Two Concepts of Communication as Criteria for Collective Responsibility

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ABSTRACT. In part one I review the literature, exposing some of the ambiguities, contradictions, and antinomies involved in the notion of communication. The literature presents us with two rather contradictory notions of communication: one rhetorical, the other responsible. Disparity between the two may be seen to jeopardize a "new moral mandate" to corporate business. In part two I develop more explicitly the models of rhetorical and responsible communication, locating the issue at the center of a solution to the problem of collective responsibility. A proper exercise of corporate moral responsibility, I argue, is compatible only with a model of responsible communication. I conclude by challenging top management to strive toward a goal of responsible communication at all levels in their respective corporate institutions.

1.

No collective entity, formal organization, enterprise, association or body of persons can hold itself, insofar as it acts, to be beyond evaluation from a moral point of view. To think otherwise is to declare by fiat the corporation as outcast — as something existing outside the community. A corporation — any corporation — may be held morally responsible for what it does.[1]

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The fact that corporations are subject to moral evaluation does not imply that corporations are moral persons. Such an equation blurs important differences between persons and corporations. To suppose that a corporation is an end in itself, that it has rights of life or "continued existence," privacy and free speech borders on the lunatic. Such attribution only confuses the issues. Corporations do not need to be granted the status of "full moral persons" in order to be held fully accountable from a moral standpoint. Corporations can be held accountable because "any action done by a corporation is done by humans."[2] What needs examining is how the corporation's vast resources and degree of organization bear on what, in the final analysis, is a matter of human action. For this reason, different causal stories will apply to corporate actions than to those of moral persons, though this difference may only amount to a greater complexity. It may be, too, that different moral criteria, in addition to those applicable to persons, will apply to the corporation.[3]

Such moral evaluation must meet both utilitarian and deontological criteria. Analysis must largely amount to a consideration of consequences of action. But there are also duties: to do, on the one hand, what is positively good and to avoid, on the other hand, what is negative, damaging or hurtful. Where the latter are unavoidable but expected, duty requires that we act so as to minimize the impact of negative consequences, e.g., by warning or informing those in jeopardy. Where the clout and scope of organization is great, so do these moral criteria have an equivalent seriousness. "A corporation's primary moral responsibility is to do no unjustifiable harm."[4] If corporate acts depend on "some decision procedure within the corporation,"[5] then holding corporate managers and officers criminally negligent in some cases makes good sense, for it is they who set the policies and

make the decisions. Clearly, first-order duties relevant to the consequences of corporate action, taken together, form the best single indicator of whether, and to what extent, top management should be held morally and legally liable. By this criterion, given that a case for strict liability can be made, Union Carbide would be held fully responsible for compensating the harm resulting from the disaster it created in Bhopal, India. But, assuming the case for legal liability is made, whom do we punish? Indian law holds the head of the firm and its managers criminally liable. How, in cases of institutional complexity, are we to distinguish instances of personal blame from those of collective responsibility?

If it is the case that "*corporate culture* . . . may either foster or inhibit moral action,"[6] then is not corporate culture itself subject to moral scrutiny and evaluation? We need to take a hard look not just at the internal decision structure of corporations but at the relationship of particular decisions to corporate identity. If "accountability requires disclosure,"[7] then normative considerations can be brought into play in the notion of appropriate disclosure. If scandal and disaster seem to demand full accounting in the form of inquiry or investigation, then it is at least plausible to think that such events might be largely avoided by requiring an appropriate level of disclosure as a standard that we continuously observe. To continuously observe this standard would be our duty. Combined with greater moral sensitivity than would otherwise be the case, such disclosure, conceived as a duty, might actually serve as a warning system or propadeutic to potentially wayward causal chains. Where catastrophe is inescapable, at least some of the bad consequences of such an event might be minimized or entirely averted.

What might meet the standard of a duty so conceived? It would have to be a regular feature of human experience, generally accessible to persons, and adequate to serve as a vehicle for disclosure. Such a feature appears to be available in communication, understood as speech and literacy. The concept of communication therefore suggests itself as a natural candidate for such a standard. A critical look at this notion is in order.

The concept of communication has a long and fairly undistinguished history in the literature of business ethics. John L. Paluszek sees the communications problem as "central." This is largely a result of the fact that "business leaders and critics of business have not been talking nearly frequently enough nor well enough."[8] Donald E. Danko shares this view, and thinks that "communications . . . should play a more substantial role in important corporate decisions."[9] But how? Danko is concerned with the "excessive lack of effective communications between top corporate decision makers and numerous publics."[10] The perspective shared by Danko and Paluszek is that of communications external to the corporation.

Top executives "consistently complain of problems involving communications within the organization."[11] It is not obvious that these writers are talking about the same problem. On the other hand, two questions may be raised: (1) How are internal and external communications related? (2) Is it reasonable to think that external communications depend somehow on internal communications? If we say yes to the second question, it would provide us with an answer to the first question. This contention is well worth exploring; we shall do so in what follows.

At least since Galbraith's *The New Industrial State*, the theme of planning has been a staple of the literature. Paluszek emphasizes the importance of communication for the "new mandate" to business. Noting "the power of communications," he cites a need for "*planned* communications programs," reflecting "two-way communication where feedback becomes an element in policy-formation."[12] This emphasis on planning is crucial, a recurrent feature of the literature. But why should it help? If "corporate strategy is really the pattern of decisions" that "determines . . . a company's business,"[13] then implementing strategy is intentional. Forseeing the likely causal consequences, positive and negative, is a minimal description of what this sort of intentionality requires, especially if there is an emphasis on planning.

A consistent pattern of negative consequences, on the analysis of these writers, suggests a "communications problem." If you only go back to the corporation and improve communications, they advise, then the negative consequences of "bad" corporate strategy can be averted. I do not wish to deny this (having suggested something akin to it earlier), but only to propose that it may be simplistic. The real concern ought to be that it is precisely those corporations

where "*planned* communications programs" are in place, where there already is "two-way communication" and where "feedback" is "an element in policy-formation" which launch disasters.

Paluszek's phrase "the power of communications" offers a clue, for it suggests a distinction between communication as rhetoric, on the one hand, and as information or simple assertion, on the other. Why should communication have to be powerful? It might be necessary in cases of conflict with power, in order for communication to hold its own. Whether this is accomplished by imitation or manipulation, communication is responding to power; the underlying assumption is, in either case, that communication is clearly inadequate or inferior to the trappings of power. In any case, power is simply a fact of the modern large corporation.[14]

An example from the "self-help" literature of business will illustrate how this "fact" of power is perceived. In Chapter 18 of *Executive Essentials* (entitled: 'Power: Out of the closet'), the author provides, under the subhead of "Company Politics," a list of some helpful rules of thumb, a sampling of which is — to say the least — bracing:

Assume that every company has some politics. No matter *what* they tell you. It's in every company.

Locate the political factors:
* what gets people promoted
* who's got the *real* power
* who's in the "in" crowd
* who's on the "outs"

Give the "power people" what they want. Aim to please. *Run with the "in" crowd.*

Learn how the game is played. Cliques; alliances; double-crosses; tactics — and who uses them against whom.

Beware of "comers." Most are just ambitious, like you, and will try to rise on merit. But if someone doesn't wish to play square, you must be ready to neutralize him.[15]

One may question how seriously the author takes his own views, since, in his introduction, he states: "On becoming an observer of the American business scene, I quickly reached a conclusion that is undoubtedly shared by a large segment of the business community: Success is not simply a matter of keeping one's nose to the grindstone, or a reward for years of unwavering loyalty and devotion to the firm. Proof that I am not alone in this view lies in

the sizable and sustained audience for books on how to manipulate, dominate, intimidate, or otherwise aggravate one's way to the top."[16] Clearly, Posner doesn't imagine himself to be writing humor, although this sort of paranoia may afford posterity a laugh. But one cannot read such matter without pondering some fundamental questions: Who is the intended audience? How seriously do they take such ideas? The larger question posed by this sort of work is: how compatible is social and economic Darwinism with a presumed "new moral mandate" to business? What such works indicate is a dramatic shift in the American people's conception of what work and productivity are all about.

Be that as it may, Paluszek's notion of communication is heavily weighted toward a view of communication as rhetoric. What I want to suggest is that the sort of disclosure that accountability requires necessarily precludes rhetoric, and must rely on the other sort of communication, that of information or simple assertion.

Danko suggests as much. "Ineffective corporate communications has (sic) helped create serious problems . . ."[17] On my reading, these communications are ineffective because they are entirely rhetorical. Another interpretation, the naive "communications" view suggested earlier, recognizes no such distinction, and the assumption is rather that communication is merely ineffective. Perhaps this is due to management's lack of familiarity with notions of "two-way . . . feedback" and planning, or possibly it is due to some feature of internal decision structure which blocks or thwarts or in some way fails to provide the proper flow of information through appropriate channels.

Yet Danko himself confirms the more sophisticated reading, for he recognizes that "there is an inherent conflict between the requirements for an effective corporate communications program and the personality and background of (top management) . . ."[18]

Two related buzzwords in the literature of corporate communications are "democracy" and "credibility." Their use provides us a rare glimpse, from a slightly different perspective, into our central problem. J. B. Fuqua, for example, writing at the height of Watergate, finds corporations inherently undemocratic. What is the cause of the growing credibility problem? ". . . business practices . . . tend

to encourage misrepresentation."[19] — Businessmen lie alot! A decade later, Henry Mintzberg could still agree that "corporate democracy is fundamentally incompatible with the functioning of large mass production organizations . . ." But now the emphasis is on "governance" and opening up corporations to "greater pluralistic control, without impairing their effectiveness."[20] Could it be that calling into question the honesty and integrity (at least the veracity) of American business and businessmen might impair the "effectiveness" of corporations? If so, the implications for any "new mandate" as well as for the moral evaluation of the corporation is less than cheering.

In keeping with Paluszek's suggestion that *"planned* communications programs" have a vital role to play in large corporations, it is appropriate to examine some of the literature on planning. In recent years, statements of mission, purpose and policy, corporate creeds and codes have proliferated. Robert W. Armstrong sees planning as a foundation for communication, recommending "a written communications policy," approved (of course) by top management, and stressing professionalism.[21] James N. Sites connects planning with problem-solving; "four-way communications" answers the need: "But in addition to transmitting messages *outward* to the public and intelligence *back* to management, let's never neglect to inform people both *upward* and *downward* throughout the organization structure."[22] Such planning entails establishing "a communications network which puts PR people on the receiving end of information," and here, I think, we begin to see how the goal may get undermined. "Outside of an organization's chief executive, only the PR officer is in a position to fill this vital role." This looks like an encroachment on executive power and privilege. Any executive who has gone to Posner's school will have no alternative but to "neutralize" such a threat. The best way to do that, of course, is simply to cut such people out of any real decision-making, restrict them to stop-gap efforts, preoccupying them with the "essential" (however tedious) matters of "approved" projects, designed to maintain or enhance the corporate image. The deeper problem emerges: "If left to their own devices, corporations may institute self-criticizing mechanisms that only look good on paper."[23]

If this sounds cynical, we might reflect on two instances (already cited) of the voluminous literature. Armstrong raises the issue in "Why Management Won't Talk." Management "won't talk" for numerous reasons, but all of them may be traced back to "some kind of fear."

> They include fear of being misunderstood or misquoted, uncertainty in the face of an interview or news conference, fear of tipping off competitors, fear that communication will do more harm than good . . .[24]

Never before had public relations striven so hard to be helpful, by pointing out the foibles and frailties of top management. If "false modesty" (also included on Armstrong's list) is laughable, then "failure to measure today's actions in terms of future reputation" is certainly euphemistic. Not surprisingly, the solution to these perils lies in management's coming to better appreciate "the nature and objectives of public relations," and learning to "respect . . . the public relation man's judgment or skill."[25]

Such "caution" on management's part (Armstrong calls this "natural behavior") is especially relevant, he says, to the "hard-to-predict area of communication."

In 'Solving Problems that Keep Your Boss Awake at Night', Sites refines Armstrong's observation, actually urging that managers adopt what he calls the "Fear Technique" (nothing less than pure Machiavellian manipulation).[26]

This sort of "pragmatic" or *Realpolitik* counsel sharply contrasts with another strain in Sites' article, which amounts to a sort of confessional plea: ". . . the bigger and more powerful the institution, the greater the urgency to relate all its hopes and goals to *people*."[27] Why the urgency (and why the stress on "people," as if some other entity longed to receive such messages)? Sites does not explicitly tell us. But a suggestion of the answer may well have slipped out in one rather surprising statement he makes: ". . . executives of all kinds are dying to work with *real* people — with people who are what they appear to be and who will 'tell it like it is.' "[28]

Despite the self-serving nature of Sites' article, one is caught off-guard by such a remark; but, I daresay, the admission amounts to far more than "it's lonely at the top." However one interprets the remark, the presumption of what corporate perception must be like is unnerving: specifically, it reveals the alienation of top management. This alienation, moreover, conveys management's attitude toward

employees — it is one of utter contempt. But management's attitude toward itself is scarcely less flattering. If we are to credit Site's expression of executive longing, we cannot avoid the inference that executives currently see themselves besieged by prevaricating chameleons — exactly the picture described in Posner's manual. Under such a scenario, there is little or no opportunity for either simple and direct information or honest communication to avail: for no one will "tell it like it is."

Such a remark is telling as to the bifurcation of image and substance, but it offers an even more remarkable testimony of the inroads made by the mass media and marketing techniques into the consciousness of a people, the identity of an entire civilization. Our reverence for the techniques of manipulating imagery is predicated on a collective cult of entertainment, betraying our worship of glamour and stardom, our preoccupation with power and fame. Now the techniques have assumed a life of their own, and have become high rites in the sacrament of politics, whose invocation of "management style" — no longer merely the central watchword of an era — has actually supplanted all party and doctrinal lines, wresting the stage from every consideration of substance, behavior and ability. This apotheosis of external veneer and superficial image was recently attested to by Herbert London, concerning an interview he conducted with high school students in connection with a PBS documentary, "Hollywood's Favorite Heavy," which examined "the depiction of the businessman on prime-time TV." London was alarmed by the moral implications of student responses — not surprisingly, for most were rationalizations perpetuating The Myth of Amoral Business. "What is troubling," he writes, "is that the bounds of appropriate behavior have been stretched to incorporate deceit, adultery and blackmail. . . . The message is abundantly clear: Immoral behavior that pays off is accetable for the new-age television hero."[29]

London is not trying to make a causal case for television and a decline in morals; the empirical evidence, he admits, is "fragmentary." Nevertheless, after quoting Nelson Goodman on the impact of metaphor, he makes the rather chilling observation: "television is the ultimate metaphor. It has indeed created a new world. If the students I talked with are any guide, we had better address ourselves to this

world of images before the images so affect our world that there is nothing left to preserve."

In view of this, it is pertinent to ask what might be done "to minimize the disparity between what the publics know and believe about the corporation and what the corporation really is."[30]

2.

Richard T. De George makes several points absolutely clear. First: Because corporate acts amount to human acts, humans "must assume moral responsibility for the corporation."[31] Corporations are not human beings. From this "it does not follow . . . that they cannot be held morally accountable, nor that they can be regulated only by law."[32]

Second: "we can evaluate the ends for which a corporation is established."[33] We should not confuse these "ends" or purposes with Kantian ends-in-themselves or human persons. Because we can evaluate these ends or purposes, we can also evaluate all of the means (strategies and implementation, or sequences of such) a corporation uses to achieve them. We can do so because all of a corporation's purposes are instrumental; i.e., they are means to some other purpose or purposes. To say that a corporation is not an end-in-itself is to recognize that it is an artificial creation. What is more: where the instrumentality of the corporation is concerned, any disparity or dissonance between established ends and the means for attaining those ends is *prima facie* evidence of a defect in the instrument. This is not so with respect to end-in-themselves: we do not talk this way about human persons or assess them in terms of utility.

Our inquiry up to this point has suggested that there are two very different models of communication, to which any corporation might approximate: the rhetorical and the responsible.

The rhetorical model is primarily responsive to facts of corporate power. As a result, communication is preoccupied with self-image and loyalty, unduly promoting secrecy, denial, knowledge-hoarding, defensiveness and loyalty-without-exception. Accountability is incompatible with such traits. Any corporation that exhibits them will foster fear among employees and, consequently, the alienation of management.[34] Because it sees so much as threatening,

such a corporation is unable to properly address legitimate security issues.

The model of responsible communication, on the other hand, is not primarily responsive to power. Because it is not preoccupied with matters of image and loyalty but is primarily responsive to clarity, accuracy, legitimacy, truth and significance, responsible communication features traits of openness, admission, information-sharing and self-assurance. The claim is that accountability in the required sense is compatible only with this model of communication.

Where large institutions are concerned, no precise definitional boundary can be drawn between internal and external communication. But, for practical purposes (including ethical ones), the distinction is clear enough. "Internal" signifies those "within a corporation," among individuals at whatever levels, in pursuit of an organization's "business." Since they are actively concerned with overseeing management's operations, certainly we would want to include corporate board members (whether serving in ex-officio capacities or not) as well as temporary consultants and third-party advisors. Also, internal communication might encompass parties who share the same corporate culture.

By contrast, external communication implies transaction between a corporation and its various "publics." Obviously, for something to qualify as an instance of external communication, at least one legitimate party to the transaction must not be a member of the class indicated above, under "internal."

Where a corporation's internal communication approximates to the rhetorical model, external communcation is undermined because it too is held to standards inherent in the model. Such a corporation perceives external demands as threats and responds defensively.

In another way, though, the internal-external distinction is a red herring, for it duplicates a distinction between individual and collective responsibility. Since this latter distinction is crucial to any assessment of corporate responsibility, we shall take it up now.

Using a distinction between individual and collective or corporate responsibility, De George elicits several models, assigning full or partial responsibility in equal or unequal measure among individual and/or collective identities.[35] But how could such

distributions be weighed? What might authorize or enable us to properly make such attributions in particular cases?

Hannah Arendt offers two suggestions in connection with the distinction between collective and individual responsibilities. One is that assignments of individual moral and legal responsibility (individual blame or guilt) "always relate to the person and what the person has done."[36] This applies to moral ascriptions of blame or approval as well as to legal attributions of guilt or innocence.

She is surely right to connect both with "deeds." We must be careful not to take this too literally. Inaction and failure to act may constitute "deeds" too, often with consequences as certain or harmful as any overt performance. Knowledge that a situation is causally overdetermined with respect to some particular outcome actually increases the practical efficiency of inaction.[37] If I see you walking into a lion's den and say nothing, what results is no accident. A duty not to harm implies active involvement, involvement which is informed, sensitive and articulate.

This brings us to Arendt's second suggestion. There are, she says, two conditions of collective responsibility. One is that "I must be held responsible for something I have not done."[38] Now, Arendt is not engaged in affirming negative acts here. Rather, it is a falling short of a standard or of some expectation which concerns her. However we interpret such failure — no matter what reasons we assign for it, whether intention, negligence, or carefully cultivated ignorance — what is always involved is our having overlooked or ignored something of significance.

Again, I think Arendt has noticed the salient feature with regard to corporations. In the case of collectivities, there is no special class of actions analogous to the deeds which individuals perform. To look for such an entity is to pursue a metaphysical chimera, for which no evidence will ever be found. Corporate actions simply consist of accumulations and combinations of a variety of individual actions. Arendt's formulation captures a tendency to which all human institutions, and notably commercial corporations, are peculiarly liable.

There is, however, another condition of collective responsibility. Collective responsibility necessarily involves membership in a community and representation of a community by its members; hence,

collective responsibility "is always political."[39] Arendt understands that our institutions are, without exception, consociative and contiguous. This means essentially three things: that each of our institutions outreaches and outlasts the individual persons who make up its membership; that all of our institutions belong together, forming a sort of community; and that our institutions share boundaries and sometimes even identity. These properties of consociation and contiguity are the source of institutional stability, but they tend to be overlooked in times of change and restructuring. Such properties of stability no doubt deserve greater consideration than I can give them here, but the bottom line is clear: Taking responsibility for our institutions demands sensitivity to more, not less, of what is significant, and greater sensitivity to the flexibility of patterns of representation.

Institutions, in other words, always involve collective responsibility. This involvement occurs in two ways. First: There is the responsibility of the institution in question, of the particular community of members comprising that institution. Second: There is a wider responsibility, concerning a variable array of institutions which may be implicated, insofar as the primary institution and community is representative of these other institutions. In both cases, collective responsibility crucially involves matters of representation, but in the second case especially, these matters are likely to vary widely from instance to instance.

It is the chemistry of significance and representation which makes judging of responsibility, in the second case, so difficult. The first case is comparatively easy to decide. In a given instance, corporate responsibility is collective, but the collectivity in question is not American citizens, or people of the Western world, or mankind *in toto*, but first and foremost that of some particular corporation itself.

Though the boundary between political and individual or personal responsibility may not always be as sharp as we might like, there is no reason to think that they are typically blurred. We cannot afford to ignore Arendt's observation about "post-War Germany," where the claim of collective responsibility "only served to exculpate to a considerable degree those who actually were guilty."[40] Her assessment has the chemistry of representation and significance right. Though it will not apply to every claim of collective responsibility, it could still pro-

vide a criterion for every case of collective responsibility where institutions rather than individuals *qua* persons play a significant role.

From this vantage, the claim of collective responsibility acquires a strategic value: as a shield for immoral or illegal conduct, as a means of evading responsibility.

Take the case of the small town villain, a fellow so universally loathed and feared that, one day in broad daylight, he got blown away by some individual or individuals. Police came, but there were no witnesses; no one seemed to know anything about it. The community acted to protect the guilty individual or individuals; perhaps it was the community's way of thanking them for a job well done. Silence gave consent to what had occurred. Without suggesting that either the action is blameless or the community justified, this is nonetheless a legitimate case of collective responsibility.

Now take the case of Trixx, a multinational corporation. Trixx sells breakfast cereal for kids. Not only are its marketing practices questionable, but some of the boxes of cereal Trixx sells have been found to contain high levels of toxic waste. What is more, the contaminated cereals are invariably sold to populous Third World countries. Under fire from the press and consumer groups, Trixx discharges a few top management people, solemnly vowing to make quality control a priority. Several years later, toxic waste is still turning up in that product in Third World countries. Trixx claims that the toxic waste is not toxic waste but actually fertilizer.[41] Besides, the fertilizer concession in the Third World shows splendid profitability. Opponents blame Trixx for a rising death rate among Third World children who eat its cereals. But Trixx responds by pointing out that such incidents are a world-class problem with a complex causality: no single factor can be isolated in connection with these deaths. After all, they may be caused by Third World fertilizer concessions, which produce toxic waste. Trixx urges scientific research to solve this dilemma, funding a study which will take decades to complete. Because Trixx favors a loose management style, it does not keep records of internal decisions and there is no one to hold responsible. "We are all of us, collectively responsible," a spokesman for Trixx announces.

There are salient differences between these two cases of collective responsibility. In the case of the small town, only one person is harmed. The only

collectivity affected is the small town itself. Trixx's actions harm many thousands, perhaps millions of people. Trixx has a much greater impact. Several collectivities are affected: children, nations, other industries as well as Trixx itself.

The most striking difference between the two cases is this: in the first, there is virtually no evidence of the event. Nothing is disclosed. The community is peculiarly silent. But in the second case, there is an abundance of evidence. Moral and/or legal guilt is ascribable to Trixx, attaching to the persons of the discharged executives. The mere fact that the questionable practices continue long after the executives are "let go" suggests that Trixx's culpability exceeds these particular ascriptions. Numerous deceptions (the discharged executives, equivocations around "fertilizer" and "complex causality") are present, supporting this conclusion. The claim of collective responsibility throws up a smokescreen to conceal the identities of those responsible for the practices.

If, in the case of the small town murder, the community legitimately shields an immoral and illegal act, then it does so as a kind of reprieve, as if to say: "We know this is bad, but for various reasons we choose to make an exception to the usual course of events." The point is that the reprieve comes from the community external to the offending agent.

In the case of Trixx, the source of the reprieve (insofar as there may be one) is internal to the offending agency, which happens to be a corporate institution. Trixx's claim takes unfair advantage of the ambiguity involved in the notion of collective responsibility, and of the underlying vagueness about representation. It is not clear who the relevant wider community might be. Is it the nation where Trixx is headquartered? Would it include the Third World countries? Maybe the external community includes not only nations where Trixx has plants, offices and subsidiaries, but all of the countries with whom it does any sort of business at all. Why not the whole world? If a multinational corporation were to exercise full moral responsibility, how could we tell? Just who — in this sense of a wider external community — are MNCs responsible to?

Moral significance, like significance in general, does not attach to the same objects, ideas and practices *sub specie aeternitatis*, but has to be discovered. Value, while an enduring feature of the world as such and therefore of reality, is not distributed uniformly throughout time. Moral value is discoverable (if at all) by the sensitivity of individual human persons; i.e., by virtue of a purely subjective property or disposition of the individual's personality. Lacking awareness of such significances, our strategies grow brittle, our visions blunder. In order for what is morally significant to inform our plans and guide our actions, subjective sensitivity must become objectified. This can only be achieved by communication which makes the original awareness public.[42]

The exercise of this wider responsibility by individuals (who else could exercise it?) requires communication that is persistent, critical and perspicacious. In the absence of responsible communication, there simply is no way to ascertain what the scope of implication may be in a given circumstance, how wide is the array of affected institutions, and what is the nature and quality of representation.

In order to exercise their responsibility, everyone needs to communicate. This is true of every institutional community, but especially pertinent to the modern commercial corporation which, because of its special purpose, inclines to be narrowly focussed. Those in positions of management and leadership need to receive communication from many quarters, including colleagues, stockholders, board members, junior employees, as well as from a variety of external publics. Such communication needs to be frequent, not something reserved for holidays and special occasions.

But it is equally important that those in management themselves communicate to all of these quarters. Simply "transmitting messages" will not elicit the "intelligence" requisite to the proper running of corporations. The duty to communicate responsibly might be facilitated by management's acknowledging that no one has privileged access to what is significant, as it may affect the internal workings of the corporation. Whether internal or external to the corporation, significance is apprehended by the shared and successive approximations of individual disclosure and response. Whatever the organization chart may say, no one has special access to what is significant. If our corporate institutions are to flourish, they will have to come to terms with this.

Notes

1 Some consider this a controversial point. No argument is given for the position since it adopts the views of Richard T. De George in *Business Ethics* (Macmillan, 1986), pp. 82, 92–6, 98–9. That work is nicely complemented by Hannah Arendt, 'Collective responsibility' (1968), reprinted in *Amor Mundi* (Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), pp. 43–50.

2 *Noûs* 21 (1987), 449.

3 Virginia Held, 'Corporations, persons and moral responsibility', *Shame, Responsibility and the Corporation*, Hugh Curtler editor (Haven, 1986), p. 168.

4 De George, *Business Ethics*, p. 69.

5 Held, p. 165.

6 De George, p. 97.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 162.

8 John L. Paluszek, *Will the Corporation Survive?* (Prentice-Hall, 1977), pp. 4–5.

9 Donald E. Danko, 'A perspective on corporate communications', *PR Journal* 30 (August 1974), p. 11.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

11 James M. Humber, 'Honesty in organizational communication', Milton Snoeyenbos, *Business Ethics* (Prometheus, 1983), p. 175.

12 Paluszek, pp. 4–5.

13 Kenneth R. Andrews, 'Difficulties in overseeing ethical policy', *California Management Review* 26 (Summer 1984), p. 136.

14 Grant McConnell, *Private Power and American Democracy* (Random House, 1970), p. 249.

15 Mitchell J. Posner, *Executive Essentials* (Avon-Hearst, 1982), pp. 271–72.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 1.

17 Danko, p. 12.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

19 J. B. Fuqua, 'Can there be corporate democracy?', *PR Journal* 29 (April 1973), p. 12.

20 Henry Mintzberg, 'Why America needs, but cannot have, corporate democracy', *Organizational Dynamics* 11 (Spring 1983), p. 19.

21 Robert W. Armstrong, 'Why management won't talk. And suggestions on how to raise the barriers to corporate communication', *PR Journal* (November 1970), p. 6.

22 James N. Sites, 'Solving problems that keep your boss awake at night', *PR Journal* 30 (August 1974), pp. 6–7.

23 Donald E. Schwartz, 'Reforming the corporation from within', *Business and Society Review* 1 (Spring 1972), p. 67.

24 Armstrong, p. 6.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

26 Sites, p. 6.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 8.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 8.

29 Herbert London, 'Setting a bad example for kids', *The Kansas City Star* (November 22, 1987), 3G.

30 Danko, p. 31.

31 De George, *Business Ethics*, p. 95.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 96.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 96.

34 For the effects of alienation on communication, see Walter Kiechel III, 'How was your Christmas party?', *Fortune* (January 18, 1988), pp. 159–60.

35 *Op. cit.*, pp. 98–9.

36 Arendt, 'Collective responsibility', p. 44.

37 Thus, S.A. Nestlé's knowledge of the conditions of widespread malnutrition in the Third World made that corporation's inaction especially grievous, no doubt intensifying the international boycott. For Nestlé to suggest that particular Third World problems somehow amounted to a worldwide decline in breastfeeding (conveniently the sort of phenomenon which no amount of evidence could ever explain), and to urge a need for scientific research to fill the "severe vacuum of knowledge about Third World nutrition and infant feeding" (*The Dilemma of Third World Nutrition*, p. 16), constituted a shift of grounds or equivocation that was nothing less than scandalous.

According to recent reports, Nestlé continues to disregard the World Health Organization's marketing code. As difficult as the issue of compliance is in this case, something of the problem can be seen in a brief contrast of quotes. "Nestlé is dumping infant formula at the same levels as before the boycott," says Janice Mantell, executive director of Action For Corporate Accountability. Nestlé's Thad Jackson says: "The resolution addressed countries not companies." The "resolution" mentioned is the World Health Assembly's 1986 resolution, meant to clarify the code. The heart of the issue is whether Nestlé complied with, or subverted, the code's prohibition of "free or subsidized supplies" of the infant formula. The fact that Nestlé requested "clarification" of the term "normal procurement channels" (of hospitals with respect to these "supplies") — thereby delaying implementation of the code still another year — indicates very well the extent of Nestlé's willingness to comply.

For Nestlé's position on the breastfeeding issue, see 'The Infant Formula Controversy: A Nestlé View' (1978); 'The Story behind the Issue: Infant Feeding in Developing Countries' (a 1981 brochure); and *The Dilemma of Third World Nutrition: Nestlé and the Role of Infant Formula*, a glossy 1983 publication which purports to be "as frank and objective as possible" (it is published at Nestlé's expense). For an account of Nestlé's "inaction," and an indication of the lengths to which a corporation can go to avoid moral responsibility, see 'A Glimpse at Nestlé's Anti-Boycott Strategy', *Business and Society Review* 37 (Spring 1980–81), pp. 65–67. For some of the difficulties involved in Nestlé's compliance with the marketing code, see 'For Nestlé 'auditors,' the test is yet to

come', in the September 20, 1982 issue of *Christianity and Crisis*.

[38] Arendt, p. 45. Her negative construction may be puzzling to some, since it makes collective responsibility appear to obtain only in cases of sins of omission; i.e., instances of inaction or failure to act. I do not think either that this is Arendt's considered position or that the inference, though fair, properly elicits her position. It is worth noting that she repeats the point and the negative construction on p. 50 — "This vicarious responsibility for things we have not done . . ." — and perhaps her use of the word "vicarious" (which she has, earlier in the essay, taken issue with in connection with discussion of culpability) should give us a clue. Collective responsibility is rarely punishable. Arendt uses this formula to avoid duplicating individual moral and legal responsibility.

Arendt does not intend collective responsibility to replace individual responsibility. The issue is clearest if we consider so-called "irreversible acts." Exterminating six million Jews is both positive (i.e., not an instance of inaction or failure to act) and irreversible. For this action, the Nazis share collective responsibility with all other Germans, but they do not bear collective responsibility *in addition to* the individual responsibility (moral blame and legal guilt) that accrues to them. There is no question of weighing or making proper assignments of collective responsibility among particular individuals; proper discharge of individual responsibility exhausts collective responsibility. The Nazis bear collective responsibility for what was *not* done (namely, the right thing, which in this case would have been either to avoid or prevent such extermination, since irreversible acts are always, *prima facie*, wrong), but this responsibility they share with all other Germans, guilty and innocent alike. On Arendt's account, Karl Jaspers and Adolf Hitler bear the same collective responsibility for the Holocaust. To grasp how Arendt may have arrived at this position, see her 1945 article, 'Organized Guilt and Universal Responsibility', Ron H. Feldman editor, *The Jew as Pariah: Jewish Identity and Politics in the Modern Age* (Grove Press Inc., 1978), pp. 228–31.

[39] *Ibid.*, p. 45.

[40] Those who find an analogy between the Reich and corporate culture amusing might ponder the following: "You never have time and are always busy. You are in an artificial world that does not allow you to have any time to rest, to think, to write or to read about problems you face." This might pass as a description of life in the corporate fast lane. The source of these remarks is Albert Speer: 'Too busy to be moral', *The Kansas City Star* (January 23, 1983), 8K.

[41] If this sounds wild, see Donald Kaul on Kerr-McGee: 'Radioactive waste put to bad use (There are limits to how creative industry should be)', *The Kansas City Star* (November 22, 1987), 5J.

[42] De George, *Business Ethics*, pp. 161–65. Of the eleven rules given for structurally implementing morality in a corporation, seven directly involve responsible communication, the rest do so indirectly.

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