

THE PROBLEM OF COMMUNICATION

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THE terms in which this essay is written, and the examples used to illustrate various points, are for the most part not specifically Catholic. One reason for this is a desire to present the problem in the idiom of the world with which Catholics want, or should want, to communicate, since they exist partly for its sake.

It looks as though the most primitive forms of communication were non-conscious and non-voluntary. Investigators working on animal communications as they are found in such creatures as sticklebacks, and even in more highly developed beasts like ducks, believe the evidence warrants their assuming that both stimulus and response as shown, for instance in patterns of aggression or mating behaviour, are almost automatic. Investigators conditioned by methods of modern scientific research are of course prone to believe in automatism, since it is a concept which makes their task of abstraction and generalization very much easier than would ideas of spontaneity and of feeling: and the outside observer may conclude that they are tempted to minimize the influence of factors they cannot measure and even sometimes to deny that they exist. It is incidentally fascinating to notice how, when they extend to human behaviour the methods and presuppositions of their earlier work, they seem to rationalize the belief that when man fell he fell away from the glorious liberty of the children of God into an animal automatism; an automatism which, since he is not wholly an animal, set him under the domination of the idea of mechanism and of the machines his brain created, from prayer-wheels to electronic brains and a concept of the State based on the image of a robot Leviathan. This domination is colloquially expressed with the greatest perfection in the phrase 'You can't put the clock back'. We, humanity, made the clock; if we were free, we could do anything we liked with it; but as it is, it rules us.

This is however a digression. It remains true that animal communication at the stickleback level seems to go on without much formulated awareness of what is happening. And in con-

nection with human communication sticklebacks are not red herrings. For humans may find some parallel to this non-conscious form of communication in the way in which telepathy and other forms of *psi*-activity seem to work. It is a process rarely controllable by the will. It operates from far below the level of the conscious mind. And though it is often finally clothed in imagery of some kind in accordance with the ideas and associations of the percipient, it equally often simply takes the form of an irrational feeling, an urgent 'hunch'. As an example of this at the trivial and reflex level, one may cite the common experience of looking at the back of a stranger's head, in a crowd, or a park, or a library, while consciously concentrating on something quite different, such as writing this paper. After a little while the person looked at will usually, without quite knowing why he does it, begin to fidget a little; and finally he turns round, catches the gazer with a resentful expression, and disturbs his train of thought by the reflection that he has been staring most uncivilly.

It seems probable that this very primitive form of communication cannot deliberately be used in individual instances by the individual human will. It should not therefore be ignored. It can be released in connection with mob activity on the one hand, and collective prayer on the other. It can be observed at work in the impulse to shout, to riot, to loot that so suddenly, so universally shows itself in a crowd of individually reasonable persons; and it can be used in the Quaker committee, which after discussing a problem does not vote but sits in silent prayer until someone is moved to get up and suggest that 'the sense of the meeting' appears to lie in this direction or that, a suggestion almost invariably agreed. In this form of communication inheres also, in all probability, one of the reasons why the contemplative life is so vitally important not only to those called to lead it, but also to the rest of the world. That which they are they transmit, without knowing it. As a by-product of lives focused on the love, the knowledge and the introverted service of God, there is diffused into the collective unconscious mind a sense of the activity, the purpose, and the being to which they are dedicated. All that *we do* who use words to get across what we mean in connection with religion probably depends very much more than is commonly realized upon what *they are*. This primitive form of communication is also likely to be alarmingly strong in our

separate selves; and in consequence, however much a human may want to get ideas across, what he is in himself will be the basis of what he says or writes, however objective his reasoning may be, and however admirably adjusted is his style to his public. He may in fact produce a one-man Alexander's Ragtime Band of brass and cymbals, and blow his own trumpet for good measure; but he will not communicate the knowledge of charity unless he has it, and to have it he must lay himself open to receive it.

Although no writer or speaker or anyone else can communicate more than what he is, or is given, to say, he can very easily communicate a great deal less. This has always been true; and is particularly and poignantly true in this Century of the Common Man, which might better be called in the present context the Century of the Common Goop and the Encysted Expert; encysted not only in the discipline and vocabulary of his *expertise*, but also, too often, in an unexamined, hypertrophied growth of assumption and imagery.

Of all such experts, the verbal expert of the logical positivist school seems to me perhaps the most remote from current living, as well as the most strongly dominated by the assumption that techniques appropriate to the exact sciences are equally valuable in quite different fields. To sterilize a word and to call the result 'meaning' is certainly to render it easy to handle and to use; but it is a little as if a vet were to geld a bull calf and to call the resulting dull manageable ox—or the still duller and more manageable Oxo cube manufactured from it—the only genuine specimen, guaranteed authentic, of *taurus domesticus*.

Nevertheless, it is as well to indicate what one is and is not talking about. By communication I mean the transmission of living ideas, arguments, truth, from one mind to another or others. I exclude prestige-prose, advertising, and advertising's sinister twin-brother, propaganda. (It is perhaps a pity that the Church still uses this word; which has been so corrupted from its pristine innocence by the activities of political parties, military departments and totalitarian states that it has become highly suspect, and arouses an instant defensiveness.)

By prestige-prose I mean the verbal equivalent of a peacock's display of its tail feathers, whose object, self-understood or not—it may be reiterated that students of animal communication doubt whether the displaying creature has much inkling as to what it is

about—is to show how glorious, interesting, erudite, brilliant, beautiful or important that creature, or its group, may be. In humans, of course, the result of such a display is less often awed acquiescence than equally futile and time-wasting counter-display.

By propaganda I mean the intention to stimulate not living thought but automatically-conditioned reflexes; the attempt by every possible method to induce minds to clothe themselves in identical, mass-produced sets of exterior beliefs, protective, flexible and resilient as chromium-plated chain-mail, off which new ideas, discoveries and thoughts bounce painlessly away, leaving 'ne'er a wrack behind'. It might in fact be useful to suggest a distinction between the verbs to 'propagand' and to 'propagate' ideas. To 'propagand' with all its evil totalitarian associations should be used to label the dictatorial, power-motivated process just described, a process which can only succeed by killing the mind, and may ultimately bring about the death of the body; since if the mind becomes an obedient Zombie serving only the purposes of the enchanter who has armoured it, those who disagree with the precepts with which it has been indoctrinated may have to resort to war if no other argument can penetrate. To 'propagate' ideas, sowing live thoughts to grow in living minds, is the true end of communication; and it is with the means to this end that writer and speaker must grapple in the present period of mutually distrustful, mutually exclusive, even mutually repellent Goop and Expert. The Goop of course feels that the Expert is a member of some sort of secret society, talking an esoteric jargon, patronizing him, and acting, if he acts at all, in an intolerable and auntlike way 'all for his good'; and the Goop therefore tends to rationalize his own intellectual sloth as a proper resentful independence of the pretensions of superior persons. In England the phrase for this is 'I am only a plain man but I know what I like', or 'I've got my rights'. In Germany before the war it became more dangerously, 'when I hear the word "culture" I take out my gun'.

The Expert immerses himself in his subject, learns its own specialized terminology, and in the pleasure of discussing things with other experts forgets the necessity of relating his language within a language to the common speech. Defensively, he may maintain the ancient principle that the translator is necessarily a traitor; and as the best method of defence is attack he may then

fiercely condemn any who undertake the work of what the French call *vulgarisation* and try to convey to the general public the fruits of his research. He thus tends to rationalize intellectual pride as an overwhelming passion for truth.

It is usually the Expert who enquires why it is necessary for the Goop, or the general public, to understand what he is at, and why he cannot be left alone to get on with his work without the bother of re-formulating his results in 'a language understood of the people'. The fundamental necessity is this. Man is a reasonable animal. He wants things to 'make sense'. He cannot reach his full stature without exercising his reason; and he cannot exercise his reason unless he has accurate data on which to base his arguments and conclusions. His religious beliefs must for instance be weakened if he has no coherent picture of the universe, as at present known, to which to relate them; and if he is denied the facts he will come to believe that he is being deliberately hoodwinked and become rather less than human, either by abandoning all effort to understand and burrowing like a self-blinded mole into a purely emotional faith, or by abandoning his religious beliefs in the cause of what seems to be intellectual honesty, and building up a false picture from distorted piecemeal evidence.

Here perhaps is the moment to pay tribute to two very different people, who have endeavoured to put newly discovered facts, newly synthesized knowledge, at the disposal of ordinary people. Neither is a Catholic, neither perhaps would even go so far as to call himself a Christian, neither is conditioned by that sort of clammy whispering false reverence which can corrode religious wonder as surely as prudery corrodes love; a false reverence fortunately commoner outside the Church than within it, but nevertheless to be seen and reckoned with even there. Both of these men however are convinced that truth is indivisible, to be sought, known, and made known.

One is Gerald Heard, whose study in ordinary language of the origin, nature, history and development of the earth and its living creatures has released many readers from the assumption that the theist must discreetly avert his attention from such subjects for fear of being ensnared into belief in inscrutable chance. This is a greater deliverance than may at first appear; for the attitude which may be summed up as 'Don't look now, dear, there's something nasty in the woodshed' is not compatible with the love of truth.

Mr Heard's book is not a devotional study. It is indeed occasionally antagonistic towards what he believes the Church to be: which is not much like what it is. The book is nevertheless breathtaking in its quiet objective demonstration in familiar language, that the established facts all point to the great fact, that God is; want him or not, like it or not, feel it or not.

The other writer is the American Dr Rhine who, brought up in a climate of thought in which a materialist philosophy, a materialist interpretation (or ignoring) of facts, were necessary to intellectual respectability, risked his reputation and the contempt of academic circles by the careful statistical study and evaluation of *psi*-phenomena. He is now, thirty years later, trying to integrate his findings in this field in a view of the universe in which the possible existence of God (from whom both psychical and physical activities derive, and in whom, through prayer, they may be seen to interact) is envisaged as the keystone of understanding.

Dr Rhine writes, however, the most appalling, slipshod jargon; certainly not, in his case, because he wishes to be private with his thoughts, but simply because, as happens with many people trained to think mathematically, words mean little to him. His sentences drag along like old trodden dressing-gowns tripping up the reader; and like many other distinguished persons, he breaks, to the unspecialized general intelligence, from time to time into a rash of statistics and diagrams which obscure his meaning rather than clarify it. That this is not an inevitable mode of procedure is shown by the fact that Bertrand Russell can write of equally difficult subjects in a style crisp, lucid and precise; as indeed can Aldous Huxley.

In such connections as these, the critic has a vital, if tiresome and nagging, part to play. He must insist again and again on the importance of language and of style. It is, for the reasons given, obviously urgently necessary that writers should write not only for the intellectual circle in which they feel at home, but for the general educated world: and as writers are included not only professional novelists, poets, essayists, journalists, but all who put words on paper, philosophers, biologists, theologians, psychologists, historians, physicists, even technicians. This means of course that every specialist should submit to a dual discipline; first to that of his own school, and second to that of keeping himself

supple and sensitive to the common tongue in its contemporary usage. The amateur (to give the Goop a more dignified name), the lover of verse, art, thought, knowledge, must always be borne in mind. He has, moreover, a vital function to fulfil in seeing, as the specialist cannot always do, where different kinds of knowledge link up with one another. In passing it may be worth while to note among all the contributory causes of the Reformation in England, and of the surprising acquiescence with which it was received (the Black Death, the Great Schism, the corruption and commercialization of spiritual life), the thing seldome mentioned, but perhaps most vividly operative, was the great gulf which had opened between Experts and Goops, identified in this instance with clerics and laity. The Expert did not make himself understood to the Goop either in his reasoning, or in the language of the liturgy, or in the documents of the Faith. It was for some hundreds of years, almost indeed down to our own time, the fashion to mock at scholasticism; not so much because it was 'out of date' as because it was not communicated, because it had become an arcane thing not explained to the ordinary man, who resented it as bitterly as his modern counterpart (with less reason, since he can at any rate listen to them) resents the more esoteric items in the Third Programme.

The writer will, of course, find himself in a state of considerable tension. It is necessary for him to express *to himself*, as perfectly as he may, the ideas and relationships and splendours of which he is aware, and of which he becomes more definitely conscious as he limits them within grammatical constructions, verbal rhythms, intellectual sequences, definite imagery. Yet, unless he is to live in a solipsist world he must also express these things to his fellow men. They will not all be bothered to understand him, but he has to make himself comprehensible to those who are prepared to take the trouble. His temptation at present is to shut himself up not so much perhaps in an ivory tower as in an ivory common-room lined with looking-glass, and to be content with the understanding of its other members. There are all sorts of ivory common-rooms. Some are dedicated to literature, some to Marx, some to sociology, some to Jung, some to philosophy of different schools, some to Freud, some to the study of statistical methodology; but all have one thing in common. They impose on their members, if these are not careful to spend

a good deal of time 'in the light of common day', a habit of mind which makes them almost impervious to outside influences, and incapable, in particular, of realizing two important things. One is, how much they take for granted in the way of basic axioms, unquestioned, arbitrary, unexamined. The other is, how the non-specialist lives, thinks and speaks, and what he assumes.

I have, at intervals over the past year, been to a series of lectures and discussions on imagery; and have heard with the greatest interest a number of specialists in various subjects put forward their theories as to the way in which images are formed in the human mind, their meaning to the individual and to the community, and their uses, dangers, and glories. It was a fascinating and an alarming experience; alarming, because of all the speakers not more than a handful, say the four or five most distinguished, saw their subject in a general context. The Freudian seemed to live in one kind of mental aquarium, in which almost every conceivable image represented some form of sexual wish or activity. The Jungian next door took for granted that the same images held quite different contents, but seemed to the outsider to be equally arbitrary, equally unquestioning, as to what those contents were. The expert in electronics seemed to take for granted that all human communications could be thought of in terms of stimulus and automatic response such as is familiar in the workings of the totalisator at race meetings. Challenged to relate these conceptions to the world at large, to prove their validity, to show them in some connection with a general view of the universe and of man, too many of the speakers, including a Cambridge philosopher, behaved rather as goldfish do if you tap the glassy sides of their aquarium: they opened their mouths, fled, so to speak, away to the middle of their respective tanks, and hung wavering there goggling a little as they regarded the interruptor with a gentle, profound and aqueous contempt for him and for all that he stood for in the uncomprehending alien element of air. Of one another they had almost no cognizance. The glass walls were too thick; and, to drop these fishy metaphors, they did not meet one another, but came and spoke at weekly intervals.

Here again, even at the ordinary natural level, the critic set between the Common Man and the Expert has a heavy responsibility. Obviously the findings of those engaged in such researches

must be of value. Equally obviously their value must be assessed in terms of ordinary experience, behaviour, and world view; and, in the Catholic case, of belief. It is for him to say so, without being frightened at the Experts' learned and detailed knowledge, without feeling it necessary to engulf himself in any of their systems of presupposition. He may find it incumbent upon him to assume the jet-trimmed mantle of Rosa Dartle and to ask repeatedly for information and explanation; to say 'Come off your perch' in whatever elaborately civil terms he can muster; or even with Dr Johnson, as exacerbated by Berkeley, to bang a wooden structure made in a form universally recognised, and shout 'This is a table!'

As a Catholic, he will probably find himself, whether in writing or speaking or broadcasting, or simply in the personal contacts which inevitably seem to follow the knowledge that one is a Catholic, involved in triple complications. The first is that the Church is the only entity really capable of connecting and integrating all these different kinds of knowledge into a system that makes sense, because it is focused on a central Fact, around which all factual discoveries fall into proportional and patterned inter-relationship, irradiated by significant truth. The second is that Catholics in contemporary England, the Church here and now, do not always see the importance of trying to achieve such an integration; an effort which would not only be good in itself (because it is always good to find out, and where this is possible, and as far as it is possible, to formulate, the truth) but which would also have good effects in showing revelation not as a thing apart from, and irrelevant to, all other departments of knowledge, but as the entity in which they are fulfilled in meaning. The third is that even when Catholics do see the importance of making this effort, and achieve the approximate success that is all that is temporally possible, they are not always able to express what they have worked out.

That it is essential to know and to speak the ordinary language of the educated non-expert has already been stressed; it should also perhaps be mentioned that writers and speakers now have to become and remain acutely conscious of the composition of their audience, since the differences of human intelligence create and maintain corresponding differences between the educated and the literate; for learning to read is not the same thing as learning to

understand. It is therefore necessary to make reasonably certain that remarks addressed to the educated shall not be taken up and misinterpreted by the simple literate. In this connection it may also be well to reiterate the urgent platitude that it is vital to know, when you use a word, whether it means the same thing to the reader as it does to you. Further, it matters enormously, whether you are Goop or Expert—and everyone is an expert at something and a goop at something else—to beware of verbal allergies, which are particularly common and virulent in England. Perhaps if I list a few of my own it will show what I mean. 'Grace', in the plural as 'graces', brings me out in a spiritual nettle-rash; and 'amiable' as applied to our Lady, and 'clients' and 'patrons' and 'favours', with all the flattery and corruption the words suggest, in connection with Saints; 'meaningful' instead of significant, in philosophical writing; 'be a sport' as an ethical exhortation; and a whole host more.

Apart from keeping an eye on the strict meaning of words, and apart from care to resist in oneself and to avoid provoking in others the irrational, unjust and very powerful allergic states just noticed, there is one other matter to be touched upon. It is the question of imagery as a means of communication, 'getting things across'. Much more is involved in this than the highbrow protest against 'repository art'; though one may note in passing that its total lack of both art and realism may mean that the pantheon of film stars is a great deal more vivid in the imagination of young town-dwellers than the communion of Saints. It may also be suggested that it might enable people to realize more easily that saints were living men and women, if only they were sometimes visualized in contemporary clothes rather than in conventionally holy draperies.

This is however only one facet of the question of imagery. The basic fact is that to vast urban populations most of the rural images traditionally used to convey religious ideas have no root at all in every-day experience. (Jungians of course believe that they correspond with archetypes existent in the collective unconscious mind; but to relegate religious understanding, belief, communication solely to the regions of the unconscious would be a most dangerous decision, even if it were possible.) We have to face such facts as that the image, say, of the Shepherd of Israel can mean, at the rational and sensory levels, very little to people

who have never seen an ordinary shepherd. Even to those who have, and who are invited to regard themselves as sheep, the image does not convey its original sense, for the associations are different. English shepherds do not lead their sheep, as shepherds still do in Israel and other near Eastern countries; they do not play tunes to them, not even on the penny whistle, the nearest equivalent to the pan pipes; they do not know them separately by name. They drive them along in a muttering, bleating amorphous mass that holds up the traffic; surely not an analogy to be welcomed.

There are two possible remedies, which of course do not exclude one another. One, for those already disposed to think about the subject, is to show *mutatis mutandis* the familiar images can be shown to underlie contemporary experience. The other, for the more general, uninterested public, is to use new images: the Englishman, for instance, might find it a good deal easier, if the valuable animal analogies are to be used, to envisage his relationship to God as that of a dog to his Owner; the football fan has an instant understanding of the connection between team and captain; the patient comprehends the link with the doctor.

After formulating and considering all these complex difficulties it is of comfort to reiterate the happy motto of Westminster—*Deus dat incrementum*.