

WHAT IS COMMUNICATION?

Author: Marthinus Van Schoor
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Reviewed by Eric Louw



This book presents a theory of communication which can be broadly defined as a conservative-humanistic approach. Of real interest is the way in which Van Schoor tries to incorporate the ideas of Kierkegaard and Augustine into communication theory. These ideas could indeed be profitably followed through by those in this field, and so in this regard Van Schoor has made a contribution to communication theory. The incorporation of Ortega into communication theory is a little more questionable, although it does serve to reveal the hidden (conservative) agenda in Van Schoor's book.

A problem with *What is communication?* is the way in which it contradicts its own premises by being dismissive of other paradigms. In the preface to the book the behaviourist and Marxist approaches to communication are simply dismissed in a manner that seems more in keeping with what Van Schoor would himself call the rhetorical approach to communication. A true dialogical (Platonic) approach, which Van Schoor claims to be advocating, cannot simply refuse to engage with other perspectives in this way. Here one can perhaps refer to Habermass' more satisfactory appropriation of the dialogical approach in which other paradigms and theories are confronted and synthesised rather than being merely dismissed as in the Van Schoor case.

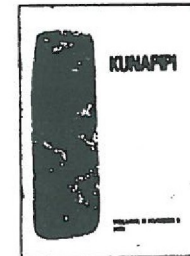
Another problem is that the book fails to even consider some other approaches within the very humanist-philosophical paradigm into which Van Schoor's theory falls. Semiology/semiotics is ignored, for example. One assumes that semiology too is not considered worthy of engaging, even in a book on communication theory.

More serious though is that *What is communication?* very clearly draws on the ideas of Gadamer and Heidegger in terms of its ontological premises and yet I could find no reference to either of these two writers. What is more, the conservative-existential worldview is rendered more coherently by Heidegger

than by Van Schoor, while conservative-hermeneutics is dealt with more successfully by Gadamer than by Van Schoor. Likewise, the sort of issues that Van Schoor is dealing with — i.e. the recipient, interpretation, and hermeneutics — have been engaged by many other writers such as Jauss, the Russian formalists, and the Prague structuralists. Even if Van Schoor disagrees with these writers they are close enough to his field of concern to have expected an engagement with their ideas, or at least mention their existence. Had he engaged with their ideas (and the notions found in the other paradigms) Van Schoor might have improved his theory of communication by learning from these other writers: (i) the usefulness of contextualizing communication; and (ii) the need to see the notions of circumstance and history as problematic and contradictory.

An interesting contradiction in the book is that Van Schoor claims that Marxists have little to say about communication. The ludicrousness of this statement aside, Van Schoor nonetheless proceeds to discuss the ideas of Raymond Williams who is certainly a Marxist. Van Schoor's discussion of Williams in fact reveals his ignorance of the many debates that have taken place within historical materialism. He nowhere refers to these debates and instead presumes to discuss certain issues and problems as if he were the first to see these.

Turning to a technical point: Van Schoor calls De Man a socialist, whereas De Man was in fact a Nazi-collaborator during World War Two. Professor Van Schoor should realize that there is a vast difference between National Socialism and Socialism.



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