



Speaking into the Air

A History of the Idea of Communication

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Dialogue and Dissemination

In certain quarters dialogue has attained something of a holy status. It is held up as the summit of human encounter, the essence of liberal education, and the medium of participatory democracy. By virtue of its reciprocity and interaction, dialogue is taken as superior to the one-way communiqués of mass media and mass culture. In 1956 the psychiatrist Joost Meerloo voiced a complaint against television that recurs like the locust with every new medium: “The view from the screen doesn’t allow for the freedom-arousing mutuality of communication and discussion. Conversation is the lost art.”¹ Leo Lowenthal likewise singled out the media: “True communication entails a communion, a sharing of inner experience. The dehumanization of communication has resulted from its annexation by the media of modern culture—by the newspapers first, and then by radio and television.”² Media, of course, have long served as scapegoats for worries, many of them quite legitimate, about unaccountable power or cultural debasement. Criticism of the media for perpetuating structural inequalities and spiritual tawdriness is both perfectly fair and urgently needed. But such criticism ought not to overlook the inequalities that exist outside media or the tawdriness that fills our hearts unbidden.

1. Joost A. M. Meerloo, *The Rape of the Mind: The Psychology of Thought Control, Menticide, and Brainwashing* (1956; New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1961), 210.

2. Leo Lowenthal, “Communication and Humanitas,” in *The Human Dialogue: Perspectives on Communication*, ed. Floyd W. Matson and Ashley Montagu (New York: Free Press, 1967), 336. Obviously, dialogism has an elective affinity with the self-definition of professional humanist educators.

To blame media for distorting dialogue is to misplace pathos. First, media critique has bigger fish to fry: the concentrations of political economy and the inherent list to perversity in human appetites. Second, media can sustain diverse formal arrangements. It is a mistake to equate technologies with their societal applications. For example, “broadcasting” (one-way dispersion of programming to an audience that cannot itself broadcast) is not inherent in the technology of radio; it was a complex social accomplishment (see chapter 5). The lack of dialogue owes less to broadcasting technologies than to interests that profit from constituting audiences as observers rather than participants. Third and most important, dialogue can be tyrannical and dissemination can be just, as I will argue throughout this chapter. The distortion of dialogue is not only a form of abuse but one of the distinctive features of civilization, for better and for worse. Distortions of dialogue make it possible to communicate across culture, across space and time, with the dead, the distant, and the alien.

The strenuous standard of dialogue, especially if it means reciprocal speech acts between live communicators who are present to each other in some way, can stigmatize a great deal of the things we do with words. Much of culture is not necessarily dyadic, mutual, or interactive. Dialogue is only one communicative script among many. The lament over the end of conversation and the call for refreshed dialogue alike miss the virtues inherent in nonreciprocal forms of action and culture. Life with others is as often a ritual performance as a dialogue. Dialogue is a bad model for the variety of shrugs, grunts, and moans that people emit (among other signs and gestures) in face-to-face settings. It is an even worse normative model for the extended, even distended, kinds of talk and discourse necessary in large-scale democracy. Much of culture consists of signs in general dispersion, and felicitous communication—in the sense of creating just community between two or more creatures—depends more basically on imagination, liberty, and solidarity among the participants than on equal time in the conversation. Dialogue, to be sure, is one precious part of our tool-kit as talking animals, but it ought not to be elevated to sole or supreme status.

Rather than survey contemporary dialogians (a term to rhyme with theologians) and their intellectual roots—the various liberals, communitarians, Deweyans, Habermasians, radical democrats, plus occasional postmodernists and feminists (not necessarily mutually exclusive categories, these) who prescribe conversation for our political and cultural woes—my plan in this chapter is to sketch a deep horizon against which to set contemporary controversies. In staging a debate between the

greatest proponent of dialogue, Socrates, and the most enduring voice for dissemination, Jesus, I aim to rediscover both the subtleties of what can count as dialogue and the blessedness of nondialogic forms, including dissemination. The rehabilitation of dissemination is not intended as an apology for the commissars and bureaucrats who issue edicts without deliberation or consultation; it is to go beyond the often uncritical celebration of dialogue to inquire more closely into what kinds of communicative forms are most apt for a democratic polity and ethical life.

Socrates and Jesus are the central figures in the moral life of the Western world. Their points of contact and difference have long been debated. They were both ironists or counterquestioners; martyrs whose kingdom was not of this world; teachers from whom we possess not a single word unrefracted by the interests of their disciples; and consequently personalities whose historical actuality has aroused enormous puzzlement and interest. Both of them taught about love and the dispersion of seeds, but to different effects. "Socrates" in Plato's *Phaedrus* offers one horizon of thinking about human discursive activity since then: the erotic life of dialogue. Parables attributed to "Jesus" by the synoptic Gospels provide a countervision: invariant and open dissemination, addressed to whom it may concern. These two conceptions of communication—tightly coupled dialogue and loosely coupled dissemination—continue today. The *Phaedrus* calls for an intimate love that links lover and beloved in a reciprocal flow; the parable of the sower calls for a diffuse love that is equally gracious to all. For Socrates, dialogue between philosopher and pupil is supposed to be one-on-one, interactive, and live, unique and nonreproducible. In the synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke (I take up John later), the Word is scattered uniformly, addressed to no one in particular, and open in its destiny. Socrates sees writing as troubling delivery and cultivation: his vision is sender oriented. The question for him is the care of the seeds and their proper nurturing, not what the recipient might add to the process. Jesus, in contrast, offers a receiver-oriented model in which the sender has no control over the harvest. The pervasive sense of communication disturbance in the twentieth century, I argue, finds a wellspring in the Socratic privilege of soul-to-soul connection and an antidote of sorts in Jesus' sense of the necessary looseness of any communicative coupling.

My aim here is to contrast two *Grundbegriffe* in communication theory, dialogue and dissemination, as they have since taken historically effective shape in European thought. The focus is not the historical Socrates or Jesus but rather the afterlife of these figures in specific texts written by their canonical disciples, Plato and the synoptic evangelists.

Plato may have invented much of Socrates as he lives today, and Jesus of Nazareth's doctrinal originality may fade once placed in the context of first-century nascent rabbinical culture, but my focus is the intellectual and moral shadow those personages have cast, not their precise historicity. In the fusion of horizons I hope to orchestrate, the point is less to illuminate Plato or the Gospels than to let them instruct us, by their distance and familiarity. Thus we may discover what it might look like if we took communication theory seriously as an open field for reflection.

Dialogue and Eros in the Phaedrus

Nominating Plato as a source of communication theory might seem simply an act of grasping for a noble lineage if the *Phaedrus* were not so astoundingly relevant for understanding the age of mechanical reproduction. There is a partial precedent for this argument.³ Eric Havelock has argued that Plato's work should be read against the transition in Greek culture from a dying world of orality to a nascent one of literacy. Since then many have taken Socrates' critique of the written word at the end of the *Phaedrus* as prophetic of worries about new media more generally, including recent tectonic shifts in forms of communication.⁴ Walter J. Ong, for instance, has argued that Socrates' complaints about writing—that it diminishes memory, lacks interaction, disseminates at random, and disembodies speakers and hearers—are similar to late twentieth-century worries about computers as well as fifteenth-century concerns about printing.⁵ The deprivation of presence, in one way or another, has always been the starting point of reflection about communication, and the *Phaedrus* has taken its place as the Platonic text most likely to be studied by those interested in media today.

Taken as a whole, the *Phaedrus* is much more than a compendium of anxieties about technology's effects on human intercourse. The critique of the written word is only part of a larger analysis of the gaps in soul

3. In 1935 Paul Lazarsfeld claimed the *Phaedrus* for social research: "The Art of Asking Why," in *Public Opinion and Propaganda: A Book of Readings*, ed. Daniel Katz (New York: Dryden Press, 1954), 675. Other invocations of the *Phaedrus* in mass communication theory include Paul F. Lazarsfeld, *Continuities in the Language of Social Research* (New York: Free Press, 1972), 153; Robert K. Merton, *Mass Persuasion: The Social Psychology of a War Bond Drive* (New York: Harper, 1946), 108; and Lowenthal, "Communication and Humanitas," 338–40.

4. Eric Alfred Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963). An illuminating discussion, focusing on book 10 of Plato's *Republic* rather than the *Phaedrus*, is Alexander Nehamas, "Plato and the Mass Media," *Monist* 71 (1988): 214–34.

5. Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Routledge, 1982), 79–81.

and desire that inform any act of communication. By focusing on the problem of when one should yield to or abstain from a suitor's entreaties and exalting an erotically charged but disembodied union of souls, "Socrates" explicitly articulates what is implicit in most twentieth-century worries about communication: the fierce longing for contact with an untouchable other. In the *Phaedrus* the question is not about media, but about love; not techniques, but mutuality. The dialogue's sensitivity to the wrinkles in new forms of inscription grows from an appreciation of the potential for distance and gaps between people, even in the supposedly immediate situation of face-to-face interaction. The dialogue contrasts modes of distribution (of words, of seeds, of love) that are specifically addressed and reciprocal in form to those that are indifferent to the receiver's person and one-way in form. Socrates' critique of writing is part of a larger deliberation on the varying tightness of the coupling between person and person, soul and soul, body and body. For Socrates the issue is not just the matching of minds, but the coupling of desires. Eros, not transmission, would be the chief principle of communication. In this the *Phaedrus* is far richer than the long spiritualizing trend in the intellectual history of communication theory—the dream of angel-like contact between souls at any distance—a trend that Plato, to be sure, indirectly contributes to.

The dialogue sketches both the dream of direct communication from soul to soul and the nightmare of its breakdown when transposed into new media forms. Both in its dramatic form and in its famous conclusion, the *Phaedrus* unites the hope of soul-to-soul contact with worries about its distortion. Facing the new medium of writing, Plato was haunted by multiplication, a term that ought to be taken in its double sense of simple copying and sexual reproduction.⁶ Whereas oral speech almost invariably occurs as a singular event shared uniquely by the parties privy to the discussion, writing allows all manner of strange couplings: the distant influence the near, the dead speak to the living, and the many read what was intended for the few. Socrates' interpretation of the cultural and human significance of the new medium of writing is governed by worries about erotic perversion; writing disembodies thought, thus forging ghostly sorts of amatory and intellectual linkage. His sense that new media affect not only the channels of information exchange but the very embodiment of the human foreshadows similar anxieties in the nineteenth century, when the concept of "communication" first took its current shape.

6. Plato's *Seventh Letter* gives evidence specifically of Plato's interest in writing as a cultural form.

In later antiquity the *Phaedrus* was variously taken to have such central aims as “love,” “rhetoric,” “the soul,” “the good,” and “the altogether beautiful.”⁷ Indeed, the coherence and central theme of the work have long puzzled commentators, especially given Socrates’ point in it that “any speech ought to have its own organic shape [*sōma*], like a living being; it must not be without either head or feet; it must have a middle and extremities so composed as to fit one another and the work as a whole.”⁸ The dialogue’s first half consists of a series of three speeches of increasing splendor on the subject of love, a structuring device reminiscent of the *Symposium*. The second half concerns, in a much less elevated register, speechwriting or rhetoric, and it concludes with Socrates’ famous critique of the written word. Scholars have adduced a variety of ingenious ways to account for the unity of the dialogue.⁹ For my part, I read the dialogue as an analysis of communication in its normative and distorted forms that has not yet been surpassed.¹⁰ “Great havoc he makes among our originalities,” as Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote of Plato.¹¹

All the themes are announced in the opening scene. Phaedrus, an eloquence junkie and impresario of the great speakers of the day—it is Phaedrus who gets the speechmaking rolling and serves as toastmaster general in the *Symposium*—happens upon Socrates outside the walls of Athens.¹² The pastoral setting of the dialogue—with its brooks, plane trees, cicadas, and grass—is described in unusual detail for Plato and is an unusual setting for Socrates, clearly a man of the city (cf. 230d); this is a place of abduction and inspiration, a place to have one’s soul swept

7. Gerrit Jacob de Vries, *A Commentary on the “Phaedrus” of Plato* (Amsterdam: Hakkert, 1969), 22.

8. *Phaedrus*, 264c. Hereafter I cite the Greek text parenthetically by the standard Stephanus numbering, using the translation of Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff, *Phaedrus* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1995).

9. Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 74–75; Mary Margaret Mackenzie, “Paradox in Plato’s *Phaedrus*,” *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* 28 (1982): 64–76; G. R. F. Ferrari, *Listening to the Cicadas: A Study of Plato’s “Phaedrus”* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 30–34; and Jesper Svenbro, *Phrasikleia: Anthropologie de la lecture en Grèce ancienne* (Paris: Éditions la Découverte, 1988), 219–38; see chart on 228. A splendid summary of the question of the unity of the *Phaedrus* and of recent scholarship generally is Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff, “Introduction,” in *Phaedrus* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1995), ix–xlvii.

10. Needless to say, my reading omits much: the dialogue’s intertextual resonance within Plato’s opus, the architectonic use of myth, sly commentaries on historical persons, vegetation imagery, and plays on names, for instance.

11. Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Plato, or The Philosopher,” in *The Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Brooks Atkinson (New York: Random House, 1950), 471. Great havoc Emerson thus makes among Harold Bloom’s originalities.

12. The characterization of Phaedrus as an “impresario” is found in Ferrari, *Listening to the Cicadas*, 5–9.

away by words or love. When Phaedrus raves about a speech on the subject of love he has just heard that morning from Lysias, a distinguished non-Athenian resident politician and teacher of rhetoric, Socrates' interest perks up. Phaedrus offers to recite its major points, since he has not yet committed it to memory. But Socrates, who gushingly calls himself a man "who is sick with passion for hearing speeches" (228b), asks just what Phaedrus is holding in his left hand under his cloak. On discovering that he has the text of the speech tucked inside his tunic, Socrates loses interest in Phaedrus's version when he can have "Lysias himself." Here, already, the written word is figured as an erotic object, concealed close to the body.¹³

Socrates thereupon settles down to hear the discourse as a whole, which Phaedrus proceeds to read aloud. The mise-en-scène of the dialogue thus sketches the theme of the transgressive circulation of the written word, its ability to wander beyond the original context of its oral, interactive presence, just as Phaedrus and Socrates circulate outside the bounds of the city. Socrates' possibly ironic comment about "Lysias himself" being present (*parontos de kai Lusiou*, 228e) suggests the ghostly way that recording media can summon the absent. It also suggests a preference for the superior playback mechanism of the new medium of recording (writing) over the limited power of memory. The disembodied presence of an absent other turns out to be a theme of the dialogue, and of almost all thinking about communication since; so is the notion that what new media gain in fidelity, they lose by conjuring a new spirit world.

The speech by "Lysias" (a speech whose singular aptness for the purposes of the dialogue is perhaps the best evidence that it in fact is a parody composed by Plato) advances the paradox that a suitor moved not by the "madness" of love but by the calculation of self-interest should be preferred by a youth to one who is genuinely in love. Like the dialogue between Socrates and Phaedrus, the love in question is an affair between men.¹⁴ Love is a *mania*, goes the argument, that can damage reason, friendship, reputation, and health. A coolly rational approach, by contrast, can spare both parties the sorrows of love. The suitor gains the sexual favors of a youth, and the youth gains the protection and counsel of an experienced older man. For young men of the elite classes in this era of Athenian history, the royal road to education (*paideia*) came through attachment to an older man in the institution known as

13. Svenbro, *Phrasikleia*, 220.

14. For a reading of the dialogue as female friendly, see Page DuBois, "Phallogocentrism and Its Subversion in Plato's *Phaedrus*," *Arethusa* 18 (1985): 91–103.

synousia. Love for Lysias can be distinguished from the concord of the lovers' souls; it is an instrumental good better handled without any accompanying frenzy.

The speech by Lysias is a rhetorical exercise, perhaps an advertisement of his argumentative powers, consciously contrary to received wisdom but perhaps vaguely reminiscent of views earlier espoused by Plato.¹⁵ It celebrates impersonality as a rational way to avoid the madness of love. *Erastēs* (lover) and *eromenos* (beloved) should contract amicably, neither being moved by passion. For if love is the sole arbiter of one's potential lovers, the choice is restricted to the comparative few who also happen to be mutually afflicted. Calculation, in contrast, yields a much greater array of choices of potential lovers. Lysias banishes any vulnerability, passion, or loss from love. He calls for exchange over expenditure.

The dialogue again presents a double drama in which performance and content coincide: the setting of Phaedrus's reading to Socrates involves an erotic relation as lopsided as that proposed by Lysias. Phaedrus, as it happens, is the intended of Lysias. More specifically, reading for the ancient Greeks was often figured as the sexual relation between penetrator and penetrated. Since reading was almost always vocal, to write was to exert control over the voice and body of the eventual reader, even across distances in time and space.¹⁶ To read—which meant to read aloud—was to relinquish control of one's body to the (masculine) writer, to yield to a distant dominating body. To write was to act as an *erastēs*; to read, as an *eromenos*. The writer was commonly understood to be dominating and active and the reader passive and defeated.¹⁷ In the opening scene of the dialogue, then, an absent author, Lysias, exerts remote control over a reader's body and voice, and in the process his words come to unintended ears, those of Socrates. Writing allows distortions of address: words meant for two ears only are overheard by others. To record is to relinquish control over the confidentiality and personal destination of the message. Phaedrus's reading of words from his suitor that momentarily take possession of his physical being mirrors Lysias's argument that an asymmetrical relationship between a rational controller and a submissive beloved is best. Lysias wants to love Phae-

15. Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 203ff., argues that we miss something if we take the Lysian position on love as simply disgusting. It resembles in a distorted way middle period Platonic positions, as in the *Republic*. Clearly, however, Lysias's mode of rationalist rhetoric is distinct from Plato's mode of dialectical reason!

16. Svenbro, *Phrasikleia*, 157.

17. Svenbro, *Phrasikleia*, 213.

drus in the way a book loves its readers: openly, without regard to particularities, and for the use of the reader.

When Phaedrus finishes reading, he asks Socrates what he thinks of the speech. Socrates jokes by overpraising it, hemming and hawing when pressed, hiding his evident distaste for the speech's form and content. He coyly hints that he might know a better speech on love. Phaedrus's curiosity is aroused, and as a dealer in speeches and "father of the logos," he forces Socrates to deliver the goods, first by bribery, then by threat of force, and finally by a threat to take away Socrates' access to his abundant supply of philosophical discussion. Socrates is thus compelled to argue the superiority of the nonlover to the lover. Phaedrus thus assumes the stance of Lysias's nonloving "lover" to Socrates. "Phaedrus makes use of Socrates as an instrument, as an *instrumentum vocale* or an *organon empsukhon* [animate tool], which is to say, as an object."¹⁸ The dramatic movement of the dialogue again mimes its topic: the conditions of the word and the mutuality of love. Can love be love when one partner is a subject and another an object? For Lysias, and Phaedrus at this point, the answer is yes.

Socrates then delivers a speech on love, with his face covered; it is unclear whether he does so to cover his embarrassment or his arousal.¹⁹ Socrates has already complimented Phaedrus, whose name means something like "the shining one"—Martha Nussbaum translates it as "Sparkling"—on how glowing he looked while reading Lysias's speech. He begins by unmasking Lysias's speech as a ruse of a lover—not a nonlover—trying to win the affections of a youth pursued by many suitors. Socrates thus refuses to grant the premise of Lysias's speech, that such a thing as a nonloving lover is even possible. For him the stance of nonlover is a pretense, since no seduction would have been attempted without love.

Then Socrates characteristically turns to definitions. Love is desire (*epithumia*), he says (237d). There are two kinds of desire: an irrational desire for pleasure and a rational desire for excellence. Eros is the desire for physical beauty—the beauty of bodies (*sōmatōn kallos*) (238c). Eros can lead to a dangerous madness. Socrates plays along with the notion that love is destructive to the welfare of the beloved. The lover who is a slave to pleasure may twist the beloved to his own ends, not tolerating any superiority (238e). As Lysias argued, the *erastēs* either conquers or ignores the beloved's otherness. The lover may cultivate not the best

18. Svenbro, *Phrasikleia*, 226.

19. DuBois, "Phallocentrism," sees the veiling of Socrates as flirting with a feminine position.

but the worst in the beloved, sequestering him from philosophy and all that is good for him, making him into a sex slave. Taking a lover exposes a young man to all kinds of potential harm. When the lover is in a passionate mood, the beloved must put up with the disgusting effects of his age; when not, he risks being abandoned. Socrates paints the fickleness of love with an agile brush! Contrary to his own sensibility as a famously erotic man, here Socrates treats love as an evil, practicing the willing suspension of truth in the fine Sophist's manner. He shows his talent at argumentative stunt pilotry. His description of love gone sour—from jealousy, neglect, abuse, and refusal to allow the other autonomy—has a perennial ring.

The first two speeches are both delivered under compulsion. In the first, Phaedrus is under the spell of Lysias's text, which governs every syllable he speaks and every breath he takes. The text of the speech exerts a kind of remote control over his body. In the second, Phaedrus compels Socrates to speak against his will. Socrates even ascribes authorship of the speech to Phaedrus: though it was spoken through Socrates' mouth, it was, he claims, the result of a drug—a *pharmakon*—slipped him by Phaedrus (242e). Both are the fruit of some *pharmakon* or another: the first the written text, the second the compulsion of Phaedrus. Neither was the free or direct utterance of a soul. At stake in both is the question to whom and in what circumstances the *eromenos* should yield, a question "characteristic of an erotics conceived of as an art of give and take between the one who courts and the one who is courted."²⁰ Both speeches concern mutual usage without mutual love. Both enact asymmetrical communicative relations: the dictation of Lysias's text in the first speech, the dictatorship of Phaedrus's threat in the second. Both speeches strip love of sorrow and danger. Plato's implied critique of discourse here turns not on the medium (such as writing per se) but on constraints against the voluntary utterance of a soul.

Socrates, on rising to leave, is prohibited by his *daimonion* and stays to recite a third speech, a *palinode* (recantation) intended to atone for the blasphemy against the god of love done by the first two speeches. His second speech offers much of great resonance in the subsequent history of Western thought: the blessed madness of love (contra the denigration of madness in the previous two speeches); the battle among reason (*logos*), will (*thumos*), and appetite (*epithumia*) within each soul, as exemplified in the myth of the chariot pulled by a noble white steed and a base black one; the unique vocation of humans to know the eter-

20. Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1986), 231.

nal truths behind the passing shows; and bodily beauty as a clue to divine truth. In this great discourse, Socrates invents both a new kind of love and a new vision of communication. After two visions of systematically distorted communication, Socrates offers a conception without master or slave, dominant or subordinate—Platonic love, as we have come to call it, love without penetration. Two of the most characteristic Socratic gestures are the refusal to write and the refusal to penetrate, the latter described in Alcibiades' speech in the *Symposium*. In the *Phaedrus* we discover the intimate connection between the two refusals.²¹ Both renounce asymmetrical relations. Socrates eliminates much of the customary inequality between *erastēs* and *eromenos*.²² In contrast to the common view that symmetry in love could occur only when the heat of passion had cooled enough to allow former lovers to become asexual friends in old age, the *Phaedrus* describes a reciprocal kind of eros, the love of philosophical lovers. Philosophy, explains Socrates, is love (of wisdom); it can be pursued only with another human, one's beloved.²³ It takes two to philosophize.

In his vision of philosophical lovers collecting themselves as they recollect their divine origin, Socrates sketches an ideal of communication that retains force to this day: souls intertwined in reciprocity. This intertwining, however, is more than a melding of minds. Bodily beauty is at its heart, which Socrates views not as a hindrance to recollecting the truth, but as a reminder that transports the forgotten glory to presence. To one who has seen heavenly beauty, Socrates instructs, a beautiful face and form recall the vision. In the presence of a beautiful person, a lover who has not seen much of heaven "shudders and a fear comes over him" with such dread that he is willing to offer sacrifices to the beautiful beloved (251a). Eros is not just a beastly and sensual pulsation; it is the soul's quest to reunite with the celestial ocean of beauty. Continuing with the theme of *mania*, Socrates says the sight of the beloved bathes the lover in floods that cause his pores to begin sprouting the feathers the soul sported in its original divine state. To look upon a beautiful person is to be filled with a stream of beauty radiating from him (or *her*, we would want to add, though here Plato does not).²⁴ Apart from the sight of the beloved, the lover suffers a sickness, an itching

21. Svenbro, *Phrasikleia*, 232.

22. Foucault, *Use of Pleasure*, 239.

23. Of course, "philosophy" comes from the root of *phileo*; perhaps Socrates espouses an erosophy (or in more proper Greek, erotosophy).

24. Plato, with some serious stretching, can be read as a feminist; see Dubois, and the point that he was the first critic of generic masculine pronouns: Nussbaum, *Fragility*, 3–4.

longing, that only the sight and presence of the beloved can cure (251e). The lover is in a sorry state of mixed pleasure and pain. He is wounded by the sweet grief of eros. He follows the beloved about in a frenzy, forgetting everything else, dazzled by the sight. He longs for the presence of the beloved and disdains all mediation. Sexual desire thus is not demeaned as base by Socrates but considered an intimation of cosmic homesickness. As in Aristophanes' speech in the *Symposium*, love is quite literally a quest to recollect a lost wholeness.

Thus far Socrates' description of the wonderful and painful frenzy of eros focuses on the lover. The arrows of Eros fly, at first, in one direction only. But Socrates' narration soon shifts from the lover to the beloved, a reversal in point of view that makes the larger point about reciprocity. An "anteros" (or countereros) appears in the beloved to match the "eros" of the lover. Plato coins this word: the point is to make eros as reciprocal as *philia*.²⁵ The beloved does not know he is in love till a stream of counterlove pierces him. The stream of beauty "enters through his eyes, which are its natural route to the soul" (255c). The beloved starts to notice the tender care bestowed by the lover, and the flow starts to go both ways: "Think how a breeze or an echo bounces back from a smooth solid object to its source; that is how the stream of beauty goes back to the beautiful boy and sets him aflutter" (255c). The beloved is stunned into love but cannot at first tell exactly its source: "He does not realize that he is seeing himself in the lover as in a mirror" (255d). Socrates, whom Lacan somewhere called the inventor of psychoanalysis, describes a transference process in which subject and object are profoundly mixed up. In the lover, the beloved catches the image of his own beauty—and falls in love with the lover.

Though the relation of lover and beloved remains that between an older and a younger man, Socrates' innovation was to forward a vision of symmetry as a criterion of genuine love. A circular and symmetrical mutuality of soul sharing is near the top of the ladder. Each lover reclaims the memory of his heavenly origin in the other's beauty. Erotic love is the path of *anamnesis* (recollection); love of the other is the way to regrow one's lost heavenly wings. Whence Socrates' lame pun that *pteros*—a word combining *pteron*, wing, and *eros*—is even higher than eros (252c). Here are no one-way deals, compulsions, or manipulations. Instead, philosophical love arises from a mutual self-control in which each evokes the heavenly idea of beauty for the other. Sexual contact is not condemned by Socrates *tout court*, but it is clearly subordinate to

25. Nehamas and Woodruff, *Phaedrus*, 46 n. 115.

the higher mutuality of abstinence. Plato's Socrates, then, begins a long tradition that sees a reciprocal encounter with another person as a way to return to the homeland whence the soul has wandered, an idea that resonates in the Christian notion of *caritas*, in romantic love, in psychoanalysis, and perhaps even in the Hegelian and Marxist conviction that the basic human unit consists of two people. The other serves as the gateway to higher knowledge and as cure for heavenly *Heimweh*. Socrates treats interpersonal communication as not only a happy mode of message exchange but, at its finest, the mutual salvation of souls in each other's love beneath the blessings of heaven. This is the legacy, filtered through Christian, courtly, and romantic notions of love, against which "communication" has been measured ever since. It is an ideal both glorious and severe.

Phaedrus is bowled over by Socrates' speech. But being the sort he is, he is not interested enough in the place beyond the heavens to stay off the subject of speeches. So he asks Socrates about a recent attack on Lysias as a *logographos*, a speechwriter for those who wish to argue eloquently in the courts and political assemblies. Socrates, in contrast to the harder line of the *Gorgias*, an earlier dialogue that treats rhetoric as a minor art like cookery or cosmetics, does not condemn such word work per se, but he seeks to distinguish good from bad. "Writing speeches is not in itself a shameful thing" (258d). The possibility of a philosophic rhetoric is the manifest topic of the rest of the *Phaedrus*. The comedown from winged love to talk about rhetoric on a lazy June afternoon while the cicadas sing overhead—fallen muses now crying in heat, in the heat—is a key source of the puzzle of the dialogue's unity.

Socrates examines Lysias's speech and finds it wanting in terms of both its grasp of the truth and its fit to audience. To be an adequate speaker, one must be an adequate philosopher. Even to deceive, one needs a grasp of the truth; and to work effects on audiences, one must theoretically know the types of souls among one's listeners and also be able to recognize them in practice. Just as love should emerge from knowledge of the heavens and from conjoint philosophizing, so good rhetoric is guided by knowledge of both the truth and the audience. As a physician ought not to dispense remedies without knowing the patient's constitution, so an orator ought not to deliver words ill suited to the audience. The medicine must fit the disease, and the rhetorician must fit the tropes and *topoi* to the listeners. Medicine's subject is the body; rhetoric's is the soul (270b). Appearances are used best by those who know realities, who can medicinally dispense them to good effect. Socrates almost thinks in the demographic terms of modern media mar-

keting: "No one will ever possess the art of speaking . . . unless he acquires the ability to enumerate the sorts of characters to be found in any audience, to divide everything according to its kinds" (273d-e). It is foolish to indiscriminately scatter words on those who will not know what to do with them. Socrates wishes to prevent disorders of address.

Socrates' views on speechmaking, then, parallel his views on love. Just as it is wrong to yield indiscriminately, it is wrong to speak words to those not suited for them. The soul of the speaker and of the hearer need to be closely knitted. Loose coupling between soul and soul, body and body, is the problem in each case. Indiscriminate dissemination is bad; intimate dialogue or prudent rhetoric that matches message and receiver is good. Speeches not appropriate to audiences can bring dangerous harvests. For Socrates the specificity with which expression fits recipient is the criterion of goodness in communication. "Spurious rhetoric turns out to be the phantom image of justice; genuine rhetoric is the science of *eros*."²⁶ Bad rhetoric is a parody of justice because it is blind, like justice, to the individualities of the listeners; good rhetoric is erotic because of its care for their particular souls. Rhetoric concerns the many, *eros* the one, but in their true forms for Socrates, both involve a reciprocal coupling of speaker and hearer, a closed communication circuit.²⁷ Socrates thus conceives of mass communication as a kind of dialogue writ large: no stray messages, furtive listeners, or unintended effects are allowed.

Writing, for Plato's Socrates, creates just this kind of scatter. Writing can never achieve such a fit with its audience, and in its pretense of mutual care, writing comes in for many of the same critiques as Lysias's speech on love. Writing may claim to address its reader one-on-one, but in fact it is indiscriminate in its care. Like speeches read aloud without understanding or youths exploited for sexual favors without love, writing is ignorant of soul and careless in distribution, disseminating words insouciantly. As ever, the dramatic turns of the dialogue enact the philosophical argument itself. Socrates puts the charge that writing destroys memory in the mouth of Thamus, king of Egypt, in a dialogue with Theuth, the supposed inventor of writing, one of many acts of ventriloquistic quotation in the dialogue. For it is precisely writing's ability to throw voices that Socrates sees as most suspicious, even when speaking

26. Seth Benardete, *The Rhetoric of Morality and Philosophy: Plato's "Gorgias" and "Phaedrus"* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 2.

27. As Aristotle says, *Rhetoric*, 1356b, the art of rhetoric concerns itself with types, not individuals.

in his own voice. The famous long passage criticizing *graphē*, writing, spells out the themes of this book:

You know, Phaedrus, writing shares a strange feature with painting. The offsprings of painting stand there as if they are alive, but if anyone asks them anything, they remain most solemnly silent. The same is true of written words. You'd think they were speaking as if they had some understanding, but if you question anything that has been said because you want to learn more, it continues just to signify that very same thing forever. When it has once been written down, every discourse rolls about everywhere, reaching indiscriminately those with understanding no less than those who have no business with it, and it doesn't know to whom it should speak and to whom it should not. And when it is faulted and attacked unfairly, it always needs its father's support; alone it can neither defend itself nor come to its own support. (275d–e)

Socrates provides a checklist of enduring anxieties that arise in response to transformations in the means of communication. Writing parodies live presence; it is inhuman, lacks interiority, destroys authentic dialogue, is impersonal, and cannot acknowledge the individuality of its interlocutors; and it is promiscuous in distribution. Such things have been said about printing, photography, phonography, cinema, radio, television, and computers. The great virtue of the *Phaedrus* is to spell out the normative basis of the critique of media in remarkable clarity and, even more, to make us rethink what we mean by *media*. Communication must be soul-to-soul, among embodied live people, in an intimate interaction that is uniquely fit for each participant. As Lysias's speech denies the difference between a lover and a nonlover, so writing has no notion of the receiver's soul.

Socrates' critique of writing thus is not just a flourish toward the end of an elaborate dialogue, but a logical outgrowth of the argument that good and just relations among people require a knowledge of and care for souls. The paradox of writing's being denounced in a written dialogue may in fact perform the unity of the piece.²⁸ Distortions in communication for Socrates arise from the disappearance of a personal nexus. Because writing can live on far beyond the situation of utterance, it can mean many things for many people. The clients of sophists such as Lysias are at best transmitters, ignorant of the messages they bear. (No wonder we call one kind of contemporary Sophists ghostwriters.)

28. Mackenzie, "Paradox in Plato's *Phaedrus*"; see also Nehamas and Woodruff, "Introduction," xlvi–xlvi.

Writing lacks the shape or *sōma* necessary for genuine speech. Writing, understood on the model of love, is fundamentally unfaithful. The dilemma ever since has been how to secure the sure signs of personal fidelity or presence in an impersonal and fickle medium.

Socrates' final critique of writing returns to the erotic subtext of the dialogue by discussing the pattern in which intellectual "seeds" (*spermata*) are implanted by various modes of discourse. To write is to broadcast; to teach via dialectic is to implant in a durable medium. The man with real knowledge will, says Socrates, carefully sow his knowledge, which he compares to seeds (276c).²⁹ Just so, a wise farmer sows seeds where they will bear fruit and eventually reproduce; a farmer plants "gardens of Adonis" only for amusement.³⁰ Wise teachers, in the same way, plant their seeds in the fertile soil of the disciple's soul, whereas a foolish teacher writes them down, which is to risk scattering them abroad. One-on-one teaching is the legitimate brother to writing. It is a "discourse that is written down, with knowledge, in the soul of the listener; it can defend itself, and it knows for whom it should speak and for whom it should remain silent" (276a). For Socrates the soul is a "medium" more durable than papyrus, which explains the notion, quite curious to our ears, that oral teaching could be a kind of writing more durable than writing per se. Words written in a disciple's soul are fertile, can take root in others via oral teaching, and defend themselves in debate; written words, in contrast, are sterile and incapable of generation. Socrates wants question-and-answer intimacy rather than broadcasting; fertilization rather than panspermia.

Socrates is worried, in short, about paternity and promiscuity. The erotic word is not the problem, just the wrong kind of eros. He does not condemn writing per se any more than he condemns rhetoric. As Derrida summarizes, "The conclusion of the *Phaedrus* is less a condemnation of writing in the name of present speech than a preference for one sort of writing over another, for the fertile trace over the sterile trace, for a seed that engenders because it is planted inside over a seed scattered wastefully outside."³¹ Socrates gives a patriarchal vision of the process of reproduction, inasmuch as the key question is the seed rather than the gestation; he figures philosophical instruction as a kind of reproduc-

29. The comparison of words and seeds is ancient: see Pierre Guiraud, *Sémiologie de la sexualité: Essai de glosso-analyse* (Paris: Payot, 1978), and Stuart Schneiderman, *An Angel Passes: How the Sexes Became Undivided* (New York: New York University Press, 1988).

30. These gardens were cultivated during Adonis's festival in early summer, the season in which the *Phaedrus* is set; they consisted of sprouts of lettuce and fennel whose short lives symbolized the short life of Adonis and the transience of beauty more generally.

31. Derrida, *Dissemination*, 149.

tion without women.³² In contrast to the praise of dissemination we will find in parables attributed to Jesus, Socrates is alarmed at the dispersive properties of the written word. This line of argument taps into an archaic set of anxieties: secured paternity versus polymorphous promiscuity. For Socrates, as for many thinkers since, dialogue (fertile coupling) is the norm; dissemination (spilled seed) is the deviation. As elsewhere in the Platonic corpus, Socrates appropriates images of female reproduction (calling himself a midwife who delivers the ideas with which all men are pregnant) as his preferred model of intellectual birthing over the indiscriminate irresponsibility of a Lysias. In short, Socrates faces two kinds of “AI”: the artificial intelligence of the written text, which simulates a caring teacher, and the artificial insemination of its distribution, which makes paternity undecidable. Writing for Socrates is something like an intellectual sperm bank: conception can occur between anonymous partners whose junction can be manipulated across great distances of space and time. The written word unleashes a cloud of idea spores that float through space, waiting to germinate and take root wherever they can. Both kinds of AI parody the full erotic presence and mutuality that Socrates calls for in philosophical lovers. With such reproduction as writing affords, distinctly personal contact between souls can never be ensured.

Writing on papyrus, as opposed to writing on souls, is for Socrates a kind of cheating eros. It pretends to be a live presence but in fact is a kind of embalmed intelligence, like the mummies of ancient Egypt, whence writing supposedly came. As with all new media, writing opens up a realm of the living dead. The papyrus may bring “Lysias” himself, but it is a Lysias who exerts an erotic spell at a distance without any possibility of interaction. Socrates would perhaps agree with John Milton, with a shiver, that “books are not absolutely dead things, but do contain a potency of life in them.”³³ Here the *Phaedrus* foreshadows the blossoming of a wide array of discourses in the second half of the nineteenth century about the leakage of the human soul into new media of recording and transmission (see chapters 4 and 5). Socrates, as much as Kafka, has discovered the ghostly element between people.

Socrates’ vision of communication, again, is not simply about media—the goodness of speech versus the badness of writing—but about the symmetry and tightness of the relationships in which they are em-

32. In his vision of male-to-male procreation, Socrates indulges in the dream of masculine *autarkeia*, or self-sufficient reproduction: see DuBois, “Phallogentrism.”

33. John Milton, *Areopagitica*, Great Books of the Western World, ed. Robert Maynard Hutchins, vol. 32 (1644; Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1952), 384.

bedded. For Plato's Socrates, the medium is not a mere channel but a whole series of relationships. The critique of writing on papyrus as opposed to writing on souls maintains the deeper theme of the dialogue: two are needed for love or wisdom. Writing, like rhetoric, can sever this mutuality, leaving behind odd parts of the whole body of discourse: words that wander abroad like dispossessed spirits or radio broadcasts transmitted to the great audience invisible. The specter of disembodiment, like the ghostly Lysias captured on the papyrus, returns.

Though other scholars have adduced much richer accounts of the dialogue's unity than what I offer here, I read the *Phaedrus* as a normative grid of communicative forms. The first half of the *Phaedrus* concerns eros, communication to the one; the second half concerns rhetoric, communication to the many. The dialogue begins and ends with deviant forms: personal rhetoric (Lysias's speech) and mass eros (writing). Both feign care for specific individuals but are in fact indiscriminate in address, open to any comer. Neither is, to Plato's way of thinking, the utterance of a soul in freedom; they occur only under constraint. Neither is a "live" enunciation; both are curiously artificial, even inhuman. Lysias addresses his beloved as an individual, though he is really addressed only as one of a crowd of eligible lovers. His stance is that of Kierkegaard's seducer, except that the seducer's professions of unique love are done serially rather than en masse.³⁴ The written word is deviant for inverse reasons: even if addressed to an individual, it can couple with unspecified readers. The speech of the nonloving lover is indiscriminate in transmission; writing is indiscriminate in reception. True eros, however, is dyadic, just as philosophic rhetoric is based on knowledge of kinds of souls. In each case, soul and word must be matched. Even in public address, Socrates proposes close correlation between the speech and the audience; the careful crafting of discourse can approximate the intimacy of dialogue on a large scale. If personal rhetoric and mass eros are the deviations, personal eros and public rhetoric are the norms.

Socrates' model of the proper and pathological forms of communication resounds to this day. We are still prone to think of true communication as personal, free, live, and interactive. Communication for the *Phaedrus*, when it goes well, can be the mutual discovery of souls; when it turns bad, it can be seduction, pandering, missed connections, or the invariance of writing, "signifying the very same thing forever" (275d).

34. Søren Kierkegaard, "The Seducer's Diary" (1843), in *Either/Or*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 1:301–445.

Plato via Socrates clearly saw that a new medium is not just a matter of repackaging old contents but a shift in the meaning of voice, word, body, and love. Perhaps the first treatise on communication, the *Phaedrus* is about messages lost in transit and illegitimate couplings. Plato's Socrates is our first theorist of communication—which also means, of communication breakdown.

Dissemination in the Synoptic Gospels

The synoptic Gospels evaluate dissemination in a way quite opposite from the *Phaedrus*, and they rest on a quite different vision of love and of communication. Like the *Phaedrus*, the synoptics feature a rhetoric of sowing and harvesting; unlike that of the *Phaedrus*, this rhetoric often celebrates dissemination as desirable and just. The parable of the sower—the archparable of dissemination—presents a mode of distribution that is as democratically indifferent to who may receive the precious seeds as the *Phaedrus* is aristocratically selective. Other parables argue the deficiency of reciprocity and tight coupling compared with an undifferentiated scattering. Socrates in the *Phaedrus* favors dialogue; Jesus in the synoptics favors dissemination. Moral theory has long taken its bearings from a confrontation with these two personalities. Why not communication theory?

Jesus is represented in all three synoptic Gospels (Matthew 13, Mark 4, Luke 8) as delivering the parable of the sower by the seashore to a vast and mixed audience. A sower, he says, goes forth to sow, broadcasting seed everywhere, so that it lands on all kinds of ground. Most of the seeds never bear fruit. Some sprout quickly (in the equivalent of gardens of Adonis?) only to be scorched by the sun or overcome by weeds. Others sprout but get eaten by birds or trampled by travelers. Only a rare few land on receptive soil, take root, and bring forth fruit abundantly, variously yielding a hundredfold, sixtyfold, or thirtyfold. In a mighty display of self-reflexive dissemination, Jesus concludes, Those who have ears to hear, let them hear!

The parable of the sower is a parable about parables. Like the *Phaedrus*, but on a far more concentrated scale, the parable enacts its point in the form of its saying, performing its own *modus operandi*. The diverse audience members, like the varieties of soils, who hear the parable as told by the seashore are left to make of it what they will. It is a parable about the diversity of audience interpretations in settings that lack direct interaction. It examines the results when sender and receiver, sower and eventual harvest, are loosely coupled. In contrast to the *Phaedrus*,

which at key points is nervous about the folly of scattered seeds and the dangers of promiscuous couplings, the parable of the sower celebrates broadcasting as an equitable mode of communication that leaves the harvest of meaning to the will and capacity of the recipient. The hearer must complete the trajectory begun with the first casting. Though much is thrown, little is caught. And the failure of germination is not necessarily something to lament. Like the second half of the *Phaedrus*, the parable of the sower sorts types of souls (soils) in public address (though not with any programmatic purpose).

The parable of the sower, again, exemplifies the operation of all parables; it is a kind of metaparable. Parables are marked by uniformity in transmission and diversity in reception. Even “parable,” from the Greek *paraballein* (meaning “to cast beyond, to place side by side”), suggests casting seeds onto soils or words onto souls. The Greek term *parabolē* can also mean a comparison or an enigma; it is closely related to “problem,” both words suggesting something that calls for interpretation.³⁵ The meaning of the parable is quite literally the audience’s problem. In other words, when the distance between speaker and listener is great, the audience bears the interpretive burden. Those who have ears to hear, let them hear! It becomes the hearer’s responsibility to close the loop without the aid of the speaker. The point of such “indirect communication,” said Kierkegaard, “lies in making the recipient self-active.”³⁶ Or as Stuart Hall writes of television, the moments of encoding and decoding (production and consumption, roughly) are relatively autonomous, allowing audiences to find meanings wildly divergent from those intended by the producers.³⁷ But this gap between encoding and decoding, I suggest, may well be the mark of all forms of communication. It often takes a new medium and its accompanying disruptions to reveal the gaps that were already implicitly there.

The Gospels have it that the actual audience of this parable was largely mystified, being perhaps stony soil. Later the disciples (and by implication the readers of the Gospel narrative) get the inside scoop in a private audience with Jesus: the sower is not just a mad farmer but is one who spreads “the word of the kingdom.” The strategy of speaking in parables turns out to be a cloaking device, a means to keep people

35. In the Septuagint, *parabolē* translates the Hebrew *mashal*, which means both a genre of Judaic teaching (an illustrative anecdote) and something puzzling or astonishing; see, e.g., Deut. 28:37.

36. Søren Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (1848; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 125.

37. Stuart Hall, “Encoding/Decoding” (1974), in *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972–1979*, ed. Stuart Hall et al. (London: Hutchinson, 1980), 129.

from understanding the doctrine.³⁸ The signal was open to all, but only some perceived the sign. For Socrates the virtue of the living, spoken word is that it is always accompanied with directions for use offered by a guiding father or teacher. In contrast, the sower sends messages whose interpretive cues are hidden or missing, to be provided by those who have ears to hear. The sower engages in a purely one-way act: no cultivation of the fledgling plants occurs, no give-and-take, no instruction as to intended meaning.

Plato's version of Socrates privileges a private and esoteric mode of communication. In the intimate setting of dialectic the receiver is carefully selected by the speaker in advance and carefully brought to understand. Socrates of course will debate all comers in the public spaces of Athens, but he refuses to scatter his doctrinal seeds except for amusement; more to the point, only an elite few were admitted to Plato's academy. Jesus, in contrast, performs a radically public, exoteric mode of dispersing meanings—even though the hearers often fail to catch the hint—in which the audience sorts out the significance for itself (save on those occasions when he decloaks parables for his inner circle). The synoptic Gospels repeatedly undercut reciprocal and hermetic relations in favor of relations that are asymmetrical and public. Though the dream of mutuality has an intense hold on the ways we imagine communication from Plato on, several elements in the Christian tradition offer dissemination as a mode of communicative conduct equal or superior in excellence to dialogue.

The suspension of reciprocity is a point rigorously pursued in some other parables in the synoptic Gospels (there are no parables in the Gospel of John). In Matthew's parable of the laborers, for instance, some workers are hired early in the day to toil all day in the sun for one denarius, a standard day's pay. Others are later hired to work part of the day, and others work only the final hour, but all receive the same payment—one denarius.³⁹ When those who labored all day complain about the injustice of compensation, the master reminds them that they got what they had contracted for, so what business was it of theirs that he paid others the same amount for less work? This parable portrays a uniform response to a diverse event; the parable of the sower portrays diverse responses to a uniform event. In each case the dispenser of the goods (seeds or payment) is invariant and explicitly insensitive to individual differences—much like Socrates' description of the written word,

38. Mark 4:11–12; cf. Luke 8:10.

39. Matt. 20:1–16.

which just keeps signaling the same thing regardless of what inquiry is made of it. There is no proportional adjustment. The impersonality of writing can thus in some cases model just treatment of one's fellows. Justice, in some cases, means treating people by the book. There is something both democratic and frightening about such apparent indifference to merit.

The suspension of fair exchange not only does apparent violence to individual differences but can also occur in the name of care for the individual. In all three parables in Luke 15 about lost objects (the lost coin, sheep, and son), the cycle of *quid pro quo* is derailed. Each parable is a meditation on the paradox that in love the particular is esteemed more highly than the universal.⁴⁰ The first two pair female and male protagonists. A woman, who has lost one of ten coins, sweeps the house till she finds it and then celebrates with her friends. Similarly, a shepherd leaves his flock of ninety and nine to hunt for a lost sheep and also rejoices when he finds it. These are homely tales of ordinary human behavior, but the insight consists in the way everyday action is moved by something more or less than the rationality and reciprocity of exchange. What cost-benefit analysis would predict that someone would take greater joy in one coin than in nine? What business strategy would have a shepherd abandon ninety-nine sheep for one? The passions operate according to strange arithmetic.

It is no less strange for a father to rejoice in his errant son and to ignore the dutiful one, as occurs in the parable of the prodigal son. The forgiving father showers gifts on the returning wastrel—a ring, a robe, sandals, a party and fatted calf, and an embrace. Though the prodigal son plans to confess his wrongs to his father and offer to work only as a servant, he never has a chance. He is interrupted before he can begin by a father who is deaf to all explanations. By the standards of reciprocity and the norm of attentive listening the father's refusal to listen is wrong, just as Socrates reproaches the written word for refusing to engage in dialogue or as the workers reproach the master for insensitivity to the varying amounts of work done by individual laborers. But the father's deafness cannot be a failing in the world of the parable. The father is so taken with joy that nothing can stop the celebration. He is indifferent to whatever explanation his son may have. His forgiveness sweeps even the faintest notion of confessional dialogue out of the picture. If there is any proportionality in the parable, it is that the father is

40. Søren Kierkegaard [Johannes de Silentio], *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin, 1985).

as prodigal in his gifts as his younger son was in his sins. The welcome home celebration is an act of sheer expenditure, not of reciprocity.

Of course the older brother, whom the father fails even to inform about the party and who overhears the music and reveling, is outraged at the unfairness of such a welcome. He, who has slaved faithfully for years in his father's service, never once received such treatment. His is the cry of reciprocity: his rationality is based on merit and fair pay, not on extravagance. "But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your living with harlots, you killed for him the fatted calf!"⁴¹ This is the eternal complaint of economics against love. Though the older brother is quite a different figure from Lysias, both are worried about the mania that overtakes those who love. According to Luke 15, part of what it means to be a father, shepherd, or householder is to know when to go beyond rationality, reciprocity, or fairness—to know, in short, when love triumphs over justice. As with the *Phaedrus*, the frenzy of love has its place.

These are messy doctrines, and doctrines about messes. Socrates disdains waste (specifically, wasted *spermata*); Jesus celebrates it. The practice of the sower is wasteful. He lets the seeds fall where they may, not knowing in advance who will be receptive ground, leaving the crucial matter of choice and interpretation to the hearer, not the master. The prodigal is the wasteful son, though the tale is about an apparently wasteful father as well. In a larger sense, the whole narrative of redemption of the Christian Gospels centers on a wasteful act. The son of God dies for every living creature, most of whom will not accept, appreciate, or even know of the sacrifice. As a means of spreading seeds widely, dissemination is excellent, but it is not an efficient means of securing a good harvest. Indeed, godlike love—known as *agapē* in the New Testament—is often figured as broadcasting. "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you . . . that ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust."⁴² In this well-known passage from the Sermon on the Mount Jesus invites his hearers to transcend the intense but limited affections of family and friends for a love as indiscriminate as rainfall, one that embraces all humanity alike, including one's enemies. The Epistle of Peter likewise proclaims that God is "no respecter of persons." A more recent translation reads, "God has no favorites," but more literally, it means that God does not take people

41. Luke 15:30 RSV. Note the elder brother's renunciation of kinship: "this son of yours."

42. Matt. 5:44–45 KJV.

by their faces.⁴³ Love is supposed to be universal and indifferent to personalities. Scattering and impersonality can be good things. *Agapē*—or Christian love—is supposed to be mass communicated.⁴⁴

Plato's celebration of reciprocity marks out one recurring option in our deliberations about the justice of varying modes of communication. But the celebration of dialogue also risks missing the defects in the notion of reciprocity. One-way communication is not necessarily bad. Reciprocity can be violent as well as fair. War and vengeance obey a logic of strict reciprocity as much as do conversation and trade. Justice demands an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. Its underlying logic says, one turn deserves another. This crime, we say, warrants that punishment; this commodity, that price. If nothing but reciprocity governed social relations, life would be a monotonous round of *quid pro quo*. Social life would be a cycle of payment, rather than of gifts. Without reciprocity life would be grossly unfair. With only reciprocity, it would be desolate. If no question could be left unanswered and every question was posed with the demand for a response, what boredom and tyranny would result. A just community rests at once on the rationality of tit for tat and on its suspension. Reciprocity, crucial as it is, needs other principles: hospitality, gift giving, forgiveness, and love. To live among others is necessarily to incur obligations; to be mortal is to be incapable of paying them all back.

Even the Golden Rule is not about returning favors, but about the radical otherness of selves. George Bernard Shaw tried to undermine the Golden Rule: "Do not do unto others as you would that they should do unto you. Their tastes may not be the same."⁴⁵ Shaw's mischievous variant still captures a key part of the maxim. Especially if paired with the injunction to turn the other cheek, the point of the Golden Rule is to treat the other as a self. The command is not to react to the other's provocation, but to treat people invariantly whatever their deeds and deservingness. Whether kissed or slapped, one is supposed to remain the same way, like Socrates' written word, as invariant as a sundial. This is the dead end of *quid pro quo*. This doctrine has a superficial resemblance to Stoicism's ethic of unresponsiveness, but there is no Stoic *apathe* or tranquillity in the Golden Rule. Instead there is active care or, to

43. Acts 10:34; cf. Rom. 2:11, Eph. 6:9. The word is *prosōpolēmtēs*. Cf. Lev. 19:15.

44. A 1920s Louisville church, impressed by radio, posted a sign, God Is Always Broadcasting: Erik Barnouw, *A Tower in Babel: A History of Broadcasting in the United States to 1933* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 104.

45. George Bernard Shaw, "Maxims for Revolutionists," from *The Revolutionist's Handbook*, in *Four Plays by Bernard Shaw* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1965), 483.

speak with Kierkegaard, anxiety. The Christian is supposed to be indifferent to both the consequences of action and the recipient's merit, but not to the other as an irreplaceable creature. The Stoic maintains equanimity via psychic withdrawal; the Christian is called to impartial kindness combined with intense psychic engagement. The Gandhian ethic of passive resistance likewise teaches abstention from reaction. To say, then, that modes of communication that involve a one-way dispersion are necessarily flawed or domineering is to miss one of the most obvious facts of ethical experience: the majesty in many cases of nonresponsiveness.

Moreover, not only is blindness to the personal uniqueness of the other a feature of justice, love is blind as well. Justice involves not only impartial treatment but also a profound sensitivity to the individual case—giving each his or her due. Love likewise is not only individuated care but also undeviating constancy, “an ever-fixed mark.”⁴⁶ Just as the sower represents resources bestowed on all alike, the New Testament also speaks of a minutely particular sort of love that numbers the hairs on the head of the beloved (Matt. 10:29–31); in Adorno's words, “Love uncompromisingly betrays the general to the particular in which alone justice is done to the former.”⁴⁷ Love, like justice, is multidimensional, both general and personal, uniform and differentiated, diffuse and focused. There is an aspect of both justice and love that is invariant and uniform and an aspect that is personal and particular. Justice that is not loving is not just; love that is not just is not loving. Just so, dissemination without dialogue can become stray scatter, and dialogue without dissemination can be interminable tyranny. The motto of communication theory ought to be: Dialogue with the self, dissemination with the other. This is another way of stating the ethical maxim: Treat yourself like an other and the other like a self.

The value of one-way dissemination can be seen in the case of gift giving. As one of the *logia* of Jesus has it, it is more blessed to give than to receive.⁴⁸ The giving end has precedence over the receiving end. Not so curiously, this saying is also directly relevant to the economics of communication. It is more profitable to purvey advertising than to receive it; teachers are paid to teach, but students are rarely paid to learn; one exerts more cultural capital in directing a film than in viewing one. Messages are almost always worth more in dissemination than in recep-

46. William Shakespeare, sonnet 116, line 5.

47. Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (1944–51; London: Verso, 1974), 164.

48. Acts 20:35.

tion. Giving can be a form of power, a way to impose obligations. We do not know what kinds of obligations the prodigal son incurred in the great homecoming feast, but that may have been the father's precise point: to impose the privileges and obligations of a son, not a servant. Indeed, a gift always hovers somewhere between unprovoked generosity (one-way) and the call for a later return gift (reciprocal).

As Pierre Bourdieu argues, exchange relations are governed by two dimensions: difference in the object and deferral in time.⁴⁹ If identical objects are exchanged but the transfer is deferred in time, we speak of a loan; if the objects are different and the exchange is simultaneous, it is a trade; and if identical objects are simultaneously exchanged, it is in effect a refusal. A gift must play strategically within the horizons of difference and deferral: it must be different enough in kind and asynchronous enough in time to seem a spontaneous act of goodwill rather than a payment. Bourdieu's great insight is to go beyond the unmasking that a structuralist analysis would perform—showing the participants in gift circuits as simply deceiving themselves about the reciprocity of their actions. In the temporal experience of practice as opposed to the spatial logic of structure, mystification is a possibility. The participant sees a series of unilateral acts, and the observer sees people deluding themselves about a circular exchange system. Misrecognition of the ultimate reciprocity of gift cycles, argues Bourdieu, is not an error but a socially productive strategy that sustains rich networks of mutual obligation. To give or to receive is to disavow obligations that everyone knows—but everyone denies—eventually will have to be met. All gifts come with strings attached, but acknowledgment of that fact is banned. Such failure to recognize allows suspension in the webs of credit and debt. Collective looking away from the mechanism of reciprocity allows something like a higher reciprocity to occur in the long haul. The gift enables a moral economy of loops, suspensions, and deferments, interactions that can be strung out over long expanses of time. It is certainly an economy, but one that plays by rules other than strict reciprocity.

If every social act were moved by indebtedness, we would be sluggish actors indeed. Love and prostitution, gift and payment would be indistinguishable. Lysias, with his call to do kindness only to those able to return it, would prevail.⁵⁰ Gifts can both arrest and accelerate the cyclical motion of tit for tat. "Overmuch eagerness to discharge one's obligations," as Bourdieu quotes La Rochefoucauld, "is a sign of ingratitude."

49. Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977). I am grateful to Michael K. Sáenz for advice on Bourdieu.

50. *Phaedrus*, 233e–234a.

The Latin proverb captures the converse, *Bis das si cito das*: You give twice if you give quickly. The giver is not supposed to keep score or respond directly at all. “Don’t mention it,” we say when thanked. The one-way character of the gift is not a deficiency but a strength. A system of rotating potlatches—celebratory feasts given publicly to the community—is as viable a way of organizing social life as is direct tit for tat. The horrors of broken dialogue can also be the blessings of just treatment. In some settings we would like to be treated as unique individuals (with family or friends); in others we want to be treated exactly the same as any other human (in court or the market). One’s personal uniqueness can be a hindrance to justice and the basis of love. A life without individuated interaction (dialogue) would lack love; one without generalized access (dissemination) would lack justice.

Taking gifts as our analogy for communication shows that something more than reciprocity must prevail. Those strange and distended forms of dialogue that happen when people correspond over great distances of time or space are not just uncanny and bizarre, as many in the nineteenth century thought, recently confronting the lightning lines of the telegraph or the death-defying tracings of the photograph, but are the shapes in which we live and move among other people all the time. Clearly there is nothing ethically deficient about broadcasting as a one-way flow. Nor are the gaps between sender and receiver always chasms to be bridged; they are sometimes vistas to be appreciated or distances to be respected. The impossibility of connection, so lamented of late, may be a central and salutary feature of the human lot. The dream of communication has too little respect for personal inaccessibility. Impersonality can be a protective wall for the private heart. To “fix” the gaps with “better” communication might be to drain solidarity and love of all their juice.

It is tempting, given compelling studies of the contrast of eros and *agapē*, to overestimate the differences between Socrates and Jesus.⁵¹ Likewise, the Platonic and Christian traditions have known a long confluence. Both Socrates and Jesus want to transcend a narrow rationality—Socrates in the name of a higher mutuality, Jesus in the name of a higher scattering. Both see love as a kind of blessed madness. Platonic eros,

51. Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros: A Study of the Christian Idea of Love*, trans. A. G. Hebert, 2 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1938–41); Denis de Rougemont, *Love in the Western World*, trans. Montgomery Belion, rev. ed. (New York: Pantheon, 1956).

after all, involves the soul intensely (it is the soul that sprouts wings), just as Christian love for the neighbor makes care for his or her body essential. The delirious exuberance of eros—sheer delight in the other without regard for compensation or return—is, as a long line of Christian mystics have seen, an instructive model for the unconditional love of God and neighbor, oblivious to any eventual payback.⁵² Likewise, Socrates rejects any notion of love, such as that espoused by Lysias, that shirks the welfare of the beloved. Though it is easy at first glance to say that eros involves sexual passion for the body as *agapē* involves spiritual care for the soul, closer inspection melts down the contrasts between the concepts.

There is, however, a final important difference. Socrates does not ultimately countenance love for the imperfect or the particular. At the end of his speech in the *Symposium*, Socrates argues that truly philosophical love moderates the “violent love of the one” by raising us on the ladder of love to an impersonal love of beauty in general. “Personal beauty is but a trifle.” Philosophy provides “the science of beauty everywhere.”⁵³ The mortal, singular other is ultimately an unworthy object of love, a stance that harbors a frightening chilliness for which Alcibiades bitterly reproaches him later in the *Symposium*.⁵⁴ Love that cannot be generalized or universalized is, for Socrates, not love at all. He could not agree with Kierkegaard that in love the particular is higher than the universal.

The parables invite an embrace of the frail stuff we are made of, not a flight from it. Platonic eros is attracted by beauty; love in the synoptic Gospels is attracted by need, even, in the case of the parable of the good Samaritan, by disgust or impurity, for the wounded man lying in the road is portrayed as looking like a corpse.⁵⁵ Socrates imagines the lover as being drawn by the most eternal and splendid portion of the beloved; the Gospels point to the spell cast on the lover by the most fragile and imperfect portion. The fundamental question is whether the epitome of love should be the love that occurs between equals who are present to each other in body and soul or the love that leaps across the chasms. If the former, then communication will be conceived of as a flight toward unity; if the latter, it will be conceived of as making do with the frag-

52. Catherine Osborne, *Eros Unveiled: Plato and the God of Love* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), chap. 4.

53. Plato, *Symposium*, in *The Works of Plato*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (New York: Modern Library, 1956), 377–78.

54. Martha Craven Nussbaum, “Socrates, Ironist and Moral Philosopher,” *New Republic* 205 (16–23 September 1991): 34–40.

55. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), treats the centrality of abjection to Christianity.

ments we find in ourselves and others. The Gospels know a kind of individuality strange to the classical Greeks: one marked by agony and duress.

The *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium* figure love as the yearning for oneness; the synoptic Gospels as compassion for otherness. The one favors symmetry, circles, and reciprocity; the other, difference, ellipses, and suspension. Socrates exalts the soul's rapturous flight toward the heavens, tickled by beauty and trailing clouds of glory; the Gospels enjoin a descent into the pains and wounds of the other. "Socrates" wants to admit no impediments to the marriage of true minds; the parables teach that the impediments are precisely what give us reason to love. Broadly speaking, Christianity calls for a love based not in comradeship (as in Aristotle's notion of *philia*), the desire for beauty (*eros*), or the "natural" ties of the clan or city, but in the recognition of the kinship of all of God's creatures. Socrates' idea of love includes the "type of soul" of the beloved or of the audience of speeches but has little notion of the uniqueness of each soul in itself. The beloved becomes a substitute for the far vaster ocean of celestial beauty. The open casting of the sower results in the most individualized and idiosyncratic harvests possible, each recipient hearing as he or she will. Platonic *eros* passes through the particular to arrive at the general; Christian *agapē* passes through the general to arrive at the particular. Does love arise from the transcendence of the flesh or from its touch? Should we think of communication as perfect contact or as patience amid the imperfections? The contrast of dialogue and dissemination boils down to the mercy we can muster for human folly.

In sum, though reciprocity is a moral ideal, it is an insufficient one. The Christian doctrine of communication is a doctrine of broadcasting, of single turns, expended without the expectation that one good turn deserves another. Love is rare that occurs within a relationship of perfect equality. Parents do not love their children because their children reciprocate equivalently. The Gospels celebrate gifts given without care for reimbursement and depict *agapē* as occurring in relationships of impossible recompense. The Samaritan and the wounded man, Christ and the leper, God and humanity—the members of each pair are radically asymmetrical. The injunction in the Sermon on the Mount to give alms in secret aims to keep good works from becoming a public opinion racket. One is not supposed to anticipate the response, only to act. Take no thought, God loves a cheerful giver: such maxims are meant to postpone deliberation on consequences indefinitely and to keep exchange logic at bay. Caring for animals, children, or the planet, for example,

does not depend on the capacity to communicate on an even footing. Infants, though quite incapable of direct communication, are invariably radiant to their parents and others; the avidity with which they receive affection helps account for their remarkable magnetism.

There is, in sum, no indignity or paradox in one-way communication. The marriage of true minds via dialogue is not the only option; in fact, lofty expectations about communication may blind us to the more subtle splendors of dissemination or suspended dialogue. Dialogue still reigns supreme in the imagination of many as to what good communication might be, but dissemination presents a saner choice for our fundamental term. Dissemination is far friendlier to the weirdly diverse practices we signifying animals engage in and to our bumbling attempts to meet others with some fairness and kindness. Open scatter is more fundamental than coupled sharing; it is the stuff from which, on rare, splendid occasions, dialogue may arise. Dissemination is not wreckage; it is our lot.