CHAPTER SIX

Communicative Clarity

We now turn to a third candidate for a virtue of intellectual dependability: communicative clarity. In turning to this virtue, we shift out attention to a virtue with a different proximate focus than intellectual transparency. Whereas the proximate focus of intellectual transparency is the perspective of the intellectually dependable person, the proximate focus of communicative clarity is the intellectually dependable person’s communications. Communicative clarity is a tendency that regulates how a person communicates what they communicate. It is a tendency to communicate clearly, out of a motivation to thereby promote others’ epistemic goods. As such, the proximate focus of communicative clarity is on one important way in which the intellectually dependable person can be connected to their epistemic beneficiaries—via their communications. In the next two chapters, we will then shift our attention further in the direction of these beneficiaries. The candidate virtues we will examine there—audience sensitivity and epistemic guidance—have as their proximate focus features of those who reap epistemic benefits from the intellectually dependable person. In this way, we will have examined candidate virtues of intellectual dependability that concentrate on features of the intellectually dependable person, their connection to their beneficiaries, and these beneficiaries themselves.

My approach in this chapter will follow the same structure as the previous two chapters. I begin in Section One by more thoroughly examining the nature of communicative clarity, and by comparing it with similar virtues and opposing vices. In Section Two, I discuss an approach to measuring communicative clarity that Megan Haggard and I have recently developed, discussing relationships between communicative clarity and demographic, personality, and behavioral variables.

1. The Nature of Communicative Clarity

I stated above that communicative clarity is a tendency to communicate clearly out of a motivation to thereby promote others’ epistemic goods. To better understand what this tendency involves, then, we could examine what clear communication is, and how a motivation to promote others’ epistemic goods regulates efforts to communicate clearly. I will begin with the latter topic, and then return to the former.

In the previous chapter, we explored the way in which intellectual benevolence serves as the ultimate motivation of intellectual transparency, which has its own distinctive proximate motivation to promote others’ epistemic goods by sharing one’s perspective with them. Much the same relationship obtains between the virtue of communicative clarity and intellectual benevolence. The ultimate motivation of communicative clarity is to promote others’ epistemic goods. A person who possesses the virtue of communicative clarity will value others’ epistemic goods for their own sake, be motivated to promote them, will tend to experience positive affect when they are present and negative affect when they are absent, and will tend to judge that it is good when they obtain and that it is good to promote them.

Yet, the virtuously clear communicator will also have their own distinctive proximate motivation, which will focus on the manner in which they communicate. The virtuously clear communicator recognizes that in order to advance others’ epistemic goods via communicating with them, their communicative intentions need to be understood adequately by the recipient of their communication. Because of this, they recognize the importance of communicating in a way that facilitates others’ understanding of their communicative intentions. A very important ingredient in facilitating others’ understanding of one’s communicative intentions is to ensure that one’s communications are sufficiently clear. In this way, the virtuously clear communicator’s motivation to promote others’ epistemic goods leads them to be motivated to communicate clearly.

The distinctive proximate motivation of communicative clarity includes motivational, affective, and cognitive elements. It includes the motivation to promote others’ epistemic goods via communicating clearly with them, and the motivation to communicate clearly. It includes tendencies to experience positive affect when communicating clearly and when advancing others’ epistemic goods via communicating clearly, and tendencies to experience negative affect when failing to communicate clearly and failing to advance others’ epistemic goods via communicating clearly. The virtuously clear communicator is motivated to be understood correctly and to not be misunderstood, and tends to experience positive affect when being understood and negative affect when being misunderstood. They tend to judge that it is good to advance others’ epistemic goods via communicating clearly with them, and that it is good to communicate clearly.

This distinctive proximate motivation is required for a person to possess the virtue of communicative clarity, but not the virtue of intellectual benevolence. Like intellectual transparency, we can conceptualize communicative clarity as intellectual benevolence specialized to a narrow domain—the domain of the manner in which one communicates. Communicative clarity, like intellectual transparency, is a subordinate virtue to intellectual benevolence, which is more cardinal than communicative clarity. The reasons for engaging in clear communication ascend to the reasons of intellectual benevolence.

As a virtue of intellectual dependability, communicative clarity is shaped by the ultimate motivation of intellectual benevolence. The efforts the virtuously clear communicator makes to communicate clearly are oriented toward promoting others’ epistemic goods. If greater clarity is needed to promote others’ epistemic goods via one’s communications, then the virtue of communicative clarity will incline its possessor toward pursuing greater clarity in their communications. If greater clarity is not needed in order to promote others’ epistemic goods via one’s communications, then the virtue of communicative clarity will not incline its possessor toward pursuing greater clarity in their communications. In this way, being a virtuously clear communicator is not merely concerned with possessing a set of skills for communicating clearly and deploying these skills as one wishes. It is concerned with deploying these skills when, and only when, and to the extent that deploying them will better enable one to advance others’ epistemic goods via ensuring greater clarity in one’s communications.

While the proximate focus of communicative clarity is on one’s communications, the virtuously clear communicator also retains an eye on the recipients of these communications. For, whether a communication is clear is relative to its recipients: a communication that would be clear to some would not be clear to others. The virtuously clear communicator’s exercise of skills for clarifying their communications is not regulated merely by an abstract aim of promoting some undefined others’ epistemic goods, but by the particular aim to promote the particular epistemic goods of the particular recipients of their communications. Here again, the virtue of communicative clarity is shaped by the ultimate motivation of intellectual benevolence, which also attends to the particular goods of its beneficiaries.

Thus far, I have been describing the motivations of communicative clarity, focusing on its proximate motivation to communicate with a level of clarity suitable for promoting others’ epistemic goods via one’s communications. But what is clear communication to begin with? What makes a communication clearer, or less clear?

My proposal is that clear communication is communication in which potential sources of confusion in the communication are eliminated or resolved. These sources of confusion are elements of the communication apt to lead its recipients to misunderstand the communicator’s communicative intentions. There are many potential sources of confusion of this sort at the various levels of communication, from individual words and phrases to statements to larger structures composed of statements. The clear communicator is attentive to these varied potential sources of confusion, skilled at eliminating or resolving these sources of confusion, and tends to deploy their skills in eliminating or resolving these sources of confusion in a way that is regulated by the proximate and ultimate motivations of communicative clarity.

Words and phrases can lead to confusion when the communicator’s intended meaning for these terms does not match the meaning the recipient of the communication attaches to them. This kind of mismatch of meaning is especially likely to occur in cases where words or phrases are regularly used with multiple, distinct meanings. Paradigmatic examples include the various “isms”: liberalism, libertarianism, and the like. There are also more mundane examples of terms with different meanings in different contexts, such as “bat” and “bank”. If a communicator does not somehow specify which of the various meanings of these terms they have in mind, the recipients of their communication are prone to misunderstand them. Sometimes, the meanings of one’s terms can be specified adequately by the context of their usage, as when one says that “The child hit the ball with the bat”. Other times, it is best to explicitly state how one is understanding a term. This can frequently be a good option when one is dealing with “isms”, for example. The clear communicator is alert to these kinds of potential sources of confusion in their communications arising at the level of individual words and phrases, and tends to eliminate these sources of confusion by removing them or resolving them, deploying skills of identifying their intended meaning for such ambiguous terms. Similar comments apply to sources of confusion arising from ambiguous syntactic structures such as those that can lead to amphibole.

The structure of one’s sentences can also be a source of confusion. Generally speaking, more complicated sentence structures are more demanding on the recipients of one’s communications, and when more is demanded of the recipient of one’s communications these recipients are more likely to misunderstand one’s meaning. As such, there is some reason to avoid unnecessarily complex sentence structures, in order to better ensure that one’s communications are understood by one’s audience. Of course, ill-formulated, ungrammatical sentences can be even worse on the recipient. The virtuously clear communicator has a command of the rules governing communication and tends to abide by these insofar as doing so enables them to better advance others’ epistemic goods via their communications.

Zooming out still further, there are many ways in which the larger structures composed by one’s statements can lead to confusion for the recipients of these communications. One’s recipients can become confused about which of one’s points is one’s main point. They can become confused about whether one intended to provide an argument for one’s view or not. They can become confused about how many arguments one intended to provide for one’s view, whether these arguments are independent from one another, and how one assesses their evidential force. They can confuse one’s view with neighboring, subtly different views. They can become confused about how one’s view is supposed to apply to particular cases. They can become confused about whether parts of one’s communications are intended to add to the content of the communication or are merely repetitive. And so on.

Virtuously clear communicators are alert to these potential sources of confusion in their communications, and they tend to exercise skills in eliminating or resolving these sources of confusion so as to better advance others’ epistemic goods via achieving clarity in their communications. This will often involve distinguishing their views from other views with which they could easily be confused. It will often involve offering illustrative examples of how their views apply to particular cases. It will often involve restating and emphasizing their main point in contrast to what is not their main point. It will often involve offering explanations of how the arguments they give are related to each other. It will often involve refraining from including extraneous information, and otherwise ensuring that one has not unreasonably enhanced the cognitive load demanded upon one’s recipients.

Empirical research confirms that exercising these kinds of skills leads the recipients of one’s communications to consider one a clearer communicator. San Bolkan (2017) recently sought to develop a new twenty item other-report measure of instructor clarity that incorporated a factor structure focusing on specific instructor behaviors that facilitate clear communication. Summarizing the resultant five factor model for instructor clarity, he writes this:

The first factor [which is reverse scored] is disfluency and refers to instructors who have a difficult time explaining class concepts in a simple manner, who cannot create examples to explain course concepts, and who deliver course lessons in a convoluted fashion. The second factor [also reversed], working memory overload, refers to learning situations where the pace of instruction outstretches students’ ability to absorb course material. The third factor was labeled interaction and indicates that clear instruction must include working with students to determine their levels of comprehension and adjusting class lectures to adapt to student understanding. The fourth factor [reversed] was a function of providing superfluous information (coherence). Superfluous information may reflect a lack of clarity because it might confuse students and direct their focus to unimportant aspects of their course lessons. Finally, the fifth factor represented a well-structured and organized presentation of information (structure). (31)

Bolkan found that higher scores on this five factor scale for instructor clarity were highly correlated with shorter scales measuring instructor clarity more directly without the use of specific behavioral items, and they also predicted better educational experiences for students. Instructors who tended to communicate in these specific ways were perceived to communicate more clearly, and they better enhanced the learning experience of their students.

Most often, the virtuously clear communicator will address potential sources of confusion in their communications by simply eliminating them altogether. This occurs, for example, when one provides an explicit definition for a key term one is using, or states up front and emphatically what one’s main point is. In other more rare cases, it may be wise not to eliminate a potential source of confusion altogether, but better to allow it to linger in order to pique the recipient’s interest. One may, for example, state an aspect of one’s view in a paradoxical way—a way that sounds like it couldn’t be correct. This can lead one’s recipients to focus on this aspect of one’s communication and consider it deeply for themselves. However, the virtuously clear communicator can be expected to resolve these sources of confusion in their communications, at least when they take their audience to be adequately receptive to seeking out their resolution. In doing so, they eventually clarify what they allow temporarily to be unclear. This kind of tactic has been employed by some of the world’s most remarkable teachers—for example, Jesus Christ in his use of parables.

The virtue of communicative clarity, then, can be conceptualized as a tendency to attend to potential sources of confusion in one’s communications and to eliminate or resolve these out of a motivation to thereby promote others’ epistemic goods. The virtuously clear communicator aims to communicate in a way that their recipients will understand so that these recipients will be better positioned to thereby reap epistemic benefits. They are skilled in removing and resolving sources of confusion at the various levels of communication, and they exercise these skills in accordance with their motivation to promote others’ epistemic goods.

* 1. Communicative Clarity and Similar Virtues

We can further illuminate the nature of communicative clarity and its place in the life of the intellectually dependable person by comparing it with similar virtues. In this section, I focus on its relationship to a trio of virtues discussed by Jason Baehr in his book, *Cultivating Good Minds* (2015).

The trio of virtues are attentiveness, intellectual carefulness, and intellectual thoroughness. Baehr sees these traits as “virtues that keep the learning process on track” (93) as opposed to virtues such as curiosity or intellectual humility that are especially helpful for initiating the learning process. Of the three, attentiveness is especially foundational, because it is conducive toward the other two. Baehr describes the attentive person as someone who is “quick to notice and is capable of giving sustained attention to important details” (95). In connection to intellectual carefulness, he observes that “If I am not attentive, I will be especially vulnerable to errors—to intellectual carelessness. Conversely, one of the best ways to avoid mistakes is to be fully aware of and attentive to what one is doing” (95-6). Likewise, attentiveness facilitates thoroughness, because “an attentive person is well positioned to notice and probe important details” (96).

Intellectual carefulness, as already suggested, is concerned with avoiding intellectual errors. Baehr describes the intellectually careful person as follows:

An intellectually careful person takes pains to avoid making intellectual mistakes. However, to do this effectively, she needs to know what counts as a mistake and to be mindful of situations in which she is susceptible to making them. Thus an intellectually careful person also has a grasp of the rules of good thinking and related intellectual activities; and this awareness comes to mind when she finds herself in danger of violating these rules. (105)

The rules in view here are those that are germane to the kind of intellectual activity in which the intellectually careful person is engaged. Baehr notes that there may be many different intellectual activities governed by different rules. The intellectually careful person is the sort of person who tends to attend to and abide by the rules of those intellectual activities in which they are engaged so as to avoid making mistakes in those intellectual activities.

One of Baehr’s examples of how the intellectually careful person will tend to follow the rules of their elected intellectual activities is especially instructive for our purposes. He asks us to “imagine a student working on an important term paper for his English class” (106). Supposing that this student writes the paper in accordance with intellectual carefulness, Baer describes him as follows:

As he puts his thoughts on paper, he is mindful of the rules of grammar, mechanics, and spelling. And his writing adheres to these rules: he uses proper sentence construction, his subjects and verbs agree, he makes appropriate use of commas and apostrophes, doesn’t make any spelling errors, and so on. Here intellectual carefulness looks like a sensitivity and adherence, not to logical or mathematical rules, but to the basic principles of good writing. (106)

Now, Baehr does not come out and say it, but this example—together with what we know about Baehr’s views regarding the other-regarding features of intellectual virtues more generally, as discussed in Chapter Two—suggests that Baehr thinks that intellectual carefulness can govern intellectual activities aimed at promoting others’ epistemic goods, just as it can govern intellectual activities aimed at promoting one’s own epistemic goods. True enough, the task of writing in this example is likely primarily aimed at promoting the writer’s epistemic goods, since the writer is a student. However, among the epistemic goods that are presumably aimed at in the writing task are the cultivation of the other-regarding dimension of intellectual carefulness—carefulness in how the student communicates. Among the things the teacher who assigns the writing task hopes for, ultimately, is that the student may develop tendencies to be careful in their communication so as to avoid leading others into epistemic mistakes. This other-regarding dimension of full intellectual carefulness, as well as its self-regarding dimension, overlaps in important ways with communicative clarity, as I will explain momentarily.

Baehr is even clearer about the other-regarding dimension of intellectual thoroughness. His descriptive account of intellectual thoroughness explicitly incorporates an other-regarding dimension. He writes, “An intellectually thorough person desires and conveys deep understanding. She desires an explanation of what she is curious about—not simply a series of isolated facts. And when she conveys what she knows, she also tends to explain rather than merely regurgitate information” (96). In a similar vein, he later writes, “An intellectually thorough person is disposed to probe for deeper meaning and understanding. She is unsatisfied with mere appearances or easy answers. Similarly, when she communicates what she knows, she explains herself. She refrains from giving superficial or cursory accounts of things” (117). These remarks at the very least suggest that possessing intellectual thoroughness in its fullness involves possessing an other-regarding intellectual thoroughness. It involves having a tendency to communicate one’s knowledge thoroughly, presumably out of a motivation to promote others’ epistemic goods—especially the good of understanding.

Communicative clarity overlaps with the trio of attentiveness, intellectual carefulness, and intellectual thoroughness in important ways. We observed above that part of what is required for communicative clarity is attentiveness or alertness to potential sources of confusion in one’s communications. Such alertness is likely to be facilitated by the virtue of attentiveness. This is especially so if we conceptualize attentiveness, when possessed in its fullness, as incorporating other-regarding elements like those we have discussed in the case of intellectual carefulness and intellectual thoroughness. Presumably, in much the way that one can be a careful or thorough communicator, one can also be an attentive communicator. Attentiveness in one’s communications is likely to facilitate communicative clarity, because communicative clarity requires attentiveness to potential sources of confusion in one’s communications.

Intellectual carefulness overlaps with communicative clarity in similar ways. Consider first the self-regarding dimension of intellectual carefulness. The kind of sensitivity to causes of mistakes in inquiry characteristic of intellectual carefulness is likely to facilitate the kind of sensitivity to sources of confusion characteristic of communicative clarity. After all, often what leads us to make mistakes in our inquiries is that we are confused in one way or another. Having a command of the ways that we could have become confused about things can help us to aid others in not becoming confused in those ways. It can help us to ensure that when we communicate to others about these topics of inquiry, we do so in such a way as to eliminate or remove from our communications the sources of confusion that we might have encountered in our own inquiry into the subject. Thus, the self-regarding dimension of intellectual carefulness likely facilitates communicative clarity.

The other-regarding dimension of intellectual carefulness has an even stronger conceptual relationship to communicative clarity. This other-regarding dimension of intellectual carefulness can be conceptualized as a tendency to communicate in a way that is alert to and avoids leading others to make intellectual errors. Being a clear communicator is plausibly part of what it takes to be a careful communicator, so understood. The clear communicator is alert to certain kinds of errors their communications could lead others to make—errors arising from sources of confusion in one’s communications. They tend to exercise skill in eliminating or resolving these sources of others’ errors. As such, they act in accordance with the other-regarding dimension of intellectual carefulness.

It may even be tempting to think that communicative clarity is a subordinate virtue to other-regarding intellectual carefulness. After all, while both these virtues are concerned with avoiding communicating in a way that leads others to make intellectual errors, the remit of errors with which intellectual carefulness is concerned is presumably larger than that of communicative clarity. Communicative clarity is concerned only with eliminating errors stemming from sources of confusion in one’s communications. But, one’s communications can lead others into error in other ways than by being unclear. For example, we would expect the careful communicator to not only communicate clearly what they communicate, but we would expect their carefulness to regulate what they choose to communicate in the first place. A careful communicator will not be satisfied with clearly asserting views they take to have a precarious epistemic status, for instance. Thus, in addition to being partially constitutive of the other-regarding dimension of intellectual carefulness, it may be tempting to think that communicative clarity is a unique specification of this virtue and is subordinate to it.

Yet, to draw this conclusion would be too swift. One reason for this is that the virtuously clear communicator does not merely aim at preventing their communications from leading others to make mistakes. Instead, more positively, they aim to communicate in such a way that others understand them, so as to advance these others’ epistemic goods. As noted above, the clear communicator recognizes that in order to secure epistemic benefits for others via one’s communications, these communications must be adequately understood; and to be adequately understood, they must be sufficiently clear. Thus, they aim to make their communications sufficiently clear for their recipients so that these recipients can reap epistemic benefits from them. In this way, communicative clarity is not exclusively concerned with preventing others from making intellectual errors. By contrast, intellectual carefulness, both in its self-regarding dimension and its other-regarding dimension, is exclusively concerned with avoiding error. This is part of what is distinctive of the virtue, according to Baehr. Thus, while clear communication is partially constitutive of careful communication, the virtue of communicative clarity is not subordinate to the other-regarding dimension of the virtue of intellectual carefulness.

It remains to assess the relationship between communicative clarity and intellectual thoroughness. First, the relationship between self-regarding intellectual thoroughness and communicative clarity is similar to that between self-regarding intellectual carefulness and communicative clarity. Self-regarding intellectual thoroughness is likely to facilitate communicative clarity, because by being thorough in our own investigations we discover important facets of the topics of our inquiries that could be a source of confusion for ourselves or others. By discovering these features, we are better positioned to exercise the skills of communicative clarity in regulating our communications so as to avoid confusing others about these facets of the topic of inquiry. While self-regarding intellectual thoroughness does not parallel communicative clarity by incorporating a sensitivity to sources of error that mirrors the sensitivity to sources of confusion constitutive of communicative clarity, it nonetheless facilitates the latter by enabling its possessor to better identify some of these sources.

What about the other-regarding dimension of intellectual thoroughness? This we can conceptualize as a tendency to communicate what one knows thoroughly out of the aim of advancing others’ understanding. So understood, it would appear that communicative clarity is partially constitutive of other-regarding intellectual thoroughness, just as it is partially constitutive of other-regarding intellectual carefulness. For, just as one cannot communicate carefully without communicating clearly, one cannot communicate thoroughly in such a way as to advance others’ understanding without communicating clearly.

However, it may be too strong to claim that clarity full-stop is partially constitutive of other-regarding intellectual thoroughness. This is because thoroughness governs only those instances of communication in which one seeks to convey understanding of something one knows, and not all of one’s communications. Thus, it may be more accurate to say that what is partially constitutive of other-regarding intellectual thoroughness is not domain-general communicative clarity, but a domain-specific variety of communicative clarity. One cannot tend to communicate what one knows thoroughly in a way that advances others’ understanding unless one tends in these specific circumstances to communicate in accordance with clarity.

Indeed, many of the behaviors we identified earlier as characteristic of communicative clarity are important for thorough communication. This is especially the case regarding behaviors focused on clarifying larger structures composed of one’s statements. For example, the thorough communicator can be expected to exhibit clarity in distinguishing their view from other views with which it could be confused; in using illustrative examples; and in explaining whether they are arguing for their view, how many arguments they are giving for it, and how these arguments are related. A tendency to employ these skills characteristic of communicative clarity in the contexts characteristic of other-regarding intellectual thoroughness is part of what it is to possess the latter virtue. So, a domain-specific variant of communicative clarity is partially constitutive of other-regarding intellectual thoroughness. And, of course, this domain-specific variant of communicative clarity is facilitated by the more domain-general communicative clarity. Being a clear communicator in general will facilitate one’s communicating in accordance with clarity in the contexts distinctive of other-regarding intellectual thoroughness.

This section has helped us to locate the virtue of communicative clarity alongside other intellectual virtues that can involve a focus on how one communicates to others. An important lesson of the section is that communicative clarity is in a certain sense foundational to intellectually dependable communication. One cannot communicate in a virtuously thorough way, or in a virtuously careful way, without communicating in a virtuously clear way; though one could communicate in a virtuously clear way that was not fully reflective of virtuously careful or virtuously thorough communication. The virtues of intellectual carefulness and intellectual thoroughness, unlike communicative clarity, involve self-regarding dimensions in addition to other-regarding dimensions. While Baehr does not claim this explicitly, the same may be true of the virtue of attentiveness. We have seen that the self-regarding dimensions of these intellectual virtues are likely to facilitate communicative clarity, while communicative clarity, or a domain-specific variant of it, is partially constitutive of the other-regarding dimensions of intellectual carefulness and intellectual thoroughness. Each of these virtues has its own distinctive motivation, despite their overlap. Attentiveness aims at grasping important details; intellectual thoroughness aims at achieving deep understanding for oneself or others; and intellectual carefulness aims at avoiding errors for oneself or others. The distinctive aim of communicative clarity is to ensure that one’s communicative intentions are sufficiently clear as to be understood by their recipients so as to promote their epistemic goods. Without achieving the aim of this virtue, little else by way of epistemic benefit can be achieved via one’s communications.

* 1. Communicative Clarity and Opposing Vices

The nature of communicative clarity and its place in the life of the intellectually dependable person can also be illuminated by contrasting this virtue with opposing vices. Perhaps the vices that come most readily to mind as opposed to communicative clarity are vices that tend to engender or are partially constituted by deficiency of clear communication. For example, whereas in the previous section we saw that both the self-regarding and the other-regarding dimensions of attentiveness and carefulness are likely to support or be supported by communicative clarity, we would similarly expect that vicious inattentiveness and carelessness would stymie communicative clarity. People who are generally inattentive or careless in intellectual endeavors, or who are inattentive or careless particularly when it comes to their communication with others, are unlikely to achieve the virtue of communicative clarity.

Yet, there are also additional ways that a person can tend toward deficient clarity in their communications with others, even without being inattentive or careless regarding how they communicate. Indeed, some vices can lead a person to attentively and carefully (albeit not virtuously) communicate in systematically unclear ways. One of these vices is often called “obscurantism”.

There is a small literature in philosophy concerned with obscurantism as a vice of communication. Contributors to this literature have tended to conceptualize obscurantism as by definition involving a tendency toward deficiency of clarity in communication, where this deficiency is aimed at impressing the recipients of the communication and leading them to think that the communicator has something of deep significance to communicate. For example, Buekens and Boudry (2015) contrast obscurantism both with “the intellectual virtue of clarity” (128) and with bullshit of the sort we discussed briefly in the previous chapter. In a passage where they present the distinctiveness of obscurantism in contrast to each of these, they write:

The bullshitter’s pronouncements can be crystal clear; it is just that he does not care about commitments that come with the language game of assertoric language use. Obscurantism, on the other hand, seems to apply, first and foremost, to the content of what is being asserted: although often presented with utmost seriousness and intellectual bravado, it is never quite clear what the obscurantist is getting at. (127)

We saw in the previous chapter that bullshit (on the model envisioned here and there) contrasts with intellectual transparency because the bullshitter is not properly motivated to faithfully share their own perspective. They may communicate clearly enough what they communicate—it’s just that their communications don’t reflect an attempt to faithfully contribute toward truth-aimed inquiry. They are lacking in sincerity. Buekens and Boudry are here highlighting that obscurantism differs from bullshit in these ways. The obscurantist may well aim to contribute to truth-aimed inquiry, and they likewise often do aim to represent their own perspective on topics of inquiry. What is distinctive of their case is that they tend toward deficient clarity in communicating this perspective.

This tendency toward deficient clarity of communication is, for the obscurantist, typically motivated by an aim of leading the recipient of their communication to think that the obscurantist has something deep or profound to contribute—or at least something deeper or more profound than they in fact have to contribute. As Buekens and Boudry put it, “The charge of obscurantism suggests a deliberate move on behalf of the speaker, who is accused of setting up a game of verbal smoke and mirrors to suggest depth and insight where none exists” (126). Bryan Magee (2014) agrees, emphasizing the way in which this aim can become disconnected from the subject matter of the communication:

What such a person wants, as a rule, is to impress the reader – and sometimes himself. Even worse is his attitude to the subject matter, namely a relegation of its importance. A writer who dresses up unclear thought in colourful rhetoric and wide-ranging allusion in order to persuade his readers that the thought is profound and the thinker a genius is using his subject matter for an end unconnected with itself. (460)

Magee suggests that philosophers Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel had some susceptibility to this vice. He writes, “They had been shown by Kant’s example that a thinker who is exceedingly difficult to read may, partly for that reason, wins a reputation for profundity; and because they coveted this reputation for themselves they deliberately expressed themselves obscurely” (459). Whether we agree with this diagnosis of these particular philosophers or not, Magee’s description of the case serves to illuminate what obscurantism tends to look like in those who are characterized by it.

The contrast with the virtuously clear communicator is sharp. Whereas obsrucantists tend toward deficient clarity out of an aim of enhancing their intellectual reputation, virtuously clear communicators tend toward sufficient clarity out of an aim of ensuring that others understand them adequately for their epistemic goods to be advanced. Stuart Hampshire brings out the contrast when writing about the example of Bertrand Russell in his contribution to *Modern British Philosophy* (1986):

It’s a question of not obfuscating – of leaving no blurred edges; of the duty to be entirely clear, so that one’s mistakes can be seen; of never being pompous or evasive. It’s a question of never fudging the results, never using rhetoric to fill a gap, never using a phrase which conveniently straddles, as it were, two or three notes and which leaves it ambiguous which one you’re hitting. Russell’s prose excludes even the possibility of evasion and of half truth . . . there’s always this extraordinary nakedness of clear assertion. His doctrines and arguments stand out in a hard, Greek light which allows no vagueness. (26)

While the language of complete exclusion of vagueness and the like here may be too strong and is likely hyperbolic, it is true enough that the virtuously clear communicator contrasts starkly with the obscurantist in their tendencies toward pomposity, evasiveness, blurriness, rhetorical fill, straddling, and the like. Whereas these form the toolkit of the obscurantist, they are shunned by the virtuously clear communicator because their use tends to harm others’ ability to adequately understand the communicator.

Inattentiveness, carelessness, and obscurantism tend to lead one toward deficient clarity in one’s communications. But there is also an opposite temptation toward excessive clarity that can get in the way of communicating with sufficient clarity that the recipients of one’s communications understand one adequately for their epistemic goods to be advanced. One way that succumbing to this temptation may manifest is in excessive pedantry—in the incessant clarification of details whose clarification is unimportant for purposes of advancing others’ epistemic goods via one’s communications. This can lead to cognitive overload for these recipients, which in turn ironically leads to a diminished perception of clarity in one’s communications, as evidenced by the empirical research cited earlier in this chapter. Succumbing to this temptation may also manifest in the communicator being reluctant to communicate in the first place, as they may struggle to identify a way of presenting their ideas that meets their own overly demanding standards for clarity. In each case, succumbing to the temptation toward excessive clarity ends up harming one’s ability to advance others’ epistemic goods via clear communication. The virtuously clear communicator hits a mean between this extreme tendency toward clarity and the deficient tendencies toward clarity characteristic of inattentive, careless, and obscure communicators.

Jason Baehr (2015) warns about a vice of this kind that he contrasts with the virtue of carefulness. “Within an educational context,” he writes, “an excess of intellectual carefulness is also quite common” (108). Such excessive carefulness, Baehr suggests, is “tied, in fact, to the problem of perfectionism familiar to many teachers.” He offers the following example:

Think of the student who is obsessed with not making mistakes or with getting anything less than an A on an assignment. This student’s concern with avoiding errors is rooted in fear—a fear that seems tied to the student’s self-image or self-esteem. (109)

This idea of a unified tendency to be excessively concerned with making mistakes, fearful of making them, motivated by a drive to achieve perfection and a tendency to tie one’s own self-esteem to whether one has performed perfectly is reflected well in recent psychological measures of perfectionism.

Feher and colleagues (forthcoming) recently developed a three factor model of perfectionism, which includes the factors of rigid perfectionism, self-critical perfectionism, and narcissistic perfectionism. It is the first two factors that are relevant here. Summarizing the psychological literature on these topics, Feher and colleagues describe the first two of these factors as follows:

Rigid perfectionism is defined as demanding flawless performance from the self. It contains the facets self-oriented perfectionism and self-worth contingencies. Self-oriented perfectionism reflects the importance placed on, as well as striving toward, perfection. Self-worth contingencies . . . [reflect] the link between one’s self-worth and meeting personal standards of perfection. . . . Self-critical perfectionism was operationalized . . . [as] concern over mistakes (overly negative reactions to perceived mistakes and failures), doubts about actions (pervading uncertainty and dissatisfaction of one’s performance), self-criticism (overly self-critical responses to perceived absence of perfection), and socially prescribed perfectionism (a propensity to believe that others demand perfection from oneself). (2)

Feher and colleagues found that rigid and self-critical perfectionism were highly correlated, and were predictive of negative outcomes such as stress and depression.

Perfectionism of this sort, of course, is a very broad personality tendency. Yet, as Baehr’s comments suggest, we can imagine more narrow versions of perfectionism or excessive carefulness. These may be restricted to the domain of academic performance, as in Baehr’s example. Or they may be restricted to, or at least include, the domain of one’s communications with others. A perfectionistic tendency of this latter kind that incorporates rigid and self-critical perfectionist orientations toward how one communicates to others is especially opposed to the virtue of communicative clarity. The virtuously clear communicator’s motivation in communicating is not to communicate flawlessly so as to preserve or enhance their sense of self-worth by achieving their own self-imposed standards of perfection for communication. Rather, what motivates their tendency toward clear communication is their concern to be adequately understood by the recipients of their communications so that they can thereby advance these others’ epistemic goods. This will lead them to be concerned about mistakes in their communications that lead others toward significant misunderstandings of their communicative intentions. But it does not involve and needn’t lead to the kind of fear of making mistakes in their communications that would be characteristic of perfectionism in this domain.

Some philosophers, in their remarks championing clarity and precision, especially in the conduct of professional philosophy, flirt with advocating this sort of perfectionism. For example, Timothy Williamson writes that “Pedantry is a fault on the right side” (185). Bryan Magee, in his work advocating clarity, writes that “one should try to be as clear as possible” (460). He claims, further, that “If one is to make something fully clear to others one must first make it fully clear to oneself. This means thinking it through to the bottom, to the point where one has a complete grasp of its presentational structure” (454). Valerie Hobbes (2015) objects to Magee here on the basis that demanding full clarity of understanding on one’s own part prior to efforts to communicate this understanding to others is unrealistic and does not reflect the way in which our ideas tend to be clarified by the very process of trying to present them and negotiating an understanding of them within our communities. As she puts it, “communication, in its various forms, helps to shape and sharpen thought” (139). What is key for present purposes is the observation that in order to communicate with sufficient clarity as to be adequately understood by others so that one can advance their epistemic goods with one’s communications, one needn’t always have thought things “through to the bottom” beforehand. To demand otherwise of oneself risks a stultifying perfectionism that gets in the way of clear communication rather than facilitating it.

The virtue of communicative clarity, then, like many other virtues, is a kind of mean between extremes. Part of what helps to secure its place in this mean space between vices such as obscurantism, on the one hand, and perfectionism, on the other, is its distinctively other-regarding character. What regulates the virtuously clear communicator’s tendency to communicate clearly is their motivation to thereby have their communicative intentions adequately understood by their audience so as to promote the latter’s epistemic goods. The motivations that regulate the extent of clarity employed in the communications of the perfectionist and the obscurantist are quite different. The obscurantist aims to secure or enhance their intellectual reputation by leading others to think they have something profound to contribute, and as a result tends toward deficient clarity in their communication. The perfectionistic communicator is motivated by meeting their own excessive standards for perfect communication, rather than by communicating in such a way as to promote others’ epistemic goods, and as a result tends to communicate with excessive clarity or to stultify their efforts to communicate. By contrast, the tendency toward virtuously clear communication lays an essential foundation for any other virtuous communication that advances others’ epistemic goods, such as virtuously thorough or careful communication.

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