

❖ ENGAGING COMMUNICATION ETHICS THROUGH LITERATURE: *LES MISÉRABLES*

Multiplicity of communication ethics reveals itself in *Les Misérables* by the contrasting communicative practices and underlying commitment to differing goods on the part of Jean Valjean and the Thénardiens, the innkeepers with whom Cosette lodged and who mistreated her. The Thénardiens were, like many in that era, just trying to survive; they ran an inn and made a living by their wits, seeking to gain as much as possible from lodgers and taking advantage of every opportunity to gain more. When Fantine makes arrangements for them to take care of her child, the Thénardiens find many opportunities to write, demanding more and more money for Cosette's purported needs, which they spend on themselves and their own daughters.

In contrast, Jean Valjean's communication with others throughout the novel illustrates the good of care for others. This "why" prompts his communicative actions, which test the strength of this "theory" in lived experience. Valjean demonstrates the good that the bishop has encouraged him to follow through a variety of communicative practices. He risks revealing his identity as an ex-convict to save a man trapped under a cart; he speaks kindly to Fantine, a woman persecuted and scorned by others because of her trade as a prostitute and her child born out of wedlock. He does not reveal to Marius that it is he, Valjean, who saved Marius's life, in order to avoid burdening the young man with such knowledge. The narrative within which Valjean stands is given life through his communicative interactions with others, and these practices of the good anchor Jean Valjean within a new narrative offered him by the bishop. He discovers the meaning and shape of a narrative of care for others through communicative practices and the meeting of others in need. Valjean's experience reminds us that we need not begin with a given narrative, but may encounter the communicative practices that eventually give a narrative life and provide a home for a sense of a given good.

3

Approaches to Communication Ethics

The Pragmatic Good of Theory



How can one, in fact, do full justice to the words used in court: "The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth"? These words mock our clumsy efforts to remember and convey our experiences. The "whole truth" has seemed so obviously unattainable to some as to cause them to despair of human communication in general. They see so many barriers to prevent us from obtaining truthful knowledge, let alone communicating it; so many pitfalls in conveying what we mean. (Bok, 1979, p. 4)

The previous chapter discussed the reality of multiple definitions of communication ethics, concluding with an emphasis on narrative and its organic connection to the study of communication ethics. This chapter examines communication ethics approaches from the field of communication that set the stage for our particular framing of dialogic ethics. Each of the approaches to be discussed seeks to protect and promote a given understanding of the good with implications for the study and practice of communication ethics.

❖ INTRODUCTION

A comprehensive examination of the disciplinary study of communication ethics begins with a major conceptual framing of the theoretical diversity of communication ethics articulated by James Chesebro (1969). Additional conceptual essays followed by Ronald C. Arnett (1987), and Ronald C. Arnett, Pat Arneson, and Leeanne M. Bell (2006), which built upon the theoretically groundbreaking work from Chesebro's 1969 insights.

Chesebro (1969) outlined the following theoretical ways of understanding communication ethics: (a) universal-humanitarian ethics, (b) democratic ethics, (c) codes and procedures, and (d) contextual ethics. In the language of this book, Chesebro is the first in the field to point to communication ethics literacy and away from a prescriptive telling about the ethical. Arnett (1987) used those same conceptual frameworks, adding narrative ethics, and then, with Arneson and Bell (Arnett, Arneson, & Bell, 2006), added dialogic ethics. These six conceptual frameworks announce a given good that each approach seeks to protect and promote. We offer a brief summary of these six conceptual approaches to communication ethics in this chapter, discussing the sense of the "good" that each approach asks us to protect and promote.

This chapter connects the study of communication ethics to communicative practices with attention to the following six metaphors of communication ethics praxis:

1. **Democratic communication ethics**—a public communication ethics process for discussion of ideas, customs, and rights, protecting and promoting the good of collaborative decision making.
2. **Universal-humanitarian communication ethics**—assumes one guiding communicative ethical principle of reason from the Enlightenment, protecting and promoting the ability of the human to discern the good through a rational process.
3. **Codes, procedures, and standards in communication ethics**—defines communication ethics guidelines by which appropriate ethical conduct is evaluated, protecting and promoting the good of corporately agreed-upon practices and regulations.

4. **Contextual communication ethics**—recognizes communication ethics variations across differing cultures, persons, and settings when applying communication ethics principles, protecting and promoting the good of the particular.
5. **Narrative communication ethics**—assumes that a communication ethic begins with persons' lives guided by stories about the way the world is or should be, protecting and promoting the good residing within given narratives.
6. **Dialogic communication ethics**—acknowledges communication ethics as attentive to the emergent, not owned by either party in the conversation, and responsive to multiple goods that give rise to and emerge in ongoing conversations, protecting and promoting the good of learning.

Student Application: Choice Making

College students face a number of choices. Some choices are easy—What should I wear today? When should I take a break for lunch and/or dinner?—but some choices are considerably more difficult. Should I stay here or transfer to another institution? What is the right major? What campus clubs or social groups are worthy of my time and energy? Whom should I date? Where do I want to work and live after college? One may meet the challenges of running for president of a campus organization, participating in **democratic communication ethics**. Sometimes, choices seem so natural to us that we cannot imagine another alternative, following what one might call a **universal-humanitarian communication ethic** that makes the liberty of self and others an irrefutable good. Other choices come from attention to **codes, procedures, and standards in communication ethics** that tell us it is not right to do something like plagiarize an essay because such action violates the educational institution's code of conduct. Additionally, a **contextual communication ethic** suggests that the situation in which we find ourselves should guide our choice of what to say or do. For example, we may skip a class on Thursday night in order to help a friend study for a statistics test that she has to pass on Friday morning. Depending on the instructor's attendance policy, we may choose not to reveal the details related to our absence. With knowledge of a sense of "why" in place, we make decisions based on **narratives** from our family traditions or

religious backgrounds. Finally, we may find ourselves learning and making choices in conversation with roommates, classmates, friends, and instructors through a **dialogic communication ethic**, attending to what emerges between oneself and another, surprised by the revelation. For example, in conversation with another, students may find themselves reconsidering a major issue or opportunity they had initially rejected, finding an emergent answer transforming their thinking in unexpected ways.

❖ DEMOCRATIC COMMUNICATION ETHICS

Democratic communication ethics defines a public process for contention about ideas, customs, and rights, protecting and promoting the good of public decision making. The metaphors of “public” and “decision” mark democratic communication ethics. As Arnett (1987) suggests, “Democratic Communication Ethics are based on a public ‘process’ ethic, an open airing of diverse opinions and control by majority vote” (p. 46). He elaborates further: “The democratic ethic in the field of communication is a ‘public’ process for forging public mass collaboration on ideas, customs, and rights” (p. 48).

Within the discipline of communication, the democratic approach is the most well-known method for engaging communication ethics and has been central since its Athenian inception, where the practice of ancient Greek rhetoric provided a foundation for public participation. The discussion of democratic communication ethics can be traced back to classical roots; however, for our discipline, much of the connection between communication ethics and democracy emerged during major democratic “stress points” in American history. The entry of the United States in 1941 into World War II, accompanied by the growth of communication departments in higher education, connected to questions about democracy and free speech (Cohen, 1994; Rogers, 1997). In that historical moment, one could not dissociate “democratic” from the notion of “ethical”—the good of “one person, one vote” reflected a commitment to popular justice uniting democracy and ethics (Commager, 1950).

In the World War II moment, conventional wisdom connected the terms *ethics* and *democracy* in opposition to forms of government such as totalitarianism (Alpers, 2002)—such a connection reflected an “enthymematic agreement” of innate connection for citizens of the United States. In other words, these terms were so interconnected that

by saying one term, everyone assumed that the other followed, whether stated explicitly or not. The term *communication* was identified, as well, with the notion of democracy, an assumption that led communication scholars to examine the propaganda techniques used by Nazi Germany and autocratic techniques employed by mid-20th-century Japan (Cohen, 1994; Rogers, 1997). World War II was fought not just to free people, but to make sure free discourse was possible. The legacy of World War II remained with us for an extended period in the persons of well-known figures in the field of communication who fought for freedom of discourse during World War II and after. For instance, arguably the most well-known proponent of free speech was Franklin Haiman, who served in World War II along with Paul Boase and others too numerous to mention. They fought on behalf of their country on the battlefield of arms and in the academy, linking communication and democratic principles.

In the historical moment of World War II, the terms *communication*, *democracy*, and *ethics* interconnected as part of an understood conceptual background, forming a pragmatic unity. To say that someone was not democratic implied that the person was not ethical. An emphasis on public speaking and group discussion in secondary and postsecondary contexts reflected this concern for responsible democratic participation through preparation for public participation and citizenship required by a democratic society grounded in the good of communicative participation in public life (Cohen, 1994).

Ideas about communication ethics tied to notions of democratic ethics shaped public speaking and later work in interpersonal and organizational communication. Interpersonal freedom of expression assumed that efforts to limit expression and democratic participation were equivalent to ethical misconduct. The connection to organizational communication rests with the call for democratic participation in the shaping of organizational structures (Deetz, 1992). One can even go so far as to say that the whole area of applied communication, including public relations and advertising, has been infused with a pragmatic and market-driven democratic ethic. Advertising’s connection rests in the drive to get as many products out as possible for people to examine to see which one they want to buy, working with a pragmatic contention that the best products rise to the top in the marketplace of commodities, akin to the best ideas rising to the top in the marketplace of ideas.

In the field of communication, a democratic ethic is probably best defined by Karl Wallace (1955) in his now-classic article about habits of communication in a democratic society. His work defines a democratic ethic by articulating four habits or procedures to follow to ensure democratic communication: (a) the habit of search—openness to new ideas;

(b) the habit of justice—seeking factual accuracy; (c) the habit of preferring public to private motivations—putting concern for the public good over concern for private preference; (d) the habit of respect for dissent—democracy is renewed through learning from difference. In the past 150 years, several public figures serve to illustrate concern for democratic ethics, from Susan B. Anthony's promotion of women's voices in the public sphere to Martin Luther King, Jr.'s leadership in the civil rights movement. In the field of communication, this ethic endures with the work of many scholars and in the national discipline's establishment of an award in honor of Karl Wallace—the Karl R. Wallace Memorial Award, which is given to support scholarship in rhetoric or public discourse.

❖ UNIVERSAL-HUMANITARIAN COMMUNICATION ETHICS

A universal-humanitarian approach to communication ethics assumes a commitment to the Enlightenment ideal of rationality as the central guiding ethical principle, a rationality considered an essential part of human nature that requires protection and promotion for the good of human beings through adherence to rational principles. Universal-humanitarian communication ethics requires

a select intelligentsia [intellectual members of society] to announce "principles" that should guide communication behavior. However, the principles are *not created* by the intelligentsia; instead, they are universal, *a priori* (pre-existing) principles announced, supported, and, if necessary, fought for by an "enlightened" and "insightful" minority. (Arnett, 1987, p. 48)

Pre-existing goods are revealed to society by gifted intellectuals who have the ability and responsibility to discern them.

Immanuel Kant is the representative ethical theorist for universal-humanitarian ethics. His approach stems from the Enlightenment assumption that all human beings possess rational governing principles as part of their cognitive makeup. Ethical principles are inborn and universal and exist as "ideals" or principles inherent and applicable to everyone everywhere. The humanitarian element of this approach directs our attention to valuing adherence to rational principles as a duty or obligation of being part of the human community.

The assumption of a priori universals plays its way out in multiple configurations, including a utilitarian perspective, which refers to decision making that seeks to do the greatest good for the greatest number

of people. In order to discern this greatest good, the utilitarian perspective, like the universal-humanitarian approach, presupposes the universal grounding of rationality that makes such discernment and choice possible. The question, "What is the greatest good for the greatest number of people?" presupposes an Enlightenment ideal that we can discern the correct answer. Although Kant's universal-humanitarian ethic is often separated from a utilitarian ethic, we highlight their implicit connection by noting the assumed a priori good underlying each, consistent with the observations of Taylor (1989) of such assumed goods. The social utility approach of William S. Howells (1986) anchors the good in the value system of a particular culture rather than a priori principles.

Universal-humanitarian ethics offers a realm of certainty in application of ethical principles stemming from a sense of order in life and the universe that is pre-existent, or already given. In every situation requiring an ethical response, tried and true principles exist that govern that situation. Kant advises us to consider the wisdom of a given ethical principle by asking, "Can this principle be universalized such that it would make sense for human life?" For example, imagine that June is aware that co-worker Paul has failed to complete a report. June's boss, Gertrude, asks her about the report. According to universal-humanitarian ethics, June should reason as follows when considering whether to tell the truth or lie: "If everyone lied, the very idea of language as representing reality would make no logical sense—it would be meaningless. Therefore, I cannot believe that everyone should lie; therefore, I have a duty to tell the truth." This reasoning will lead June to recognize that her duty is to tell the truth, in every situation, without exception. In this specific case, therefore, she must tell the truth, not protect her co-worker, because the universal principle of truth telling applies to every case.

A universal-humanitarian communication ethic does not attend to the messiness of particulars, but to the principles that prescribe or dictate one's duty. The good is one's universal duty tied to a given domain of human life and experience (such as telling the truth); one's communicative behavior protects and promotes that good. Challenges arise when more than one perceived duty emerges in a situation, when rival goods compete for our allegiance. For instance, the impulse to protect a person may conflict with the universal duty to tell the truth.

In the field of communication ethics, there are several thoughtful champions of universal-humanitarian/Enlightenment approaches. An exemplar of a universalistic communication ethic is provided by Christopher Johnstone (1981). He argues eloquently for a commitment to beauty, choice, and reasoning situated within the public context to

help us understand the complexity of the human soul. He calls us to universal principles that inspired great documents and, at times, heroic action in the West.

❖ CODES, PROCEDURES, AND STANDARDS IN COMMUNICATION ETHICS

Codes, procedures, and standards define communication ethics guidelines by which conduct is evaluated, protecting and promoting the good of corporately agreed-upon regulations. Codes, procedures, and standards frame communication conceptually and behaviorally according to guidelines defined by institutional groups. These guidelines are the “guardians of appropriate ethical conduct” (Arnett, 1987, p. 50). This perspective outlines value codes to guide discourse:

Standards and codes are important to most organizations in crisis and in beginning identity formation, as long as they are not taken too legalistically. The value of codes lies more in their ability to promote discussion than in the total regulation of behavior. (Arnett, 1987, p. 51)

Organizations develop written codes of conduct to ensure common agreement on appropriate conduct. Professional groups, such as lawyers and physicians, adhere to defined codes of conduct; some of these professional codes are ancient, such as the Hippocratic oath that binds physicians to “do no harm” to those for whom they provide medical care.

This approach defines many codes of ethics in organizations. Within the field of communication, Kenneth Andersen is central to this ongoing effort to make public the expectations for academic communication professionals. Andersen was instrumental in the development of the National Communication Association (NCA) Code of Professional Responsibilities for the Communication Scholar/Teacher. The NCA Code of Professional Responsibilities for the Communication Scholar/Teacher includes statements such as the following:

The National Communication Association believes that responsible behavior is a hallmark of professionalism in communication. We believe that responsible behavior is guided by values such as

- integrity
- fairness
- professional and social responsibility
- equality of opportunity
- confidentiality

- honesty and openness
- respect for self and others
- freedom and safety

These guidelines support values that the profession, through committee approval, considers central to its teaching, research, publication activities, professional relationships with colleagues, students, members of the community, and society as a whole.

In the marketplace, both the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) and the American Advertising Federation (AAF) define codes of conduct for their members that consist of guidelines for professional behavior. The PRSA’s code emphasizes responsible advocacy in the public sphere. Advocacy, honesty, expertise, independence, loyalty, and fairness are the six goods put forth by PRSA. The AAF code includes truthfulness in representing attributes and prices of products, “taste and decency” in advertising, and competence of spokespersons who provide testimonials for a given product. Communication ethics as codes, procedures, and standards rests on the centrality of corporately sanctioned public proclamation of communicative action that regulates professional behavior and requires periodic revisiting.

❖ CONTEXTUAL COMMUNICATION ETHICS

A contextual approach to communication ethics recognizes variations in culture, persons, and communication settings when applying communication ethics principles, protecting and promoting the good of the particular context and the good residing in that context. A contextual communication ethic encompasses and “justifies different communication standards for different audiences, cultures, and relationships” (Arnett, 1987, p. 52). A contextual approach asks questions about the situatedness of the particular, seeking to identify the good appropriate for the individual case.

An example of contextual communication ethics would be differences in appropriateness of eye contact across cultures—directness in eye contact in one culture protects the communicative goods of honesty and direct connection. The goods of privacy and distance are protected and promoted by the communicative practice of reduced eye contact in other cultures. Likewise, goods of hierarchy, freedom, authority, distance, and social harmony are manifested in the varied communication practices of different cultures, as intercultural research reveals (Hall, 2005). Culture is contextual host to the practice of ethics; concern for the good and its enactment are integral to culture.

Particular cultures manifest particular ethical practices, many of which, at the surface level, may not be shared with other cultures (Appiah, 2006). Therefore, consideration of culture holds significant implications for the study and practice of communication ethics.

In organizational settings, the good of a particular institution is defined by its mission statement (Arnett & Fritz, 2001); the context of a particular organization calls forth practices that support that good. Through socialization of new employees, the good of an organization's culture finds support in the organization's day-to-day operations. Additionally, in an interpersonal context of close friendship, revealing personal information serves the good of connection and intimacy proper to that context. In a professional setting—for example, a place of employment—goods of the task and professional distance could be damaged by self-disclosure of intimate information or protected by limited self-disclosure. In these two contexts, understood as personal and professional, different amounts and types of self-disclosure protect and promote different goods in the engagement of communication ethics.

Matthew Seeger's (1997) work represents a thorough treatment of communication ethics in organizational contexts. His model, based on Karl Weick's organizational sensemaking theory, incorporates a number of issues relevant to organizations and their internal and external publics, including employer-employee relations, whistleblowing, and democracy in the workplace. Seeger's application of Weick's work provides a focus on organizational responsiveness to the environment through the process of enactment, which refers to the way in which organizational members construct and make sense of events around them. Charles Conrad's (1993) edited volume *The Ethical Nexus* addresses a broad spectrum of issues related to organization communication ethics, highlighting a number of contexts calling for responsive ethical organizational decision making.

In each of these examples, the specific context frames appropriate communicative action that protects and promotes a given sense of the good. This view of communication ethics presupposes a high degree of influence associated with a given context. Simply put, the context takes on more persuasive or instructional power than the communicative agent. This view of communication ethics begins with knowledge of the context aligned with the communicative necessity to be responsive to the needs of that context in a specific situation.

❖ NARRATIVE COMMUNICATION ETHICS

Walter Fisher's (1987) work on the narrative paradigm for human communication offers a story-centered approach in which the good is

manifested through the action of a given story and the characters who live the practices of a given narrative structure. A narrative suggests appropriate lines of action, or instantiations of the good for lived experience: "Narrative or story provides a community with a . . . context for action and rhetoric of practice" (Arnett, 1987, p. 53). For example, the Old Testament story of Exodus, featuring a nation enslaved by another in which the enslaved nation leaves the oppressing nation in search of a new home, illustrates goods of freedom and deliverance. These goods emerged within the narrative and now provide the basis for other oppressed groups' hopes and eventual movement in search of freedom (e.g., Selby, 2001).

Fisher's work builds upon a number of sources, with the insight of Alasdair MacIntyre as key. MacIntyre (1984) offers an understanding of virtues derived from different narratives or traditions throughout culture and history. MacIntyre (1984) is also central to Bellah and colleagues' books *Habits of the Heart* (Bellah et al., 1985) and *The Good Society* (Bellah et al., 1991), which address the dangers of losing a narrative from which actions gather their meaning.

The goods manifested in a narrative structure or tradition offer guidelines for living and for evaluating one's own life and that of others. We see the power of narrative in human response to stories, which are narrative in form but less encompassing than the more comprehensive structures of a particular tradition. Human beings respond to stories and to the goods they manifest. Stories display attributes of the cultures of which they are a part, and some, like the Cinderella story (e.g., Alidou, 2002), emerge in multiple locations, displaying goods that are shared across cultures. The work of Christians and Traber (1997) on universal-minimalist ethics identifies a small number of protonorms or goods valued in all cultures—for example, telling the truth, doing no harm to the innocent, and respect for persons. Like Bok (1979), Christians and Traber look for narrative agreement that might bring us together around a minimalist set of values. Narrative communication ethics recognizes the story-laden nature of human experience, framing guidelines appropriate to "characters" in a given story.

Postmodernity challenged a "metanarrative ethics" that identifies one transcendent good or set of transcendent goods invariant across time and place, represented by Kant's universal ethics. However, postmodernity announced the presence of multiple and competing petite narratives. The recognition of many narratives, as opposed to a meta-narrative, understands multiple senses of "ground," each of which gives rise to a communication ethic that seeks to protect and promote a given sense of the good. Recognizing a multiplicity of petite narratives permits narrative ethics to guide without claiming universal validity.

Each narrative frames a good and holds implications for action and evaluation of that action; behavior of persons in the narrative should be consistent with the good articulated by the narrative. Religiously and politically grounded communication ethics—for that matter, all story-laden communication ethics—may be framed within a narrative ethic. The narrative perspective offers the possibility of seeking temporal agreement on minimalist values protected and promoted by more than one narrative that will permit us to function together in the midst of our diversity.

* The novel *Watership Down* (Adams, 1972) reveals the importance of narrative in the reconstruction of life together after a group of rabbits loses its warren to a housing development. This analysis comes from Stanley Hauerwas (1981) in his illustration of narrative ethics that employs this novel. The rabbits establish a community, which they name "Watership Down," defined by goods that become agreed upon at a corporate level. Guiding their development of this community is a larger story of the legendary rabbit El-ahrairah. El-ahrairah is a mythological prototype or character illustrating the challenges of life as a rabbit in a delightful and dangerous world. His wise, cunning, and careful action emerges in tales told by the rabbits in their journey to find a place to establish their new community. These stories reflect a larger narrative that provided guidelines for the rabbits as they established their dwelling place. The story of a given community makes manifest goods that the community protects and promotes. Such is the reason that stories like *The Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien, 2004) capture the attention of both young and old. What makes these works interesting is the power of narrative that guides the characters. We find characters within the novels who attend to stories that propel their action. Hauerwas (1981), in *A Community of Character*, takes the important insights of MacIntyre on narrative and brings them to life in exemplification. This work of Hauerwas and the work of Bellah on the limits of individualism (Arnett, Fritz, & Holba, 2007) suggest that the communicative insights of Walter Fisher are extraordinary—stories matter, as Fisher (1987) states, we are "homo narrans" (p. xiii). We live in a story-laden world. For the study of communication ethics in a world of difference and for an understanding of dialogue that attends to the reality of differing ground upon which the communicators stand, the work of Walter Fisher was paradigmatically groundbreaking. His insights provided a way to understand multiplicity that did not begin with the person, but with the narrative ground upon which a communicator stands (Arnett, 2005).

❖ DIALOGIC COMMUNICATION ETHICS

Dialogue, understood as the communicative exchange of agents embedded in a particular historical moment, a particular sociocultural standpoint, and a particular set of experiences, requires us to stand on our own ground while being open to the Other's standpoint. A dialogic approach to communication ethics recognizes the importance of meaning that emerges in discourse between persons. A dialogic communication ethic acknowledges multiple goods that give rise to and emerge in ongoing conversations, protecting and promoting the good of learning. A dialogic approach to communication ethics, or a dialogic ethic, recognizes that human beings live within an ongoing conversation that began well before a specific interpersonal interaction begins and is never concluded (Arnett, Arneson, & Bell, 2006). Such an ethic protects and promotes the unexpected revelation that emerges between and among persons, a revelation owned by no one and meaningfully important to many.

We are born into a world already formed, already in conversation. This understanding of dialogue assumes the importance of narrative; narrative gives birth to a particular set of social practices, virtues, and understandings of the good carried forth in dialogue. A dialogic ethic does not ensure the "right" answer; it works to assist in meeting whatever diversity is before us, whether we like it or not. The key to dialogue is what Buber called the "between," that which emerges, which no one can force to appear or make happen. A dialogic ethic is the protector and the promoter of the emergent, the unexpected, and the unforeseen—it is the communicative home of hope for an idea, a viewpoint, or an action that has not yet been apparent. A dialogic ethic is the dwelling of communicative hope beyond our control, but when recognized, it brings the unsuspected, the unknown, and the unplanned together. We cannot demand dialogue and its gift of the unexpected, but when it happens, communicative practices of gratitude are necessary, for the emergent answer comes as a gift outside the demands of the communicative partners. The work of Charles Brown and Paul Keller (1973) began the movement to connect dialogue and ethics; later, this connection was furthered by the work of Johannesen (2002), John Stewart (2006), Baxter and Montgomery (1996), and Anderson and Cissna (Anderson, Baxter, & Cissna, 2004; Anderson, Cissna, & Arnett, 1994), reminding us implicitly and explicitly of the ongoing connection of dialogue and ethics.

The following section illustrates the application of each of the approaches to communication ethics, addressing the issue of drinking alcohol on a college campus. In the United States, the practice of

alcohol overconsumption has been a source of contention and conflict in many arenas, particularly on college and university campuses. The Prohibition era will forever mark the ongoing ambivalence of this country to alcohol consumption.

The College Campus: Communication Ethics Perspectives

Drinking alcohol has been a contested good in many cultures and contexts. Some cultures understand alcohol as a legitimate good of human life that promotes sociability and relaxation. Some cultures understand alcohol as a significant part of a tradition, important to sacred rituals. Other cultures or groups forbid the consumption of alcohol. Each of the approaches to communication ethics offers a way to think about the consumption of alcohol as a good (or as not a good) or as connected to a good (or to that which is not a good). We review each approach below as it applies to the case of five friends enrolled at an educational institution who are faced with issues related to alcohol consumption.

A **democratic approach to communication ethics** finds the good in a public process for collaborating on ideas, customs, and rights, protecting and promoting the good of public decision making. Imagine five close friends who attend the same college and understand that drinking is an issue requiring responsible decision making. The five friends make a pact to discuss and deliberate about the rules they will follow when attending parties where alcohol will be consumed. Through a number of meetings among the five, many options about what to do are discussed, and they develop guidelines by which they agree to abide. The practice of discussion and deliberation illustrates a democratic communication ethic. Some of the democratically generated guidelines that emerge from their deliberations include decisions about electing a designated driver who will refrain from drinking when the friends attend parties requiring transportation and decisions about which parties to attend and which ones to avoid based on the likelihood of intensity of alcohol consumption at the event.

A **universal-humanitarian approach to communication ethics** assumes a built-in guiding ethical principle that is part of human nature, protecting and promoting the good of duty and responsibility to human beings. From this perspective, if Ivan was elected to be the designated driver on a given evening, he would abstain from drinking as a duty to his friends based on a promise he made and as a duty to the larger society in order to fulfill his obligation not to drink and drive as required by law. He fulfills the rational obligation of understanding that if everyone were to break promises, the notion of promising itself would have no meaning for human society; if everyone broke the law,

contracts among persons would have no meaning. His fulfillment of this obligation also shows respect for his friends as valuable human beings; he should not put them in danger by drinking and driving. The practice of keeping a promise to his friends, keeping the law, and fulfilling the duty to protect human life illustrates a universal-humanitarian ethic.

A **codes, procedures, and standards approach to communication ethics** requires defining guidelines according to which appropriate ethical conduct can be evaluated and then protecting and promoting the good of this corporately agreed-upon set of regulations. From this perspective, the group of five friends understands that their college has an ethical code of conduct regulating drinking on campus. For example, the students must know the university rules for student drinking, identifying the codes, procedures, and standards for this campus.

A **contextual approach to communication ethics** recognizes variations in culture, persons, and settings when applying communication ethics principles, protecting and promoting the good of the particular. In certain contexts, the good of alcohol consumption may clash with other goods, although consuming alcohol may be permitted by law. For example, in a party where most people are under the drinking age, the consumption of alcohol by someone who has attained legal drinking age may not represent the most salient or important good. Additionally, consider the case of someone who is having difficulty with alcohol abuse and is trying to stop drinking. A close friend of that person may choose not to order a drink at a restaurant when they are dining together, stating, "I think I'll have a soda with my meal. I don't want a beer right now." Ethical communicative choices about drinking or refraining from drinking in different situations illustrate a contextual communication ethic.

A **narrative approach to communication ethics** assumes that persons' lives are guided by stories about the way the world is or should be, protecting and promoting the good of particular narratives or stories. Narratives themselves are host to goods that underlie, constitute, and shape them. For some, a life story recognizes the good of alcohol consumption in moderation for contexts of celebration and relaxation; for others, alcohol has played such a strong role in a story of abuse and neglect that it cannot fill the role of a good in that life. A family with a history of alcohol abuse may have an elaborate story about the dangers of alcohol and compelling reasons for abstinence. A colleague had a mother who watched her father die of alcoholism after she had seen the same fate befall two uncles. The mother, as an adult, never permitted alcohol in the house for any occasion. Her husband honored her request, as did the rest of the family. As the children became professionals and functioned in much different environments with much

different narrative limits on drinking, there was one constant story—no drinking in Mom's home. Stories matter; they shape our lives.

A **dialogic communication ethic** acknowledges multiple goods that give rise to and emerge in ongoing conversations, protecting and promoting the good of learning. After a night of heavy drinking resulting in regrettable behavior, unwise choices, stupidity, and physical illness, the five friends discuss the consequences of their actions. Though their conversation, they realize how lucky they are to be alive and, more important, recognize that the actions that occurred should never occur again. Of course, there is no guarantee that dialogue will open the unexpected. However, it is amazing what the emergent unknown can bring to us when it appears unexpectedly as an idea or a road less traveled. The emergent unknown can change a life—for dialogue is the home of a hope we cannot own, but can only invite.

These six approaches to communication ethics point to theoretical differences that lend themselves to differing views of the good. Diversity lives in many forms; differing understandings of communication ethics reflect such ongoing diversity. As Chesebro (1997) reminds us, different communication systems bring forth different values and are shaped by the society of which they are a part.

Not all people share the same values. Multiple systems of human communication exist, in part, because different sets of values govern symbolizing (see e.g. Chesebro 1973). But far more important in this essay the values regulating any particular human communication system are influenced by societal systems. (p. 126)

Engagement with communication ethics diversity begins with understanding differing basic approaches to communication ethics: democratic; universal-humanitarian; codes, procedures, and standards; contextual; narrative; and dialogic. Each approach offers insight into the complexity of communication ethics in theory and action, with each protecting and promoting a given sense of the good.

❖ COMMUNICATION ETHICS: REFLECTION AND ACTION

1. Locate a student handbook for your college or university and list several goods that are protected and promoted. How are these goods talked about in the handbook?
2. Consider a situation that required you to make a difficult choice. Assess the situation using three of the following

approaches in your communicative analysis: democratic; universal-humanitarian; codes, procedures, and standards; contextual; narrative; dialogic.

3. Which of the approaches to communication ethics seems most helpful to you in this situation and why?
4. Locate the Web sites for the National Communication Association (NCA), the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), and the American Advertising Federation (AAF) to find their professional ethical codes. Do these professional communication organizations share any guiding principles?

❖ ENGAGING COMMUNICATION ETHICS THROUGH LITERATURE: *LES MISÉRABLES*

Les Misérables illustrates elements of each approach to communication ethics. A democratic communication ethic emerges in the hopes of the revolutionaries for a more just society, with representation from peasants as well as rich nobles. Javert illustrates a prototypical universal-humanitarian communication ethic in his concern for duty without exception. His unswerving devotion to the law reflects commitment to the good of duty. Jean Valjean follows a universal-humanitarian ethic in his determination to fulfill his promise to the dying Fantine to care for her child. He carries out this duty with all his energy; likewise, he struggles between competing duties, one to the town he governs as mayor, to which he has brought safety and prosperity that would be jeopardized if he were no longer mayor, and the other to the truth, secured by revealing his identity as Jean Valjean, thereby saving the life of an innocent man mistaken for him.

When Valjean first arrives at the village where the bishop resides, he encounters a set of codes, laws, and procedures to protect citizens from harm, and these guidelines prevent him from finding a place to stay for the night. When Javert comes to find Valjean after he reveals his identity to save the life of the man mistaken for him, the nun who keeps house for Valjean/Mayor, Madeleine, who had never told a lie in her life, states that Valjean is not there, nor has he been there, working with a contextual ethic that honors the particular of protecting someone she believes to be honest and worthy of protection. Bishop Bienvenu

engages a narrative ethic when he welcomes Valjean into his home; the bishop seeks to live the Christian narrative of love for all when he identifies Valjean as worthy of the title of Monsieur, worthy of trust, and worthy of invitation into a narrative represented by the bishop's "gift" of candlesticks and silver.

A dialogic ethic can be seen, finally, between Javert and Valjean at the end of the book where the unexpected emergent appears after Javert arrests Valjean. Valjean asks Javert to permit him to take the wounded Marius home, and, in an unexpected acquiescence, Javert agrees, and then, just as unexpectedly, permits Valjean to go free. Although Javert cannot continue life with this contradiction between his commitment to the good of duty to the law and his own behavior in setting Valjean free, the emergent reality transforms Valjean's future. In this case, an uninvited dialogic event takes place that no one could have predicted.

4

Communication Ethics

In the Eye(s) of the Theory of the Beholder



Common sense is seen primarily in the judgments about right and wrong, proper and improper, that it makes. Whoever has a sound judgment is not thereby enabled to judge particulars under universal viewpoints, but he knows what is important, i.e. he sees things from right and sound points of view. (Gadamer, 1986, p. 31)

This chapter examines issues of theory, diversity, and communication ethics as interrelated, framing theory as a type of lens that makes visible implicit ethical content. Different theories make visible different types of ethical content. The pragmatic importance of theory and communication ethics rests with the assumption that we need a public map of "why" and "how" we see, permitting examination of our own bias and that of others. We begin the discussion of theory with humble recognition of our limits and the need to make such positions public when doing communication ethics.