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Book Review

An Ecology of Communication:

Response and Responsibility in an Age of Ecocrisis

By William Homestead

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“Anyone paying attention, even if lightly, knows the litany,” is how William Homestead opens *An Ecology of Communication: Response and Responsibility in the Age of Ecocrisis*.¹ So, we all know the litany, but can we effectively communicate it? The ecocrisis is not so much the various ecological and social disasters themselves, as it is a crisis of communication surrounding these events. We receive plenty of data, personal accounts, and individual experiences that disclose the dangers of our present culture–nature relationship, but so often our response is characterized by “an emergency room mentality without going to the deeper roots that cause ecological emergencies in the first place.”² All the while, we cannot shake the feeling that our responses are not fitting.

As a researcher in the field of ecology who is heavily invested in the study of hermeneutics, how ecological principles can be effectively communicated in a way that

¹ William Homestead, *An Ecology of Communication: Response and Responsibility in an Age of Ecocrisis* (Lexington Books: London, 2021).

² Homestead, *An Ecology of Communication*, 109.

inspires individual and societal change is of supreme importance to me. In my conversations surrounding the issue, most people I have spoken to across all disciplines agree with the charge, but everyone seems to have a different idea about the address. Furthermore, many agree the ecocrisis is pressing, but believe other matters deserve our immediate attention instead, or that it is not their specialty so it is not their direct concern. Yet, the fact itself that the ecocrisis is thought of as an issue with a discipline for addressing it, separate from other disciplines, is part of the crisis. In reality, ecocrisis is a crisis that demands a response from all fields of study as everything we do is fundamentally tied to the environment. Therefore, since ecocrisis is such a multifaceted, complex issue that knows no disciplinary bounds, it ought to be viewed, discussed, and addressed through the relationships between perspectives rather than any one given perspective at a time. Ecocrisis is fundamentally an issue of poorly kept relations, thus demanding a relational response.

Homestead enters into this conversation with a keen knowledge of and respect for its context. At its surface, *An Ecology Communication* is an impressive body of synthetic scholarship, combining well over 200 individual sources across disciplines. The text has value as an encyclopedia of environmental thinking but reading it solely as that would be doing it and yourself a disservice. Homestead's impressive synthesis directly addresses the crisis of communication surrounding ecocrisis, providing a holistic and relational understanding of communication that is beneficial for conversations surrounding the multi-disciplinary issues of today. The text acts as a common point of conversation between eco-activists, environmental scientists, communication scholars, philosophers, anthropologists, and many more disciplines as it speaks to each of them in a way that encourages them to speak with each other. Thus, Homestead provides guidance to how one could hermeneutically engage with environmental thinking and the interdisciplinary conversations such thinking requires.

The title of the book is indicative to the degree of Homestead's insight into the communicative issue at hand and his conviction to address it in a multidisciplinary manner. Named after the main theory he puts forward, he aptly titles it an *ecology of communication*, as it is in no way a mere reductive *communication of ecology*. Staying true to being an ecology, Homestead explores the relationships between various forms of communication and the insights that can be derived from examining holistic systems rather than narrowing one's focus solely to individual aspects. Furthermore, the subtitle *Response and Responsibility in the Age of Ecocrisis* suggests, rightly so, that the project of exploring communicative relationships is not enough and that such an inquiry demands an exploration of how a knowledge of those relationships better prepares us for the responsibility to respond. While the book falls under the category

of communication scholarship, it is hermeneutic to its core, inviting its reader to consider how re-reading our relationships re-writes our responses.

Both in content and form, the text stays true to its name. From the beginning, Homestead never attempts to discuss a concept in isolation. Rather, he discusses two or more concepts at a time, working through the ideas of each in their relation to one another and an external circumstance or experience. Fitting and unfit aspects of each concept in relation to the circumstance at hand are revealed through this dialogic interplay. Not only is this indicative of Homestead's hermeneutic sensibility, it also provides direct evidence through praxis to one of his central claims: that our communicative strategies surrounding ecocrisis are dominantly monologic when they would be better served by a dialogic engagement. Content wise, Homestead has his finger on the pulse of our communicative problem, namely, that we have been socialized into over-using and over-stressing the importance of a distorted version of rational communication that takes form as an instrumental-calculative monologue, at the expense of dialogic communication. He makes clear that our communicative abilities run deeper than that, arguing for an ecology of communication that has aspects and relationships, which are still underdeveloped in our contemporary society.

While the introduction sets the stage through the context of previous and present environmental activism, provides a summary of the project, and considers possible critiques from John Durham Peters to guide the subsequent discussions, chapters one through four of the text serve to define four communication styles and the relationships between them that build an ecology of communication. Homestead creates a food web of sorts, wherein each of the communicative styles contest and cultivate each other to a degree that the web would collapse without the support of any one part. Each aspect of this ecology, dubbed rational, spiritual, mythic-animistic, and aesthetic communication, is developed through readings of the works of Calvin Schrag, Ken Wilber, Paul Shepard, and Gregory Bateson, respectively. In doing so, Homestead seeks to re-imagine communication by challenging the contemporary primacy of "logic" with a more encompassing logos using transversal rationality; asserting the necessity of playing with and within a transcendental dimension to build imaginative capacity; re-establishing a sense of rootedness through direct tactile experiences in a particular *topos* through acknowledging the subjectivity of all others, including non-humans; and arguing for the importance of allowing insight and inspiration to come through from yielding to the beauty of larger a-historic and atopic patterns that we exist in. Even though a chapter is dedicated to the discussion of each of these aspects of his ecology, Homestead does not let a single chapter go by without including commentary on and from each of the other three aspects, making clear their

inherent interdependency and that they “should not be construed as predetermined or rigid criteria but the flowing of communicative praxis in time and place.”³

The fifth and sixth chapters address two movements that may be mistakenly conflated with Homestead’s ideas, New Ageism and interspecies communication, offering critiques while gathering insights that fit. While covering these two perspectives could have been an opportunity to have easy straw-man examples of unfit responses to ecocrisis, Homestead again shows his tact and instead takes them deeply seriously, unpacking what they have to say in the search of insight. Perhaps unsurprisingly, much of what these perspectives have to say turns out to be unfitting, but what is surprising is the saliency of the insights Homestead is able to pull from these traditions by examining them dialogically through an ecology of communication. From New Ageism, he finds issue with an ungrounded hope, which takes shape as a “create-your-own-reality” principle of hyper-subjectivity, but finds wisdom in the call for a global shift in perspective and a necessity for hope. From interspecies communication, he finds issue with the countless examples of self-projection onto the natural world so that one exists within an echo chamber, while believing the delusion that they are open to more voices, but finds wisdom in the practice’s inherent “I–Thou” ontology that perceives non-human others as subjects, from which we may learn and draw insights that may come through.

In his final chapter, Homestead turns to Thoreau, who has been a guiding figure throughout the text, more directly. Thoreau is seen as an exemplary case of practicing an ecology of communication, so that it yields possibly its most desirable result: living in sympathy with intelligence. By investigating what a life of practicing an ecology of communication may look like through the lens of Thoreau’s life, we are reminded through the description of practice what the text had explored in theory. His lifelong conscious commitment to improve dedicates him to “[filter] his head through his heart,”⁴ allowing him to be purposefully contradictory, approaching the address of each circumstance with fitting responsiveness. This responsiveness naturally led him to a kind of activism and action that was at once suffused with logos; guided by play, imagination, and contemplation; rooted in significant places and particulars; and yielding to the beauty of broader contexts and systems, making them impactful in his time and influential for generations to come. To a degree, the entirety of Homestead’s text is a love letter to Thoreau, compelling its reader to open themselves to a wider,

³ Homestead, *An Ecology of Communication*, 15.

⁴ Homestead, *An Ecology of Communication*, 274.

deeper, more reciprocal kind of communication so that we may come to love our rows and beans whilst we tend our fields.⁵

This is all the more apparent in the epilogue, where Homestead returns to the context the book opened in, and, again by exploring past and contemporary environmental activist movements, resoundingly shows the “obvious link between a systematically destroyed biosphere and a systematically distorted communication.”⁶ Keenly, he leaves the reader with societal level responses that already benefit, and will continue to benefit from, an ecology of communication, such as, amongst others, ecological design, I–Thou science, and deep listening in agriculture. Most compelling, however, is the connection Homestead draws between these responses, necessary social-justice movements, and our individual development, reminding us that “we are called to be responsible for ourselves, but also called to be responsible to each other.”⁷ It becomes abundantly clear, if it was not already, that while much of the text’s work is theoretical, the theory goes that once one opens themselves to an ecology of communication they are inevitably led into a responsibility that demands response to our eco-social circumstance, thus encouraging those around us to practice their underused communicative muscles. As the famous Rilke poem suggests, a work of art demands that you must change your life, likewise, thus, *An Ecology of Communication* does just that while adding another charge: to change your life in such a way that helps others change theirs too.

That is not to say the text is perfect, however, because just like we, just like Thoreau, Homestead is “a human being, not a myth.”⁸ Although Homestead’s dedication to listening from as many sources as possible is in part what makes the work so distinguished what makes the work so distinguished, there are a few subjects, such as scientific studies of telepathy and other “psi-phenomena” that are widely dismissed at first glance in the scientific community, which, despite the insights they offer, may turn the more skeptical reader away. Furthermore, throughout the text there is an occasional usage of outdated scientific language, such as left-brain/right-brain distinctions and the mention of *Homo sapiens*’ “reptilian brain,” that may further push away scientifically trained readers. Finally, as a suggestion for possible readers, this book has the misfortune of being published slightly before David Graeber and David Wengrow’s monumental *The Dawn of Everything*, which, although it has received much

⁵ Henry David Thoreau, “The Bean-Field,” in *Walden and Civil Disobedience* (Vintage Books: New York, 2014), 138.

⁶ Homestead, *An Ecology of Communication*, 315.

⁷ Homestead, *An Ecology of Communication*, 327.

⁸ Homestead, *An Ecology of Communication*, 273.

criticism, may have provided another rich perspective to Homestead's discussion of mythic-animistic communication, making it an excellent companion text.⁹

But these minor quibbles should not deter you; if you are patient with Homestead in the way he is with countless conflicting ideas throughout the text, you may, like he, see past the unfit towards the fit, and find that there is much to learn wherever you look. Homestead's ecology of communication is fascinating, and like all good scholarship, one comes away from it with countless questions of how the world might change as we look at it through this new lens. However, to me at least, what makes this project so endearing and informative for years to come is the borderline "panecastic" sensibility, with which Homestead approaches his inquiry. It is infectious, in the best sort of way. After reading *An Ecology of Communication: Response and Responsibility in an Age of Ecocrisis*, I was left with a new-found wonder towards that which always seemed so familiar. Homestead asks of the reader to have a hermeneutic comportment, in order to see what one may learn from a text they disagree with, a neighbor with whom they barely speak, or even a cement-bound tree on a city street, if they can hone the right kind of communication. Even more gripping, Homestead asks the reader to consider how what they learn will call them to respond. I am convinced Homestead can continue to communicate this wonder to countless others through this book, as long as they are willing to listen.

⁹ David Graeber and David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (Macmillan Publishers: New York, 2021).