective drift by listing several claims that it makes, although it is not possible here to provide exhaustive justifications for each of them. Some of them we have already implicitly discussed:

1. The best way to understand, at the ontological level, the process of realization, is to understand it as communication. Thus, the theory of perfective drift generalizes communication into a universal, speculative ontological concept. To be means to relate to others, to be for others. This relating is not something static or formal nor an emanation, but a truly new, creative movement of going out of oneself, an ontological abundance.
2. Communication cannot be understood in abstraction from the mutually dependent notions of drive, negativity, perfection and the not-yet; the subjunctive is an ontologically more fundamental category than the indicative.²¹
3. The general drive towards perfection is no guarantee that its aim will be realized, but the possibility that it will cannot be ruled out: this transforms the *drive* into a *drift*: the

universe is set on a course, which may yet be thwarted but has not been thwarted yet.

There is a positive orientation within the process of realization, a “principle of hope” that is more than an add-on, rather it is constitutive of the very process of being. Our individual creative and communicative acts take place against the background of this positive orientation.

4. The frontier of communication is always a transgression, a danger and a possible rescue, a “sail into the other world” (Bloch).²² It is the Socratic place of ignorance.

Now ‘perfective drift’ does not mean ‘things are getting better all the time’, we are cruising steadily onwards to a point Omega.²³ Often things do not get better, at least not visibly so; the tendency to solve the problem of evil by arguing that the evil in the world is good for something is far from the theory of perfective drift. Catastrophe is always possible and often real and its negativity can be bottomless. Suffering is universal. Hope is often misguided and if not that, nearly always disappointed. Roadmaps of what this “better” would consist in are not available; if they were, we would have to be suspicious of them. The nature of the new itself precludes such facile teleology. But we have to go even further: the universe itself may die a slow entropic death, while being long-forgotten because no mind will be there to care or lament its demise. Death is the foreseeable horizon of our individual lives, mine and yours; a limit we cannot claim to understand and which only a facetious grin or hypocritical smile can call into doubt. And yet, the fact that things are this way, shows, *ex negativo*, that it might be otherwise, and better. We could think of this ‘might be better’ as an escapist fantasy fed on denial and anxiety; something like this Erich Fromm had in mind when speaking of humanity’s tendency to want to escape freedom: a vision that looks to be alive but is actually dead, unchanging. However, the fact that hope is given with the very structure of the symbolic act, and the fact that the symbolic act universalizes itself because every ‘other’ that it sets up as laying outside of it is already part of the symbolic act (its nature is transgression), indicate

that this ‘might be better’ is part of the very fabric of being itself (being is perfective). In this way we can understand Bloch’s idea that the world has a dream of itself as connected to Whitehead’s idea cited above, that, in philosophy universality defined by communication is universality enough.

One consequence of this line of argument is that reality is filled with symbols, that it has a symbolic side by which it pre-empt itself, as it were. Bloch called this category of the real “real symbol” (*Realsymbol*), and traced it back to cabbalistic thought and to Jakob Boehme’s idea of *signatura rerum*, and his book by that name, in which things are seen as signs, and vice versa. A theory of real symbols can be developed, which would be part of understanding the cultural matrix of communicology, a theme that is so central to much of Lanigan’s work:

(T)he symbolic communicates itself to its expression solely from the perspective of its object content, differentiates the individual symbols from the perspective of the objectively real material, whose variously situated content of cloakedness, content of factual identity they respectively depict as this cloaked and factually identical aspect. And it is solely this depictiveness of a *real cipher*, of a *real symbol*, which finally lends symbols their genuineness.²⁴

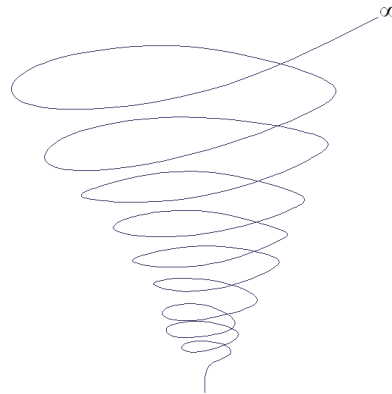
Perfective drift exhibits the two elements Bloch identifies in reality as process, *tendency* towards identity and the *latency* or “cloakedness” of this identity: we do not know what it is, and also the world itself does not know where it is headed. But perfective drift is also a profoundly communicative phenomenon because it is through and through symbolic. It exists only in the moment of relating, both as the moment of the self-relation or reflection in taking possession of the self, the Socratic moment, as well as the moment of the creation of the new in the relation between self and other.

On the basis of this understanding of the real symbol, a critical theory of culture and communication can be developed that would help us to understand the history and future of cultural formations and communicative practices such as religion, politics, art, social and legal institutions and science. The real symbol, understood on the basis of the theory of perfective drift, can in this way provide a matrix for a form of communicology that allows us to explore perfective drift as it precipitates in communicative cultures and practices as well as institutions aimed at increasing understanding and communicative exchange free from structures of domination or violence. But the cultural domain conceived of as a *matrix*, a temporarily fixed set of communicative coordinates and symbolic practices, is part of a much wider, ontological, *flux* of symbolization, like a vortex that forms on the surface of a flowing river and dissolves back into the general flow before long. This flux is the sphere of the constitution of the communicating subjects, “awakening and speaking”.

One of the structural features of the field of communication theory as identified by Craig is its dialogical-dialectical coherence.²⁵ Different communication theories speak to each other, provide corrections and illuminations of each other in a way that is inherently pluralistic but also ameliorative. The “dialogue” different theories have with each other should help each of them further along, as well as helping our understanding of communication further along. For the theory of perfective drift two developments present themselves, which we will briefly discuss: (a) it will prove illuminating to explore the possibilities of creating a communication model of perfective drift and (b) the centrality of dialogue to the field of communication theory as a whole creates an opportunity for the theory of perfective drift, for which the Socratic communicative exchange is so important, as we have seen, to contribute to a better understanding of what dialogical-dialectical coherence is.

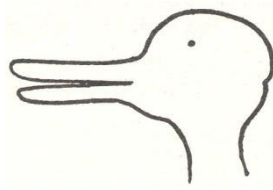
We would like to suggest in particular that Dance’s helical model of communication can be connected in an illuminating way to the theory of perfective drift.²⁶

A Helical Model of Communication
from Dance, 1967



First of all, concerning its status as a model: the model is simply an image, and therefore it can be interpreted in many different ways. We might say that it acts as an allegory or analogy for communication, by which different aspects of the phenomenon of communication can be articulated in different ways; it is not a linear or simple representation and that is not its purpose. Properly speaking, the temptation to see a model such as this as a metaphor that illustrates a literal statement of the nature of communication which still eludes us, is I think wrong. The metaphorical, the poly-interpretable, analogical image *precedes* the literal meaning statement. Metaphors are not possible on the basis of literal signification, it is rather the other way around. Seeing x as y is simply another form of the basic symbolic act, something that cannot be reduced to a literal assignment or naming that would order a space of understanding. Definitions come always last. The model is therefore quite philosophical: it shows something that is present in many different ways and yet is similar in all cases. It is interesting to note here that in this way the medial affordance of the difference between image and word can be used to express the distinction between what Wittgenstein called saying, and showing.²⁷ Logical structure, for Wittgenstein, cannot be said or articulated, it can only be shown as the structure that is present in all saying. Although Wittgenstein apparently himself held that a philosopher admits that he does not know what he is saying when he takes recourse to drawing images or diagrams²⁸, he did so himself when discussing the nature of “seeing as”, and showing (because it cannot adequately be said) the impossibility of a mediation between

forms of “seeing as” that would lead us from one to the other, while at the same time making it clear that we recognise it is the same image that we see now as this, now as that.²⁹



(On a more charitable reading of “not knowing” as a philosophical virtue, we might even rescue Wittgenstein’s philosopher “who admits he does not know” and – draws a picture.)

So, part of the theory of perfective drift is to claim that there is a certain kind of knowledge that we may call analogical, which cannot be reduced to other kinds of knowing, which is characterized by poly-interpretability and that we need to acknowledge this type of knowledge is relevant to communication (we will see below how Dance’s model can be read in this way). If this is correct, it provides a new contribution to communication theory as a field, not so much in its contents, but in its epistemological status, especially as far as the nature of the coherence of the field is concerned. More specifically, the theory of perfective drift provides an embedding of Craig’s multiverse of communication theories, in other words the dialogical-dialectical coherence of the field of communication theory points towards the theory of perfective drift. Dialogical-dialectical coherence is dialogical in that it refers to concrete subjects engaged in communication and in the process of understanding communication; it is dialectical in that the relatedness of different theories is not external but internal, and the coherence is itself analogical and creative, never unambiguous or final. “Coherence” emphasizes the realization that different ways of conceptualizing communication need each other, while yet not being reducible to each other, and that they need each other as elements of communication theory seen as metadiscursive practice: the different communication theories are as many different forms of “seeing communication as”, held together by the analogical nature of perfective drift. Perhaps Craig had the Hegelian

concept of a concrete universal in mind, a universal which exists in its various manifestations, which all add to the content of the universal, while not being merely instances of it. He rightly avoids an essentialist as well as a nominalist reading of the concept of communication. But dialogical-dialectical coherence requires a tendency within communication to even come off the ground, which the concrete universal itself cannot provide. Craig therefore relies on Carey's ritual model, to provide him with a working definition of the purpose of communication as the grounding of the constitutive metamodel. But this is a bit of a stop-gap as it does not sit well with the obvious one-sidedness (which is not a defect) of Carey's ritual model which after all is much more one of the available theories or conceptualisations than an articulation of the ground of their togetherness.

Interestingly, Craig recognises that after Dance's model speculation about defining communication stopped, only be taken up again, but in a pragmatic and community-oriented way, by Carey's work in the 1980s.³⁰ The theory of perfective drift, by understanding itself as an explicitly analogical theory, can make it clear how Dance's model can be used in a richer way than as a mere definition and can provide a more comprehensive 'metamodel' of communication than Carey's, which was never intended as a constitutive metamodel in the first place. The theory of perfective drift, with its ontological understanding of communication (and hence community) as flux can also provide an ontological embedding of Carey's ritual model which tends to be more of a matrix model (see the discussion of this distinction above).

Secondly, Dance's model envisages communication as moving between singularity and infinity. It transgresses the boundaries of linearity, because the relation between the singular and the infinite is not one of instantiation or mere augmentation and adding up, what Hegel called *bad infinity*. There is an ontological difference between the singular point or moment of existence and infinity, and yet we can say that the singular contains the infinite

within itself as much as the other way around: this is a key insight of what we have called the Socratic position. The helix is an image of metamorphosis between these two poles: how the infinite contracts into a singular instance, and how the singular instance becomes infinite. The process of becoming is a dialectical pulse, it moves in concentric but widening, or narrowing, circles, back and forth between these two poles.

Thirdly, on the basis of this dialectic we can see the usefulness of the model. It can be applied to a wide range of communicative phenomena, from dialogues and the development of self-consciousness to rumours, stories, political and mass media communication, speech acts, institutionalization, conflict and misunderstanding, and many others. In each case the model provides a way of articulating the dimension of communication that is properly philosophical, that is analogical and has to do with the “awakening and speaking” of the subject that Merleau-Ponty talks about. The model is speculative: it manifests a general feature of communication that is realized differently in different instances of communication and allows us because of that to challenge any reductive understanding of communication.

Fourthly, the model visualises the joint but counter-posed centrifugal and centripetal dimensions of communication (Bakhtin). Meaning strives to fixed, singular identity on one hand, on the other it strives towards an infinite widening out. In our theory, we can say that this striving represents the Janus-face of perfective drift: the communicative process strives towards identity, in the sense of becoming singular, and it strives towards totality. Again, we see the proximity to strands in mystical thinking, in this case the relation to the Greek thought of “hen kai pan”, “one and all”. In different, but related, senses, the one is “whole” and the all is “whole” – or, in our process philosophical account of wholeness, “not-yet whole”. It would not be amiss to see the helix as a drawn-out projection into four-dimensional time-space of the

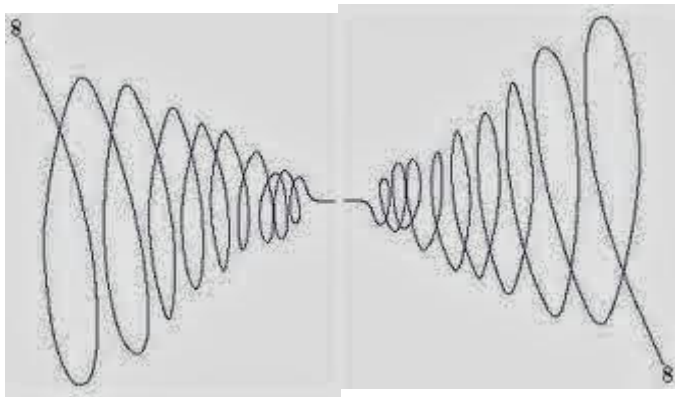
taijitu, the yin-yang symbol, which visualizes the dialectical dependency of the two poles and



the birth of one in the other. In this way, the model relates to the idea of Dao, or the all-pervasive way of the being, another articulation of perfective drift, and one that the *Dao De Jing* already recognizes to be of an intuitive nature that has to be grasped directly and cannot be discursively and conceptually pinned down: “Way-making (*dao*) that can be put into words is not really way-making, And naming (*ming*) that can assign fixed reference to things is not really naming”.³¹ The addition that the theory of perfective drift makes is not at all the claim that the eternal Dao will once be spoken but rather the realization that this opening statement of the *Dao De Jing*, when taken as an indication of how it is with perfection in this world, implies the communicative, gap-like and drift-like nature of the real. As we said, perfection becomes visible and real only in the communicatively maintained lack of it: but no communicative event is without a reference to perfection, to totality, to the whole. In Daoist terms: no “eternal name” without “the ten thousand names”, no ten thousand names without the eternal name.

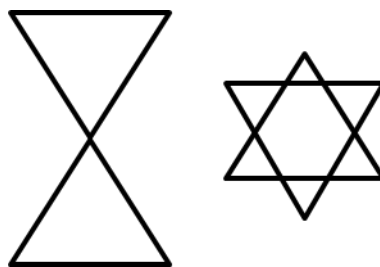
The theory of perfective drift has to be understood in exactly the same way as the status of the helical model, namely as a speculative theory that assigns the status of analogue to what it terms “perfective drift”, a fundamental feature of the process of becoming, a dialectical movement between a singular and an infinite pole which exists in the spiral-like transgressive process by which the new comes into being. Dance’s model can be used as a model of perfective drift when we make it explicit that the helical movement is driven by the two becoming poles of the helix, the singular and the infinite. This is implicit in the model, because also for Dance there would be no reason for the helix to unfold or contract if there were no bi-directional lure behind. But that lure is the persuasion Burke spoke about and the –

also ontologically generalized - erotic pull, the seductive structure of the ideal, of Plato's *Phaedrus* and *Symposium*. When seen in this way, the model acquires another connection, namely to the structure of the process of self-realisation of the individual event, the "actual entity" or "occasion" of Whitehead's process philosophy. This is the process by which a new self-creative event realizes itself as its own connection to the totality of being and in doing so creates unbounded, infinite novelty. The process is driven by a lure for realization, an aim of something that represents a value, a perfection. We can now expand Dance's model in a simple way to articulate this process-like relation of singularity and infinity, to finally yield a *model of perfective drift*:



The great advantage of this model is that it visualizes two further dimension of perfective drift that have remained implicit until now, namely the pulsating nature of the perfective dialectic and the encounter structure of communication. Perfective drift is not a gradual evolution of the universe towards an Omega point, as was noted before. The structure of negativity implies that all communication, and hence all processual realization, has the structure of a rupture of the fabric of the given, it is a transgression. The rupture is included in the fabric, and a new rupture arises. The spring-like pulsation that is given with the model we have now produced captures this moment, it captures the specific nature of the temporalisation of communication. Secondly, the communicative relation is an encounter, it is

as it were bi-directional. The spiraling towards singularity and infinity, and vice versa, happens in a dimension of “over-againstness”, itself a gap, at the meeting point of which communication occurs, paradigmatically in an I-Thou dialogue but also, analogically, elsewhere. Without this moment (which can still be a moment of recognition, relation, or of its opposite: as noted perfective drift does not mean harmony if harmony be taken merely in a classical way), communication would become appropriation. (Here we see the value of Buber’s conceptualization of the difference between the I-It relation and the I-Thou relation.) The theory of perfective drift is a theory of the universe in dialogue. At its most abstract level this dialogue is that between past and future, no longer and not yet, which is the present moment. In its religious manifestations, the bi-directionality is that between god and world, grace and nature, freedom and necessity, as in Rosenzweig’s reading of Star of David, which we can connect to the event cone and the model of perfective drift in a movement like this:³²



The communicative event arises in freedom and is liberation from the given, unto the new; it is contingent, although not unconditioned, like the hope of which it testifies and to which it gives rise. The theory of perfective drift translates into the realm of praxis by giving us a handle with which to critique images of perfection that so easily become oppressive or ideological – a critique that does not remain merely diagnostic, but because of the subjunctive nature of the theory itself is intrinsically practical, action to transform the world. The theory of perfective drift encompasses a praxis of dialogue and educated hope, using the speculative understanding of communication to examine our visions of liberation and redemption: this is where its main use as a critical communication theory lies, and where it can contribute to

existing ways of critically understanding communicative practices. Its knowledge is thus that of the subjunctive, hope as knowledge, a kind of knowledge without which we cannot understand communication, without which we cannot understand critique or indeed human existence. Adorno was aware of this type of knowledge when he wrote:

The only philosophy which can be responsibly practised in the face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption. Knowledge has no light but that shed on the world by redemption: all else is reconstruction, mere technique. (...) But beside the demand thus placed on thought, the question of the reality or unreality of redemption itself hardly matters.³³

The theory of perfective drift gives this statement hands and feet in an age in which the standpoint of redemption is not so easily articulated anymore. It shows the light of knowledge to reside in the subjunctive activation of the perspective of hope that dwells in all communication. It stands up for the invocation, the exhortative, the desiderative – without which no knowledge can be gained – and it widens these to encompass reality as a whole. It does not paint a programmatic picture of the goal of our actions, it does not stipulate an endpoint of history or simply condone our desires; it seeks to sensitize us to the flowing, creative movement in which we become ourselves and are together, and in which the new may occur in its peculiar, itself inexhaustible relation to wholeness, and to use this awareness as a source of critique of domination, exploitation, idolatry and dogmatism, but also as a wellspring of creativity itself. In this way, like all philosophy, it seeks to sensitize us to the hidden depths of reality, in this particular case to what happens when we communicate. The fact that the widest speculation possible comes to be the prerequisite for a practical critical theory that aims to liberate is the specific advance made by the theory of perfective drift as a philosophical theory of communication.

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¹ Alfred North Whitehead, *Modes of Thought* (New York: The Free Press) 1968, p. 69.

² Richard Lanigan, *Phenomenology of Communication; Merleau-Ponty’s Thematics in Communicology and Semiology* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1988).

³ Richard Lanigan, “Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology of Communication”, in *Philosophy Today* 14.2 (1970), pp. 79-88.

⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “In Praise of Philosophy”, in *In Praise of Philosophy and Other Essays*, tr. Wild, Edie, O’Neil (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), pp. 3-64.
(Citations from the text are my own translations.)

⁵ *In Praise of Philosophy*, sections 5 and 6.

⁶ *In Praise of Philosophy*, section 7.

⁷ *In Praise of Philosophy*, section 3.

⁸ Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Rhetoric: The Quest for Effective Communication* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), p. 76.

⁹ Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Rhetoric: The Quest for Effective Communication* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), p. 153-169.

¹⁰ See for example Stephen Mulhall, *The Great Riddle: Wittgenstein and Nonsense, Theology and Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) for a reflection on the perfections in metaphysics and ethics that seeks to articulate the relation between classical (Thomist) metaphysics and Wittgenstein.

¹¹ Jan Aertsen, *Medieval Philosophy as Transcendental Thought* (Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2013).

¹² The theory of perfective drift includes the claim that the psychoanalytic idea that the desire of the whole, as a constant factor in human mentality, can be reduced to a desire for a symbiosis with the mother, from which all separation is an undialectical negation, is a form of psychologism that needs to be repudiated in philosophy, while recognizing its proper sphere of application. Wholeness and the kind of separation by which we become autonomous individuals do not exclude, but rather presuppose each other, in many (analogously related)

ways. We can envisage an “ethics of solidarity and separation” as part of a fully developed theory of communication as perfective drift.

¹³ *In Praise of Philosophy*, section 7.

¹⁴ David Bohm, *Wholeness and the Implicate Order* (London: Routledge 1980).

¹⁵ Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality, Corrected Edition*, ed. Griffin and Sherburne (New York: The Free Press, 1978), p. 4.

¹⁶ Robert Craig, “Communication Theory as Field”, in *Communication Theory* 9.2 (1999), pp. 119-160.

¹⁷ Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, tr. by Neville, Neville and Plaice (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986), p. 12.

¹⁸ Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1969); *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1969).

¹⁹ *A Rhetoric of Motives*, p. 172.

²⁰ The theory of perfective drift includes the claim that is better to say that the negative and symbolic are equiprimordial and imply each other.

²¹ For an insightful exploration of the application of process philosophy to communication theory which stresses the subjunctive, see Cathy B. Glenn, “A Middle Way: Process Philosophy and Critical Communication Inquiry”, in *Empedocles: European Journal for the Philosophy of Communication* 4.2 (2012), pp. 113-132.

²² Ernst Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, tr. Nassar (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 82.

²³ Indeed, the attitude of *perfectionism*, which causes so much imperfection, is unrelated to what we mean here by perfective drift.

²⁴ Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, p. 239.

²⁵ Robert Craig 1999.

²⁶ Frank Dance (ed.), *Human Communication Theory: Original Essays* (New York: Holt, Reinhart and Winston, 1967).

²⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, tr. Ogden (London: Kegan Paul 1922).

²⁸ A personal communication by David Pears, the late Wittgenstein scholar.

²⁹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, tr. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1958), p. 194.

³⁰ Craig 1999, p. 124

³¹ Roger Ames and David Hall, *Daodejing, "Making this Life Significant", A Philosophical Translation* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2003), p. 77. Is it here necessary to refer as well to David Hall's superb essay on Taoism, process philosophy and creativity: "Process and Anarchy: A Taoist View of Creativity", in *Philosophy East and West* 28.3 (1978), pp. 271-285, in which Hall presents an interpretation of the central place of chaos in the concept of Dao as self-creative event and uses it to articulate a conception of the relation between radical novelty and togetherness that echoes central claims of the theory of perfective drift.

³² Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, tr. Galli (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005).

³³ Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, tr. Jephcott (London: Verso Books, 2005), p. 247.