Being as Communication: An Exploratory Model

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Mystical experience has a generic relevance to communication. Craig (1999), in passing, indicated the potential relevance for communication theory of a reflection on religious and mystical experience; in Simonson, García-Jiménez, Siebers and Craig (2012) I sketched an initial exploration along the lines of thinking about communication in its non-conceptual dimensions as event. In this paper, I want to address the potential of the idea of a communication model in thinking about communication and (or as) mystical experience. The model presented here, then, aims to provide some coordinates for exploring this generic relevance. Some preliminary marks about mystical experiences, the traditions I draw upon and the nature of models in communication theory precede the description of the model. In contrast with standard academic articles, I have found it most expedient to be brief and have therefore condensed the model into a series of linked theses. These can be used as exploratory devices in a range of communication situations, much in the same way as, for example, the transactional model can be applied to concrete communicative practices. The model, like others, does not claim exclusiveness or even universality; all it does is provide some handles to articulate certain aspects of communication as a process and as an experience that sometimes appear as elusive as they appear insistent. The model can be further elaborated, brought into relation with other models and theories, critiqued, transformed and amended.

It will be useful to make a distinction between two types of models: *abstractive* and *sublimative*. An abstractive model is an abstract representation of certain elements and structural features of a phenomenon, usually but not necessarily in a graphic format, which aids analytic understanding of the phenomenon in question. The Shannon-Weaver

transactional model of communication which includes the notions of a sender, receiver, message, code, encoder, decoder, channel or medium and noise, is a clear example. A sublimative model starts from the meaning of model that we encounter in phrases like "a model of beauty", or "a model case" of this or that. Model here means an exemplary instance. These "models" articulate an intensity of realisation, a paradigm or ideal case, or the full realisation of the thing they model. In this sense, for example, Th. W. Adorno spoke of models of freedom in his *Negative Dialectics* (Adorno, 1969). An example in communication theory is Buber's dialogical I-Thou model. *I and Thou* (Buber, 2004), first published in 1923, is an attempt to articulate what communication between people (and between people and God) in its full realisation is; it argues that the I-Thou relation has to be understood in its own terms, and that it provides the basis for other, less fully developed communicative relations (I-It relations) to be possible. I-Thou is not the rare, if ever achievable, perfect instance of communication, but rather the always present, but often only partially acknowledged, ground of all communication. But as such it functions as an ideal; it can be used as goal and as a measure of critique; it can also be used as background against which to appreciate the many forms of communication, as they are all united by reference the intersubjective, non-objectifiable relation. The I-Thou relation, finally, allows us to understand the mediality of communication (e.g. language) not as an external code but as the way in which the free encounter between I and Thou actualises itself. A sublimative model tells us what communication, from a particular perspective of set of interests, is all about. An abstractive model gives us a handle on the mechanics of the communicative process. These two models do not exclude each other but they do move in different registers – we might say the abstractive model uses concepts of the understanding (a sender, a receiver, whichever they are; a code, whichever it is), while the sublimative model uses ideas of reason (the free encounter, what it ideally amounts to).

The strength of a model lies in two factors mainly: the reach of its applicability or interpretability and the coherence of its basic notions. Coherence is here defined by reference to A.N. Whitehead, as meaning "that the fundamental ideas in terms of which the scheme is developed, presuppose each other so that in isolation they are meaningless. This requirement does not mean that they are definable in terms of each other; it means that what is indefinable in one such notion cannot be abstracted from its relevance to the other notions" (Whitehead, 1978, p. 3). Coherence renders the model unified and ensures that as a whole it predicates more than each of the constituent parts taken in isolation. When coherence obtains, a model has an organic quality and is a functional whole. Coherence is a requirement of both abstrctive and sublimative models. The Shannon-Weaver model is a good example: each of its constituent notions cannot be separated from the others, yet there is something in each of them that is not simply definable in terms of the others, as a moment of reflection will show to everyone. Also the I-Thou model satisfies the condition of coherence to have no arbitrary bifurcations or unmediated dualisms in that I and Thou are distinct aspects of the intersubjective relation, presupposing each other but not definable in terms of each other ("I" do not exist outside of the I-Thou relation, but I am not simply the other of Thou). The model presented here also aims to satisfy this condition of coherence.

Finally, it is necessary to remind ourselves of the difference between models and theories. These differences do not amount to watertight, mutually exclusive categories, but as a rule of thumb we can say that a model stands in a relation of interpretation or resemblance to what it models. The application of models is always analogical to some extent. Models can be part of theories, but theories have a wider remit than models. A theory gives an account, according to certain criteria of accountability (often causal) and certain trivial conditions such as logical coherence and non-contradiction (or a version of these; e.g. dialectical accounts will use a qualified version of the principle of non-contradiction while formal theories require more

stringent conditions of univocity of their concepts than non-formal theories). Without these parameters, theoreticality is compromised or lessened, and other forms of discourse take over. A model can be part of a theory, as I said, but it does not have to be, as its basic notions can have a non-theoretical basis in understanding. Thus the relation between Romeo and Juliet as a model of consuming love is not part of a theory, but of a play. But it can be used (in its relevant contexts) in much the same way as the Shannon-Weaver model. One way of articulating the porous boundary between theory and models is to point out that both, as ideals, seek the kind of coherence defined above.

The concept of mystical experience is not clearly defined, and perhaps not clearly definable at all. Yet the experience itself is a recurrent feature of human consciousness throughout history and across cultures and religious and philosophical traditions. The aspect that interests me most here is that of a direct, intuitive grasp of the undifferentiated oneness that pervades all being, and which often involves a breaking or loosening of ego-boundaries in which, in one sense or another, a fusion with a totality is experienced. This experience is usually seen as lying beyond concepts and words because these divide up the whole and cannot by themselves stick it back together again. It is essentially intuitive and therefore has the quality, once it is experienced, of being self-evident.

As we are dealing here with an experience and not a concept or idea, it will be useful to list three sources here by way of indicating what we are talking about, without (vainly) trying to make it discursively accessible, thus creating a false semblance of some conceptual or logical grounding of something that essentially goes against that operation. The reader has to do some work here, too:

> In 1934, Carl Gustav Jung, in his foreword to Daisetz T. Suzuki's *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, described Ch'an (Zen –JS) as a process

transforming the limited ego-form self into the unlimited non-ego-form self. When one embraces an insight into the nature of one's self, emancipation from the illusory conception of self takes place and total consciousness emerges. This new, total consciousness is distinguished from the ego-form consciousness in that the latter is always conscious of something, whereas the former takes no object but itself. It is as if the subject character of the ego has disappeared, leaving this total consciousness conscious of itself. It is free from attachment to things, creatures, and circumstances. By this turning inward, man glimpses a total exhibition of potential nature. This realization may be illustrated by the words of Hsüan-sha Shih-pei. A disciple once asked him how he could enter Ch'an. He answered, "Do you hear the murmuring of the stream?" "Yes." "Therein you may enter." (…) William Barrett (…) calls this consciousness Radical Intuitionism. Intuition is an activity, but one without either subject or object. It is our most unified state of consciousness, or pure experience. When it is in action, artists gain new inspiration, scientists make new breakthroughs and discoveries and religious devotees acquire new vision. (Chang Chung-Yuan, 1971, p. viii)

At the base of thought there is always concealed a certain mystical element; even a geometrical axiom is a thing of this kind. Usually we say that thought can explain but intuition cannot, yet explanation means nothing more than being able to reduce to an even more basic intuition. (Kitaro Nishida, quoted in Chang Chung-Yuan, 1971, p. ix).

> When the word "proof" has been uttered, the next notion to enter the
> mind is "half-heartedness". Unless proof has produced self-evidence
> and thereby rendered itself unnecessary, it has issued in a second-rate
> state of mind, producing action devoid of understanding. Self-
> evidence is the basic fact on which all greatness supports itself. But
> "proof" is one of the routes by which self-evidence is often obtained.
> As an example of this doctrine, in philosophical writings proof should
> be at a minimum. The whole effort should be to display the self-
> evidence of basic truths, concerning the nature of things and their
> connection. (…) Philosophy is the criticism of abstractions which
> govern special modes of thought. (Whitehead, 1938, p. 66-67)

These lengthy citations indicate the experience the model of being as communication seeks to articulate. I include them here not as steps in an argument but as the data the model starts with. I will return to the story of Hsüan-sha Shih-pei below when introducing the dimension of communication that is part of the mystical experience. Here I want to note that, in these citations, we are introduced to the idea that the radical intuitionism of mysticism is experiential and that this radical intuitionism lies at the basis of rational thought, which is always in a relation to it. As in Bergson's notion of intuition, the conceptualising intellect does not reach reality as such but our consciousness is capable of placing itself within the process of the real, precisely as pre-predicative intuition. Our intuitions, are, however, often dim and they require critique as much as they provide the basis for it. They share in the general quality of experience of being on the one had hard fact, and on the other open to and in need of questioning and exploration. Pointing out the basis of thought in intuition and self-evidence is quite the opposite of postulating privileged access to absolute knowledge. Empirical science and mystical experience share more with each other than with the claims of

religious totalitarianism, esoteric knowledge or absolute idealism. They both start from a fact that also seems self-evident: as knowers, we *question*. Even radical intuitionism, and with it – if we come to interpret at such – the universal oneness of which we are part, comes to light itself only for the questioning mind. A creative openness seems to be an intrinsic part at least of our relation to reality as such, if not co-extensive with it in some sense that is yet to be explained.

A disciple once asked Hsüan-sha Shih-pei how he could enter Ch'an. He answered, "Do you hear the murmuring of the stream?" "Yes." "Therein you may enter." In this short koan-like story the starting point is easily overlooked. It is the questioning mind. How do I enter Ch'an, active meditation, or enlightened consciousness co-extensive with what is? That is where the process of entering the stream starts. The response to this question, the basic question of philosophy as Whitehead talks about it in the citation above, is a further question, pointing out what is self-evident and not going beyond it in any way. There is no theorization, no conceptualization, no speculation and no dispensing of knowledge or information. The answer to the question. The answer is almost like a question again. Of course I hear it! What of it? "Therein you may enter." An invitation, not a command. Into what? Not the stream itself, at least not initially. But into the hearing of it. Again the disciple is thrown back upon more questions: what does hearing mean? What does it mean to enter into hearing as one might enter into a stream? To hear is to perceive, to know in some sense. Hearing retains the distance between the hearer and the heard, and it requires a connecting medium that is itself not heard (unlike, as Plato already pointed out, sight, where the medium is what is seen). But entering into a stream is becoming one with it. You are carried along with it. The paradox of Ch'an seems to be that the subject-object distinction is overcome, without it being the case that there are no hearers and heards anymore, that everything would become one indistinct soup, philosophy's night in which all cows are grey. The disciple's enlightenment lies along

the path of coming to an insight into this paradox, and the path is itself an instance of the play within the real that knowledge is, because it proceeds strictly along the line of questioning thus exhibiting an openness that is not filled up, an emptiness or negativity that is part and parcel of the real. Through successive stages of questioning, blank ignorance becomes philosophical not-knowing and openness comes into its own.

This is a story. It seems to me to have a profound meaning that, much like a wellspring, can continue to give cause for thought and contemplation, to be hauled up by the bucket of interpretation. Yet it does not address directly an important question, a question to which it nevertheless may give rise precisely by remaining silent about it. This is the question of being. The interrelated world the story indicates, in which everything depends on everything else and independence is itself a relative factor within relatedness, not something that exists absolutely outside of it, is at first sight simply the universe of things and experiences, the interconnected web of life. Everything is related to everything else. What, however, about the being of this world as such? What does it mean to be *as such*, not to be this or that entity-in-relation? Why is there something at all, and not nothing? We are dealing here with two questions, or two levels of questioning, which Heidegger distinguished with the help of the idea of ontological difference. The level of questioning at which interrelatedness becomes apparent is ontic, it concerns the nature of all that there is insofar as it is. The second level is ontological, it concerns the question what it means to be, not to be nothing (White, 2014, p. 133-180)

If we look closely, we can see that the story carries this ontological difference within itself. At the ontic level we find the stream, its sound and the hearing of it, the two people interacting. At the ontological level, the story itself is a stream, something is gradually disclosed in the time of the story that shows what the interconnectedness of the situation that is described means. The universe is an interrelated web. At the higher level, this "is" shows

itself as a giving to be known, to us who are reading and thinking about the story. Self-evidence repeats itself, first at the level at which the student monk comes to realise the path he is on, secondly as the self-giving to knowledge of being. Not only is all that is interrelated, being as such is relational in its standing out to being known.

We can find clear parallels to these ideas in the Western philosophical tradition, and not only with the arrival of Heidegger. The Parmenidean identity of being and thinking, which can be traced through history via the scholastic principle that to be simply means to be knowable (if not by man then by God) to Hegel's equation of the real with the reasonable and the pragmatist equation of reality with intelligibility indicates an awareness of the ontological level, even if, as is well-known, Heidegger argued that the metaphysical tradition again and again succumbed to the temptation to conflate the ontic and the ontological. The idea that the interrelatedness of beings is not something contingent but grounded in their being as such was given a classical formulation by Plato (which also serves as a good example of the procedure of self-evidence in philosophy that Whitehead refers to):

> I suggest that anything has real being, that is so constituted as to possess any sort of power either to affect anything else or to be affected, in however a small degree, by the most insignificant agent, though it be only once. I am proposing as a mark to distinguish real things, that they are nothing but power. (*Sophistes*, 247e, tr. Cornford)

This criterion has no meaning if the power is not exercised at all; it is therefore circular, though not in a vicious way for it is at least analytically informative. Aquinas introduces the explicit link to communication: "It is the nature of every actuality to communicate itself insofar as it is possible" (*De Potentia*, q. 2, a.1, tr. Norris Clark). Whitehead combines the

Platonic mark of being with the Thomist active propensity to communicate in a formulation of being as communication that is as lapidary as it is irrefutable:

> Thus the philosophic scheme should be "necessary", in the sense of bearing in itself its own warrant of universality throughout all experience, provided that we confine ourselves to that which communicates with immediate matter of fact. But what does not so communicate is unknowable, and the unknowable is unknown; and so this universality defined by "communication" can suffice. (Whitehead, 1978, p. 4)

By pragmatically reformulating of the idea of the identity of being and thinking in terms of experienced communication, Whitehead's philosophy gives us an account of the ontic as well as the ontological side of being as communication. Not only do all beings communicate, or relate; being as such, what it means to be, is communication as giving-to-be-known. The story of the Ch'an monks covers the same ground; in this way we have found that the mystical experience of radical intuition tells us something about communication in a generic sense. *Being communicates* is the first element of our model.

Classical Thomism has charted the implications of being as communication in great detail (Blanchette, 2003, p. 367-476). For the purposes of our model only two points need to be stated explicitly. 1. There is a difference between effective or productive causality, in which one entity brings about another materially, and the relation of knowing, which is one of sensation, recognition or intellection. It seems to me that this difference is treated as an irreducible difference in classical metaphysics, but in Whitehead's philosophy the difference is one of degree. We can understand this if we realise that both are instances of creativity, taken in its most generic sense as the production of novelty. In both the key feature of the

communicative relation is present, namely the going together of a sharing or imparting, a commonality of some sort, and a withholding or foreclosing, an independence of some sort. This is precisely the irreducible and therefore indispensable and indefinable feature of communication, which our philosophical reflection has aimed to make clear: communication is not a "merging into one" but a "being together", which means to share or participate in each other, but also to remain with oneself. The model seeks to give a handle on this basic insight, which is presupposed by our notions of, for example, mediality and recognition rather than that we might explain communication by reducing it to these, and other, notions of communication theory. Our model shows that and how communication is an irreducible term, coherently relatable to others in the models and theories that make up the field of communication theory.

For an abstractive understanding of the communicative relation, it will appear that the sharing and the withholding sides lie outside of each other. And indeed in everyday experience this is often the case, it not always, to some extent. But for, as I have called it, a *sublimative* understanding of the communicative relation, which our model aims to include, the classical metaphysical tradition has a theorem that we may profitably use. Being excludes nothing, so all things are in some sense. But this does not make "being" the highest genus or most abstract and empty concept, precisely for the same reason: because it excludes nothing. "Being" is not really a concept at all, but the name for a pre-predicative, unthematic experience of the correlate of thinking (Weissmahr, 1991). From this it follows that all things converge in being – insofar as they all are, they are one – but also that all things diverge in being – for their differences are ultimately difference in being; *this* is different from *that*. Classical metaphysics holds that, paradoxically, that in which things are one is also that in which things are different: their being. We see that the sharing and withholding of communication are not mutually exclusive but both are equally grounded in what it means to

be. Weissmahr (1991) has developed this idea in the direction of a critique of the substance-accident scheme of Aristotelian metaphysics, which has tended to see relations as forms of accidental being, and argues instead that on the basis of the idea of being as that in which things both converge and diverge, relations hold a special ontological status. We can conceive of a substance-relation scheme, in which the independence of an entity and its relatedness are not mutually exclusive or inversely related, but in which they presuppose each other and as one becomes more intense, so does the other. Weissmahr gives the example of the differences between inorganic matter, organisms and persons (Weissmahr, 1991, p. 166). At the inorganic level individuality but also relatedness are both relatively indistinct. Where does a piece of matter begin, where does it end? And one stone is not affected much by its contiguity to another stone. In an organism, the functional individuality of organs as well as their interdependence is much more pronounced. In interpersonal relations, finally, we can make the experience that the more intense or worked out the relatedness of persons is, for example in free relations of mutual recognition, the greater their independent, free personhood, the substantial side of the substance-relation scheme, can be (for Christian theology the relation between the three persons of the Trinity is the apex of the interpersonal relation). We can even see a reflection of this last point in the end of the koan: "therein you may enter" expresses a recognition of mutual freedom and the moment in which the disciple becomes fully himself, at least partly in and through the recognition by the master. The story progresses and we now see that this progression can be understood not only in a temporal sense, but also in a sublimative sense, in which being as communication leads to the insight that communication is essentially a free relation, in which what unites and what differentiates is ultimately the same. Again, this is a perspective that may add to communication theory, because it shows us that the dimension of freedom cannot be removed from our understanding of the communicative relation, and that therefore attempts to theorise

communication that start from relations of causal determination and information exchange are intrinsically limited in their explanatory power. The deep inadequacy of the Shannon-Weaver model, despite its local utility, can be understood in this way. If defines the sender and the receiver purely in external terms of an effective causal relation between prior, and independent, existents and leaves the essential communicative dimension of recognition and free exchange entirely in the dark, exposing itself to incoherence of its notions. This is another way of pointing out its abstractive nature (which is not a flaw as long as it is recognised as such). *Communication is a mutually overlapping sharing and withholding* is the second element of our model.

The communication relation is not a massif, ontologically uninterrupted unity, as we have seen. It seems that the way being communicates has an aspect that can perhaps be indicated by the notions of abundance, overflowing or generosity. Precisely because the communicative relation is free, what communicates cannot be simply an ontological function or extension of beings that links up with others; only an excess or surplus of being in the entities themselves can, as it were, traverse an open space and establish an encounter. Buber often uses the term "over against" to indicate that there is a space within which communication happens, and that therefore the going out of oneself to communicate with others has to be conceived as an essential extra, a freedom in being, without which, however, nothing could exist. In the classical metaphysical tradition we find indeed the notion of an ontological generosity by which being gives itself, which in Christian theology is equated with the love of God. The dimensions of essential surplus and freedom can be summed up in the notion of communication as gift, the sublimative case of the epistemological *datum*:

> Note that this expansive dynamism of the act of existence implies a
> certain ontological "generosity", as Jacques Maritain does not hesitate
> to call it, within every real being. For the real beings of our universe

> go out of themselves (…) and have an intrinsic tendency to share (…).
> Why this should, in fact, be so is, or should indeed be, a source of
> wonder for the metaphysician. Without it, of course, there would be
> no universe. But it seems that the ultimate reason is that it is the very
> nature of God himself to be self-communicating love (Norris Clarke,
> 2001, p. 33)

We may well feel that the localisation of the moment of spontaneous self-communication in a divine existent adds little to the notion of the groundlessness of being that ontological generosity aims at. In the koan I referred to we see the same sense of spontaneous communication and being going out of itself, in the image of the stream and the relation of hearing, and we may feel that the more anarchic, generalised idea of this spontaneity characterising all being equally is more true to intuition than the Thomist interpretation, but this is not a matter that we need to explore in detail here; the model has space for both avenues to be explored further. The difference hinges perhaps on an ethical moment in metaphysics. Is ontological generosity really possible without an aim or desire to share, as Norris Clarke puts it – without invoking the notion of ontological love? There is a difference between free, spontaneous self-giving as mere overflow, like a cup that is full might overflow, and the intention to communicate oneself, with another in mind already, as it were, in order to add to the stock of good things. Where are the boundaries between an anthropomorphism of the relation of recognition and an ontological claim that *ens et bonum convertuntur* – being and the good converge? How we choose to think about this question will be determined largely by how we choose to interpret the status of the substance-relation scheme of point two of our model. If we say, as the metaphysical tradition does, that the good is what is willed (and willing the good is love), we might develop a generalised notion of will that includes all

being. A further illustration from the koan literature underlines the free spontaneity of being, and does not exclude such a generalised notion of a will, drive or desire:

> (As I) sit quietly, doing nothing,
>
> Spring comes and grass grows of itself.
>
> (Watts, 2017, p. 43 and Capra, 1975, p. 125)

Communication is free spontaneity; who is to exclude that the spring and the grass communicate with the one sitting quietly, in the model's sublimative sense of being as communication? *Communication is free spontaneity* is the third element of our model.

We can now sum up the model: *Being communicates > Communication is a mutually overlapping sharing and withholding > Communication is free spontaneity.* The model is an analogue for communication processes and is sublimative, not abstractive. It is unhelpful to seek to translate the model as explained here into a graphical representation, as that would raise the impression that we are dealing with an abstractive model. We have to think of it much in the same was the familiar I-Thou model. Our model is based on a reflective recuperation of certain aspects of mystical experience and can serve as a way of articulating dimensions of the communicative experience that are sometimes elusive or difficult to put into words; it can also serve as a reminder that communication is an irreducible notion and that, when we invoke it, we always invoke more than what we may be conscious of. Communication is a universal feature of being as such, given in intuition, infinitely open to exploration and creative development. Communication is not owned by anyone, but the intractable and uncontrollable freedom by which the spirit embodies the world and animates it with the paradoxical, sometimes harmonious, sometimes chaotic, togetherness beyond discursive thinking that mystical experience gives us access to. In communication, we go out of ourselves, into the groundless stream of being – and find that we float.

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