

**THE JOURNAL OF DIALOGIC ETHICS:  
Interfaith and Interhuman Perspectives**



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## Interfaith and Interhuman Perspectives

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## Editorial Introduction

### Special Issue: Moral Ground of Dialogue, Part I

Annette M. Holba

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When I think of dialogue, my first thought is of Martin Buber and his philosophy of the I–Thou relationship. Maurice Friedman (1960) identifies two significant influences on Buber’s philosophy of dialogue: Georg Simmel and Ludwig Feuerbach. Feuerbach indicated that philosophy begins with man, not as an individual, but man with man: human beings (man or woman) in mutual relation. This is the ground of Buber’s I–Thou philosophy. In *Between Man and Man*, Buber (1965) wrote, “The individual man for himself . . . does not have man’s being in himself, either as a moral being or a thinking being. Man’s being is contained only in community. And in the unity of man with man. A unity which rests, however, only on the reality of the difference between the I and the thou” (147). Feuerbach was also concerned with relations. Three of these relations include the relation between man and God, between man and man, and between man and nature. Relations between two entities guided the development of Buber’s dialogic philosophy.

Friedman (1960) suggested that Feuerbach pointed to the notion that the ideal expression of the divine is in relation between human beings. Simmel draws an analogy between the relations of man and God and those of man and man, which is relatively similar to the I–Thou relation that Buber later pens. According to Simmel (1906), to believe and trust in God requires not just rational belief in his existence but a definite inner relation to him and a surrender of the singular self to him. In the same way, to believe in a man means to have a relation of trust to the whole man; it is a relation that rises above particular qualities of the individual self.

Buber (1965) stated that simple immediacy, being fully present to the other, is what provides a sense of togetherness and is the most effective form of action. He suggested that the most powerful kind of presence is one who is directly there. He also states that it is a common belief that production is the criterion for determining human value. Buber even considered illegitimate production or production without immediacy, which means to have no criterion or no reality of experiencing immediacy. Buber’s focus was around how we are with another,

human-to-human, and how we engage the world together, between man and man. The moral ground for us, or the higher good from which we should engage, is actually within the relationship between one person and another person. Buber's philosophy of dialogue and the I–Thou relation is the moral ground of the dialogic relationship. In *Between Man and Man*, Buber (1965) stated, "Man's being is contained only in community" (147). For Buber, the moral ground of dialogue is community.

The idea of community has been a robust area of research in the academy across most disciplines. Rob Anderson, Kenneth N. Cissna, and Ronald C. Arnett (1994) situate the necessity of a commitment to a common good as of key importance within the communitarian movement. However, not all understandings of community share this commitment or concern. As Arnett (2005) reminds us, some environments might invoke the word community but only as a façade for the reality of selfish concerns and exclusion of certain people. Both Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Buber suggest that a community is based not upon feelings but upon a "willingness to participate in a common story" (Anderson, Cissna, and Arnett 1994, 291). Human beings in community with one another participate together through communication, and if we are communicating in a common story with others, we participate in shaping and reshaping the story, as do those others participating within that story and other stories that have both direct and indirect implications upon our story.

Being situated in and impacted by all kinds of stories means there is a burden of care that weaves together the fabric of those stories. This burden requires a dialogic willingness to acknowledge the importance of care, love, and trust that must fill the spaces between people, places, and things in the community. The absence of care, love, and trust in communication practices can lead to communicative misunderstandings or complete communicative catastrophes. Michael Mitias (2023) suggests two reasons why people do not communicate effectively and meaningfully. First, they lack the linguistic skills necessary for ensuring effectiveness and meaningfulness. Second, the most important reason is that they lack skill in human communication, which for Mitias (2023) means either being reluctant to or unable to interact with others as a "human reality" (12). This means that "I to whom I speak is a living flame of humanity; I speak to the totality of her being" (12). And so, the possibility for dialogue rests within the "fundamental premise that the participants in the dialogue are human realities and should be treated as such" (12). Too often today, especially with the rise of social media, accessing or recognizing the human realities of others is quite challenging in virtual spaces. Therefore, for dialogue to be meaningful, communicating with someone involves full engagement between complete human realities—the complete nature of our beings wrapped in care, love, and trust.

Hannah Arendt made a case for the need of some kind of moral foundation or moral structure if human beings are to live with and amongst one another. In her 1994 article "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy," she discussed what happens when morality collapses as a foundation for engagement in a human community. She suggested that with such a collapse, one is left with "a mere set

of mores—manners, customs, [and] conventions to be changed at will—not with criminals, but with ordinary people” (744). Arendt considered questions of morality from various philosophers and concluded from them that they believe moral conduct depends upon “intercourse of man with himself” (756). This means that one should not contradict oneself and should be able to tell right from wrong. She also concluded that moral conduct “has nothing to do with obedience to any law that is given from the outside” (757). Arendt drew a final conclusion from her readings of and reasonings from other philosophers, indicating that “it is impossible for man to do wicked things deliberately, to want evil for evil’s sake” (761). However, for Arendt, this conclusion does not fit her experiences. She stated that the real evil is what brings the human races to “speechless horror” when we say, “This should never have happened” long after it did happen. Specific to human dialogue, Mitias’s concern for the ground upon which interlocutors stand occurs in both interreligious and nonreligious contexts. Mitias (2021) states that an interreligious dialogue assumes an “ontological orientation” of God-centered ground to guide communicative engagement between humans. Outside of interreligious contexts, Mitias (2024) suggests that all human dialogue should come from some kind of sacred, moral ground. Both of these perspectives highlight the importance for a discussion around questions pertaining to understanding the conditions for dialogue to exist; in particular, what is the moral ground of/for human dialogue?

This question is at the heart of this issue of *The Journal of Dialogic Ethics: Interfaith and Interhuman Perspectives*. In responding to this question, varying perspectives will be considered. This particular issue is the first of two issues devoted to thoughts and discussions around varying perspectives of and for the moral ground of dialogue. In the first essay, “Ethos: Freedom, Responsibility, Truth,” Algis Mickunas provides an opening for our focus related to what is meant by an ontological foundation as an arche or a universal pronouncement that is redundant. Mickunas interlinks freedom, responsibility, and truth as core aspects of foundation. Following Mickunas’s enriching discussion, Preston Carmack’s essay, “The Moral Foundations of Narrative as Grounding for Dialogue” suggests that moral foundations of dialogue are rooted in narrative, as defined by Alasdair MacIntyre and Ronald C. Arnett. Carmack works to establish a synergy between narrative and dialogue based upon the first component of narrative, publicly told moral stories. Using the philosophies of both MacIntyre and Arnett, Carmack weaves together a case for a moral ground of dialogue as narrative. This perspective advances the interrelation between narrative and dialogue and focuses our attention on care for the other and the ground that situates our communities.

In the third essay, Robert Foschia provides a provocative perspective of a terrestrial ethic through the frame of a planetary dialogue. In his essay, “‘Go Touch Grass!’: Inaugurating a Terrestrial Ethic through Planetary Dialogue,” a broad-based discussion is offered, positioning the work of Bruno Latour as the basis for a moral grounding of dialogue in the context of a morality in our shared home, referencing the earth and developing a dialogue around shared action and responsibility for the climate crisis that is unique to our planet. Next, moving from

a macro- to a micro-framework on the theme of moral ground of dialogue, Dennis Cali and Erik Gustafson explore and apply Gabriel Marcel's perspective on friendship in today's digital landscape in their essay, "Marcel on Friendship in a Digital Age." Cali and Gustafson offer a moral hermeneutic as a moral foundation that advocates an orientation toward human connection. After making their argument, they provide specific strategies and practices that can restore our human connections even in the heavily mediated environment. All of this provides opportunity to identify broad implications for sustaining dialogue.

The final two essays of this issue focus on care and hope in the ground of dialogue. Adrienne Darrah offers "An Examination of the Ethics of Care and Care/Harm Moral Foundations in the X Cativeverse," which explores the notion of care in our digital age as a moral component of engagement with others in the cativeverse. Darrah uses the context of a feline health crisis and seeks to understand how the care or harm within a moral foundation structure informs interactions and influences support of community members within the X cativeverse. This essay considers how a foundation might be applied within a particular environment. Finally, the last essay ends with a focus on hope. Joshua Clements and Kristen Haldeman argue in "Liquid Hope: Muddy Ground as the Place of Civility" that more civility is necessary in the public sphere and more thoughtfulness is needed in our personal lives. Adopting metaphors from the philosophies of Lewis Mumford and Zygmunt Bauman, Clements and Haldeman make a strong case for finding the moral ground of dialogue in our everyday communicative behavior.

Providing different perspectives on moral ground demonstrates that moral ground is not just a process of or a condition for dialogue but that there is, within the interspaces of dialogic connections, something more that binds people together where they recognize a deeper interconnection or a larger gestalt well below the surface exchanges of information. This means that there is more to relationships and responsibility that we might take for granted. Each of these essays discusses a possibility for moral ground in different ways, contexts, and means. Dialogue has been identified as much more than just talk. Edda Weigand (2021) argues that dialogue is the structure of pragmatics. This unites dialogue and ethics in ways that are sometimes overlooked, taken for granted, or minimized. Dialogue, "as the complex whole of human action and behavior" (Weigand 2021, 457), requires more attention, especially if we want to sustain human existence. It is not just about talking to or at others, but it involves the other through care, love, and trust, thus dynamically weaving a complex whole in existence.

There is much more to think about when it comes to living in the world with others. Therefore, we have planned a second special issue around the moral foundation of dialogue for Fall 2026 to continue this discussion. When I think of philosophers who have impacted, influenced, and transformed my understanding of dialogue and the interhuman perspective over the course of my academic life, two people come to mind. The first is Ronald C. Arnett. This scope and depth of his philosophy of dialogue have changed the course of my life, my relationships with others, and my responsibilities in community. The second is Michael H. Mitias. I discovered his philosophy of dialogue more recently through various books and articles, as well as interpersonal encounters that have opened my

curiosity and interests toward deeper meaning, especially around the sacred. It is with these two thinkers in mind that I dedicate these two special issues on the moral ground of dialogue. At a time when the dialogic terrain is experiencing debilitating and sometimes catastrophic pitfalls, we need more philosophers like them to light the path for interhuman existence. Thank you, Professor Arnett and Professor Mitias, for illuminating a pathway for us.

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## Ethos: Freedom, Responsibility, Truth

Algis Mickunas

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**Abstract:** This contribution is concerned with ethics and communication. The philosophical foundation of all ethics is an *arche*, answering the question of human “essence.” Given the contemporary negation of “essentialism” and the resultant multi-discursivity, post truth and multi-culturalism, all ethical standards, including communication, have been reduced to “all discourses and cultural worlds are equivalent.” In this sense, any universal pronouncements are redundant, including tolerance and human rights. Both are deemed to be constructs of modern West and need not be adhered to by “the others.” Freedom, equality, responsibility are also parts, by now, of one among many cultures and therefore lose universal appeal. All the post-truth theses belong to multiple monological claims, each with its own “truth” abolishing the question of lying or empty rhetoric. If there is no representation, then there is no mis-representation—political correctness becomes redundant.

But such *arche* must ground both freedom and responsibility, and these features are a condition for speaking the truth and philosophical search for truth. Hence, despite the rejection of Eurocentric claim to universal human rights and tolerance, there is a constant appeal to such rights at the cultural level: we are humans and have a right to live in accordance with our cultural tradition, and, indeed, others must tolerate our tradition. A silent background of human *arche* and universal claims resurface. Moreover, there appears a demand that the “others” must be understood as equally human and possess the right to have their alternative “reality.”

**Keywords:** arche; freedom; responsibility; multi-truths; multi-discursivity

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### Contemporary Context

To discuss the contemporary global context in relationship to communication ethics would seem a foolish venture, specifically since the world contains various major civilizations with their conception of ethics. There is an added issue of modern turn to global scientific technology and media, and their use to reclaim the past vestiges of autocracy and theocracy. In addition, civilizations and their cultures are in flux with confrontations, accommodations, shifting alliances and

ethnic encounters, mixtures and antagonisms. To make sense of communication ethics in face of the inevitable presence of very different civilizations and, above all, fundamental challenges to any kind of universal ethos not only from diversity, but also from a confusion in the sphere of simple ethics, might seem a futile venture. This is evidenced by the breakdown of modern Western thought into multiple theories and sub theories, leading to separate and autonomous disciplines and their discourses. In their technological mode the latter have the power to make the world in accordance with their scientific prescripts. The postmodern writers also fragment the world into cultures as discursive systems, each different from and equivalent to others; the result, multiple life worlds. In this sense, all understanding becomes cultural anthropology with all the attendant issues of theory and methodology. We shall note how methodological issues have been neglected leading to almost non-existent erudition in dealing with others and with one's own culture.

Meanwhile, taking for granted that cultures, as discourses, are diverse and each defines its own world, then the Western ways of understanding must be counted as one among many. It cannot be universal and imposed on other cultures without becoming colonial. Eurocentrism belongs to the constructs of white dead men and their constructs, such as human rights, tolerance, freedom belong to the West but need not be accepted by other cultures. It is obvious that the notion of multiculturalism, multi-discursivity, and constructivism, are Western, Eurocentric, going under the Western banner of tolerance of the cultures of others. Even philosophers talk of logical construction of reality. Since these features are part of Western education, then such education can be excluded by any autocracy, theocracy and monological doctrine. Indeed, such education is regarded as a virus which might infect the population with wrong, critical thinking. One example in the West is Hungary; Soros established a university there and yet with the election of an autocrat, such university was abolished because it might teach subjects which can be regarded as counter to "Christian teachings." Autocracy justifies its actions by theocracy. No wonder then that Western autocratic figures are enamored by the Tsar of Russia—Putin, whose war on Ukraine is legitimated by Orthodox theocracy and American Christians and conservatives as an eradication of ungodly gay parades. Such legitimation would have to be accepted by the theses that human understanding is dominated by constructed discourses. Russian constructs are calling for constant war and building of an empire, other discourses call for the establishment of theocracy, still others for behavioral control of all human actions, etc. . . . Since discourses do not represent but in fact determine what reality is, then Putin as well as Hitler, Trump, and China's Xi cannot be charged with any violations without protests from all the post-truth crowd claiming the right of different peoples to defend themselves against Eurocentrism. Indeed, the Western construct of a discourse on tolerance, rights, and freedom requires that only Westerners must be tolerant.

## Methods

We must address the issue of method and culture, as currently relevant, since there are almost universal claims that culture (its history and language) is what shapes and determines all that we are, do, and think, and hence it is the most basic issue with which we must contend. For postmodern essayists (they are not philosophers, since they themselves have rejected philosophy as just one more story among others) the term “culture” has become all encompassing: culture defines everything and is how everything acquires meaning, including our self-understanding. Of course there is no one culture, since every geographic region is by now a space of various, even incompatible cultures, leading to multiculturalism. The price for this primacy of culture (its discourses and histories) is “death” of the subject, author, philosophy, access to matters of fact, death of identity, and death of awareness. What is at issue, to be addressed in more detail, is that the followers of culturalism, multiculturalism, and multi-discursivity abolish their own positions due to the problematic inherent in regarding everything either as culture or discourse or the conflation of both. The efforts of postmodern essayists to abolish the presence of the subject rests on the dispersal of the fundamental concept of the subject through the appearance of the numerous scientific branches in modernity and cultural discourses. The once preeminent subject is now a conjunction of disciplines such as genetics, chemistry, economy, biology, physiology, perhaps religious beliefs, ideological commitments, and even multiple desires.

The results of this context are numerous and only major ones shall be mentioned. First and most basic is a rejection of human common understanding, traditionally called “essence.” What we call human depends on cultural discourses which do not represent some reality but, as if by verbal magic, make it. Second, if discursive constructs do not represent reality, then they cannot be accused of misrepresenting anything. They are simply different with their own truths and even values. We are in the context of post-truth, post-communication, post-democracy, and even post-death, since there is no human who dies. It is impossible to excuse others of being wrong, false or mistaken, since there is no criterion to decide which discourse is false or true. Third, the public arena where traditional dialogical debates could take place concerning public affairs is abolished. With it, vanish such notions as lying, propaganda, true history and even common education. Fourth, there are mass media and each is regarded as a propagator of its own construct—ideology, values, worldviews, leading to the phenomenon where the public selects a specific media outlet which confirms the “truths” of a specific audience. In this context everyone has access to different news and regards the news of others as “fake.” Indeed, this context allows us to speak of “post-communication.”

Testing of any major proclamation, such as multi-discursivity or multiculturalism, has one requirement: each claim posits principles which are proposed as explanations of all phenomena. This means that it cannot introduce phenomena through “the back door” which such principles would have to deny.

But if such phenomena are introduced, then there must be “more” than a given explanation can account for. In this sense, the “more” must also be accepted as a given in order to obtain a fuller understanding of our world and who we are, specifically in the current context of “many truths” or a “post-truth” world, a world of multi-discursivity and even multiculturalism. This is the universal context of all “post” claims, including postmodernism. Although this situation might appear laudable, it has one fundamental flaw: rejection of *human essence*. Once more, this rejection appears in various forms: death of the subject, death of author, death of truth, God, and all premised on the claim that who we are depends on a specific discourse or a specific cultural framework. Thus “subject” is a “product” of modern Western discourses delimiting what is “objective” and what is “subjective.” If everything can be explained by scientific discourses—physically—then the subject disappears. He is a biological, chemical, physiological, creature, a bundle of vital desires, requiring no meddling subject hindering scientific objectivity. Meanwhile, each culture also defines who we are differently, leading to the conclusion that what is called *essence* is one Western discourse among many others, and any effort to demand that it ought to be recognized as universal is identical with postcolonial imposition of one Eurocentric story on the rest of the world. All such stories are “constructs” which do not represent anything, although they define everything in their own ways. Even philosophy is one more constructed story, leading to the conclusion that philosophy should become creative and construct more interesting stories, including one more construct: logical construction of reality—but none of such constructs has a subject who does the constructing, since even he is just another construct as would be human essence. As will be seen shortly, no one can accuse a person of being a “racist,” since “race” is one more construct, just as a Jew is another discursive product—and no Nazi need apologize.

The constant appearance of the communicating subject who is irreducible to any modern materialist and even cultural explanations is the background condition for the proclamation of Universal Human Rights, including the right to free speech, and the numerous celebrations, organizations, and debates promoting and defending such rights. Still, we face the current psycho-babble in “philosophical” rhetoric about human reality as a bundle of desires, and even the “neo-neo” army of neo-Freudians, or neo-Marxists, marching against human rights as a “subjective” construct of white dead men. Having discarded human subject and more fundamentally, human essence, they have to contend with the rights of “others,” of other cultures, to have their ways of life without Western colonial impositions of rules and customs. The West can have its culture and the others theirs. Since “human rights,” including free speech and even tolerance, is a construct of the West, then the others need not accept such a construct. Even designation “philosophy” of other civilizations must be avoided. Western tradition is in principle philosophical, and it would be inappropriate to burden other traditions with such designation. To call Hinduism, Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism, shamanic pronouncements philosophical would be an imposition of external and thus unfitting terms—one could even say it would be an insult and just another form of colonialism. The dilemma is obvious: we, just as

the others, are subject to our cultural “unconscious” or “unconscious drives,” “economic” causes, and yet we also want rights, including the rights of the others to be subject to their cultural unconscious, and at the same time we negate the communicating, dialogical subject—not only for ourselves, but for the others. After all, the others do not speak; it is their culture and their discourses that speak and thus negate the other as being essentially a human. In principle, the equivalence of the power of all discourses is used by any autocrat, theocrat, or dogmatist to justify his/her claim for actions and a social system which he/she might rule. To ask that they respect universal human rights, or even tolerance of differences and others is, so the argument goes, to deny their cultural right and to accept another culture’s discourses, invented by “white dead men.” The question: who are these Eurocentric dead men?

## **Societies**

It is a common and mistaken mixture of society with political society. The principle of the former is that “man rules over man by power,” such that in most cases there is a minor autocratic or even theocratic group which rules over the population without any public domain or rights—not even the right to speak, since even speech was restricted to the “lords.” Societies are, in principle, based on power, and to call such societies “political” makes no sense. It is like saying organized crime is political. Thus, when Machiavelli (2016) separated politics from ethics, he did not realize that one can have numerous ethics in political society without abolishing political ethos. The prince had power, and perhaps his “ethics” was a claim that he knew what is “good” for society, but his society was not allowed to be political—that is, to participate in public affairs or decisions. Any tendency toward autocracy is a tendency to abolish democracy and thus to destroy political ethos. Such autocrats might have their specific ethic, such as is the case in Hungary, but political ethos is abandoned. Moreover, autocrats are neither free nor responsible; they are driven by power and selfish motives. Indeed, purely in social power confrontations, there are no laws which would restrict the power of autocrats. Lenin was laughing about the killing of ten million kulaks, and no one could tell him that his actions were illegal. Autocratic “ethics” is “might makes right.” This is also the case with theocracies. When Machiavelli did not say that a population can have its ethics, all he allowed was that the might of the prince would not tolerate some ethics separated from his power. In principle, social composition is simple: the rulers, whether emperors, kings, theocrats, oligarchs and ideologues, are the law and the owners of everything in their societies. The only media that are allowed is a publication of their interests.

Let us look briefly at such society—first, a pure rulership by an emperor, so well exhibited by the Persian empire. There is the celestial Lord-King, his Queen, their retinue, and their subservient supplicants and worshipers, each with a sign of appointed and anointed rank and hierarchical position. This is precisely the imperial regality, and in the final analysis the mythological composition coincides with the ruling composition. This is to say, there is no legitimation here, since the

mythical does not justify the imperial deeds but is identical with them. The emperor can claim without a fear of contradiction that “we are divine.” Thus, we find that the Persian imperial morphology and the Judeo-Christian-Islamic composition also coincide. The ruling emperor is the lawgiver and the law, and there should be neither deviations nor questions concerning the power of such law. The language here is one of edicts and imperatives. All that lives and exists belongs to the emperor, and all must obey and be subordinate to the edicts, indeed must act in ways that would constitute a support and enhancement of the edicts. No one can question the imperial force of the law, specifically when the law coincides with the “divine making of the world.” The imperial powers make the world by their commands, and their divinities make the world by uttering appropriate words. There is no public participation, and there is no freedom or responsibility—all social events and activities are marshalled to support the power of the ruler. We know about the palace intrigues and the opportunists waiting in the wings to topple the ruling powers and occupy the ruling throne. Any change of heads in this kind of society is not a revolution, but a disposal of one ruler by another (Kautilya 2000).

We come to the Russian Byzantine Empire; being similar to the Persian, it is purely autocratic, where the head of the empire is also the head of church. In brief, when he speaks, God speaks. The Tsar is also the head of a family and a ruler of aristocracy; the latter swore allegiance to the Tsar, and he appointed them to serve in various posts of the state. As in all autocracies, those closest to the emperor were most dangerous—they knew the weaknesses of their lord. Also, as in all autocratic empires, there were family murders and ascent to the throne by another family member—it was simply a tradition. The emperor spreads his power and territory as much as his finances and cunning could bear. After all, Russian empire expanded both east and west (incorporating the Baltic states). All is well, but the Tsar should have studied Kautilya’s writings warning about opportunists. And they came, until Lenin concentrated them under his domination and total discipline, allowing him to overthrow the Tsar with his family and aristocracy and to become an autocrat of the same empire. The first task is to eliminate all the vestiges of claims to the throne by the old aristocracy by the educated, the talented, and the productive, and to hand the reins of power to the dull and illiterate, allowing them the pretense that they are “the people” in whose name the new autocracy is empowered to be masters and lords over everything. As an opportunist, Lenin and his cohorts appropriated all the wealth of the entire empire and subjected the population to total control by his opportunists, creating a system of suspicion where everyone might be a spy for the new autocracy. The so-called “collectivization” for economic equality and benefit was a veil; in reality collectivization was the best means to herd the “people” (those who survived mass murder) so they could be watched, controlled, and punished and become completely subservient and docile. There was no Russian revolution: in principle, a traditional autocracy was overthrown by opportunistic autocracy without any essential changes for the population. In fact, the opportunistic autocracy was more ruthless and arbitrary. In brief, such a revolution is not political, since before and after the revolution, no public sphere for everyone’s participation was allowed.

All laws came from the new autocracy. One can even say that in such cases there are no lies or propaganda. They cannot be caught because there is no one to catch them.

A brief reminder of the ways an opportunist functions in relationship to his gang of supporters and conspirators: Beginning with Lenin, any of his supporters who showed any deviation from his momentary edicts as a challenge to his authority were eliminated—as was the case when the sailors who won military battles for Lenin, and who requested a participation in public decisions, were destroyed along with millions of peasants. After Lenin's death, Stalin had trials to condemn just about all the leading party members for "betrayal" and, of course, as a possible threat to his total rule. Poor Trotsky, who escaped to Mexico, could not avoid Stalin's power. After all, Trotsky was one of the leading members of the party and thus a threat to Stalin. The people were told to cheer the trials and condemn the traitors of the revolution. Hitler and his "party" were extremely adept at finding opportunities to take over Germany and then to destroy all "enemies" internal and external. In the Russian empire (the Soviet Union) and in Germany (the Third Reich), there were purges and elimination of any sign which would threaten the "leader" and his absolute power. There is no need to go into the cunning of forming "alliances" or even treaties as somehow valid; valid, yes—for momentary convenience to lull the "enemies." The point is this: in societies, there is no communication ethos to speak the truth, to discuss public issues, to have a separation of governmental powers or an open and critical education. Indeed, the latter is the most dangerous virus. The actions of the rulers are not public but private, and all media are their possession.

## **Political Society and Communicative Ethos**

In Western philosophies, there is a background admission placing humans in their limit (*peras*) as a principle (*arche*), which becomes a basis of classical philosophy: to understand the essence of anything, one must understand it from its limit, such that, if the limit is transgressed, an entity will no longer be the same kind of being. In case of humans, they are fallible, responsible to correct their mistakes, and dialogical. The inclusion of responsibility also demands freedom, since a being determined by any cause is not free and, resultantly, not responsible. Moreover, a fallible human is dialogical. In open dialogue one becomes aware of one's inadequacies and with others can extend one's understanding and correct mistakes. All communication must be dialogical: to speak is to speak about something with someone, even if that someone is "myself." Yet it is also granted that the "something" about which we communicate is the criterion which determines the veracity of what is being said. After all, we speak about trees, fruit, kings, culture, theories, ideologies, mythological figures, morality, and even "freedom of speech." Since the latter involves "speech about anything," then its range and restrictions also involve rights in the context of other human rights. This context is democracy, and our focus on dialogue involves freedom of speech, which is a major part of the ethos of communication.

So far, our discussion suggested a “revolutionary” transformation of society into “political society” where humans, in a free dialogue with each other, establish the common laws by which they will live as free and responsible citizens. Such responsibility is depicted in a direct human way in the myth of Prometheus (Aeschylus 2012), who rebels against Zeus’s edict that forbids fire to humans. The supreme authority, Zeus, in his anger, denies humans the use of fire. Divine intervention initiates human suffering, if not tragedy. Prometheus, moved by the unnecessary suffering of humans, steals fire from the gods and gives it to humans. Here we have practical assistance for which Prometheus does not ask anything. He does not wish to rule or to have others follow his way of life. He does not form a party or demands to be a judge on the court. There is no revenge present against anyone or an obedience to some divine command. He simply regards Zeus’s law as unjust and, indeed, premised on one aspect of tragedy: revenge by Zeus against humans. What is interesting is that the Greeks accepted the action of such a rebel as a noble violation of bad or even unjust laws—although, speaking formally, the act of Prometheus was “bad” or illegal. His personal nobility and his positive attitude and qualities outweigh his formally bad act. His aim was to help others, but with this help he changes the notion of justice. Even Zeus accepts this change by admitting that his edict prohibiting fire to humans was a bad law.

This means that there arises a possibility to challenge any authority or law, to interrogate them sensibly, and thus to change them. Every position, every tradition, even the thinking of the highest figures can be interrogated openly and reasonably, can be investigated, analyzed, and requested to justify itself in a full light of public and poly-logical debate or in a public gathering. If a given position, even an accepted tradition, cannot be justified by reason and by the well-being of humans, then it can be openly rejected. This is the reason that classical Greece comprised an arena of intellectual tension among multiple positions, views, all calling for an open public in whose context such a tension could be maintained. This composition of awareness comprises the ground of every person’s rationality and responsibility. It must be noted that this architectonic also founds the modern Western democratic understanding, although articulated by different cultural symbolic designs. The worldly secularism of Prometheus is a personality which is independent from any authority. If he makes mistakes, he admits them and corrects them. After all, Prometheus had decided to support Zeus in the battle against the Titans, but after the battle he recognized that Zeus had become a tyrant. Thus, he decides to correct his mistake by rebelling against Zeus’s laws simply because he decided that such laws are practically unjust. Here the highest authority is negated as unacceptable in principle without any question concerning one’s own benefits. Here, humanity is in charge of its own affairs and demands that gods no longer intervene. In this classical Greek mythology, one develops the notion of personal responsibility for one’s own action. Although one can make mistakes, he takes full responsibility for such mistakes and deems it his duty to correct them. While not having ultimate wisdom, humans are depicted as capable of managing their own affairs as long as they can exclude the cosmic, clashing forces from their polis.

For classical thinking, so well expressed by Athenian philosophers such as Aristotle (1943), man is *zoon politikon*, a political being. In this context, there is another designation by Aristotle: human beings are *zoon logon echon*, a being who lives in accordance with *logos*, and thus man is a being of communication; *logos* is both reason and the order of the world. Life in a political community is coextensive with the abovementioned communicative ethos, which, despite such variations as habit, nature, and even morality, is a principle whose denial is a contradiction. We are to be reminded that this ethos includes the recognition of human fallibility and thus a need for dialogical space in which open discussion of any subject matter can both reveal and correct our mistakes. This space is where our human essence is manifested, and, in classical thinking, to be human one must participate and maintain this space where freedom and responsibility can flourish. This means that the very existence of a person is identical with public participation in all matters. For Athens, anyone who is not participating in public affairs is not “apolitical” but incapable of being. Meanwhile, any thesis, any claim made in public can be interrogated, accepted, rejected, and asked to be rationally justified. This brings us to the famous case of Socrates.

While Socrates participated in official public duties, such as courts, he also engaged Athenians in discussions about many topics, from poetry to love, leadership, power, justice and truth (Stone 2015). Some might see a difference between his participating in official duties and his engaging citizens in conversations in the marketplace or in private gatherings, such that the latter were regarded as “private” and the former as “public” – political. Such a distinction is modern and does not apply to Socrates. This is evident in the famous trial of Socrates. He was accused of “corrupting” the young and many other discursive misdeeds, such as questioning the authority of some Homeric texts. It is obvious that his questioning “bothered” various citizens, since Socrates disclosed that their claims could not withstand rational interrogation. This means that Socratic public debates “at the market” exhibited his duty as a free and responsible citizen to speak freely and debate any question in any public setting. Such activity was, in principle, any citizen’s responsibility, and to prohibit such an activity was to deny citizens’ freedom to act responsibly and thus to be political. In his trial, Socrates did not add some kind of meta-domain but reminded the citizens that they too must exercise their duty to engage in dialogue on any subject matter as free and responsible citizens. To forbid this exercise to one person—Socrates—is to contradict this responsibility and thus to destroy Athens as a democracy. In principle, Socrates pointed out that his “search for truth” anywhere and anytime is identical with the maintenance of Athenian polis. Thus, Socrates was the citizen who did not rise above the communicative ethos of the polis but was a responsible reminder to Athenians as to their duty as citizens. In brief, for Socrates, his freedom of speech as a form of engaging in dialogue was identical with Athenian political and communicative ethos.

In principle, this ethos includes the notion that philosophy, with its search for truth by fallible humans, is also a public affair, such that every claim is open to testing in public debate. In this regard, the very philosophical dialogue is identical with the maintenance of the free dialogical public space where all can participate.

As a result, political society is philosophical, and philosophy is political. Society, dominated by individual or group interests, is not free. Only a political society that provides a public arena for the articulation of private and public concerns is free. In this sense, political society provides a context for philosophy, and philosophy defends the political arena for free dialogue. Indeed, not being socially laden, political society is in principle philosophical, since its denial would be a denial of the search for truth unhindered by social interests. In addition, the dialogical freedom in a political society is coextensive with the freedom toward the world, comprising what can be called an openness for search for truth. Thus, freedom can be maintained by following the freely established laws and rules, and wisdom must respect the parameters of beings. The latter is reserved for the exposition of the basic principles that constitute the very essence of nature. The latter has been a debate within and among major philosophers, yet all of them, despite some variations, understood all natural events from their limits. Every being is determined to be a specific kind of being by the limit which cannot be transgressed, and to grasp things from their limit is to understand their essence, things as they are in themselves. One might call this understanding Eurocentrism, but without it we run into power and arbitrariness.

But to understand things as they are in themselves, knowledge must be unimpeded—free from instrumental, pragmatic power and other concerns if it is to attain the status of *theoria*. The latter is devised to make present the very essence of what anything is. No doubt, the task is difficult, and many arguments were presented to challenge whether a given *theoria* truly made present the essence of some thing. Yet such challenges revealed both human fallibility and the ability and responsibility to correct mistakes. Yet again, mistakes are corrected not by some willful invention or trick, but by going back to the presence of things of this world. It is not humans or some of their divinities who are judges of the world, but the worldly things judge human understanding. After all, the rule is, “Not me but the *logos* follow,” demanding that knowledge will be worthy of theory if it follows the way the reason of the world comprises the order of all things revealed by the place and limit of each.

When a political society begins to seek out public enemies, to monitor books people read, to shift education from open institutions to technical training centers, to have mass media persons blatantly lying and then using all sorts of rhetorical ploys to justify their lies and thus rhetorically to proliferate such lies, then to speak of democracy is nonsense. The citizen who ceases to participate and, hence, to maintain democracy has also become a bearer of irresponsibility to the extent that she will base any participation only if her private interests are at issue. The public interests, meanwhile, have been reduced to power relationships, confrontations, and proliferation. No one can make the citizen democratic; it is his duty to recoup the public domain and insist on its maintenance. One can no longer count the more recent texts proclaiming the “failure of liberal institutions” and the success of autocracies as the best way to serve the public’s well-being—provided that the public will not be involved in public decisions. Then there are ideologies within the nominal democracies which claim to represent the true democracy without any engagement with other ideologies of other persuasion. Add to that

nationalistic rhetoric with racial undertones, and we are floundering without any sense of the basic issues of what democracy is, what its institutions are, and what the dangers of contemporary attacks on such institutions could be.

Most talks of freedom of speech assume such freedom but fail to enlighten the public as to the essence of such freedom. There is a difference between freedom of choice and that of autonomy. The former usually has a background cause or motive. Thus, one can choose to invest in real estate or in stocks, but the choice is driven by greed. Autonomy is an unconditional self-legislature uncompelled by any force apart from rational dialogue. This distinction leads to another essential difference: one is free to lie, to promote hate, to threaten with damnation, but such a freedom of speech is not free speech and thus not responsible. The latter is an unconditional telling of truth, acceptance and correction of mistakes, and is thus responsible. When one inspires hate and claims that he is not responsible for the results of his speech, one is correct, but although he exercised the freedom of speech, his speech was not free. This distinction demands of the citizen an understanding of events, issues, topics of discussion, and, resultantly, education.

## **Responsible Self-Founding**

This leads to a question: what kind of relationships must there be between humans which would allow the emergence of a political society? This is to say, what distinguishes political communities from other human relationships? The answer offers a unique relationship between the human as a rational being and the human as a political being. Most kinds of human relationships are based on common purposes, and indeed the origin of political society might have numerous common purposes; yet there is an essential difference which belongs to the founding itself. This is to say the founding and the existence of the political society are inextricably related. While we have other purposes toward which we aim in common, the political community is its own purpose which we must maintain. The very purpose of human relationship in political community is this very relationship, i.e., the purpose of the origination of the community is the very existence of the community. The community is not a means for other purposes or a common purpose; rather, the unification of humans into a political community is its own purpose. The origination and continuation of political community is as such a fundamental purpose in itself: it is self-founded. Thus the political community is not comparable to any other human relationship; the relationship of humans, as a purpose in itself, and not a relationship for the sake of other purposes, is what maintains for the human the source of its own essence. This means that the very origin of being human can be maintained and preserved only in a political community. In this sense, the human as human must be essentially political if he or she is to preserve his original human essence (Kacerauskas and Mickunas 2020).

This should be regarded more closely in terms of various levels at which the relationship between the human and the political community is fundamental. What constitutes the human in one basic sense is his rationality, i.e., the capacity to function in the world in light of man's own purposes. But in order to manifest

his rationality, man must establish a political community. How so? The human, as rational, is empowered to function in accord with purposes, and purposes are representations of the future and at the same self-representations of man as to what he is and what he wants to accomplish. But a purposive being of this kind is a free being. Yet he is constantly working with others for common purposes, and, hence, his freedom is constantly delimited against the others; his freedom exists in the context of life with others in such a way that this life might lead to one group becoming the "masters" while another becomes the "slaves." Here the very essence of the human is completely subverted. How is one to avoid such a subversion? The freedom of each in the multifarious relations with others is guaranteed when the free activity of an individual is tied to a condition: the consensus of free members with one another to the extent that the consensus is guaranteed by universally accepted laws. This condition circumscribes and determines the essence of public rights, comprising the totality of laws which rule the freedom of each in relationship to freedoms of others.

The laws that secure each person's freedom are not always followed—i.e., not everyone follows the law for the sake of or due to respect of the law. But what would it mean to say that someone follows the law for the sake of the law? First, it would mean that such a person respects freedom (he is not submitting to some dictating or necessitating impulses). Second, the respect of such freedom and hence the law is not some natural occurrence but calls for constant maintenance of the law and its free origins; after all, such a law is not simply there, but is a continuous "ought," not in some moral sense, but in a public-political sense. Third, this constant "insistence" means that freedom is not a pre-given condition, but an established condition and hence requires maintenance. This maintenance is based on public, communicative ethos where free speech is guaranteed. As noted, such speech is free if it speaks the truth about a given subject matter and the latter is a criterion to determine the correctness of such speech. While there is interest laden speech which mainly does not address a subject matter for what it is, such speech is not communicative—its subject matter is empty and irresponsible.

No doubt, there is a specific ethos in relationship to right in the public domain: First, a free recognition and acceptance of the laws which stem from mutual freedom of each individual in relationship to the "ought," i.e., the maintenance of the rights of each, and second, the continuous engagement of the individuals in the public domain to ensure that the laws meet the condition of maintaining the public domain of rights and freedoms. This means that the laws are not eternal but must be wisely modified in order to accommodate the public requirements of interrelating individuals. The freedom of any member is balanced by the freedoms of all members. This, of course, permits the laws to change in accordance with changing human relationships and public needs. Legitimate power stems from free establishment of public sphere and thus the carrying out of the laws. Indeed, it is possible that societies might mislead and suppress the political sphere for the sake of a quick fix in the domain of private aims and interests, yet such a society, on its own basis, cannot account for the continuous appearance of voices calling for "rights," calling for "public participation" in the establishment of laws, calling for freedoms; these very voices constitute a

reminder that pure social life, even under the guise of “politics” which serves the “group” interests, is basically a despotic life, devoid of political and communicative ethos.

## **Education**

There cannot be any doubt that autonomy, responsibility, and rights are coextensive with knowledge. Ignorant people cannot make judgments in public dialogue without running the risk of being misled by all sorts of rhetorical ploys and interest manipulations. Education is a process from authority to autonomy—rational and free adjudication of issues based on knowledge. One must move through authority by those who know a subject matter and can articulate its intricacies, whether in sciences, literatures, social affairs, and even public institutions. But one must also grow out of being subjected to authority by mastering issues and complexities in principle of different fields of knowledge in order to make rational and thus autonomous decisions. Without such a process, the person cannot be responsible for his decisions, since the latter are blind and irrational. In this sense, education is another institution that is coextensive with the public domain of dialogue and, finally, autonomy and responsibility. This extends into the very domain of universal human rights to education as a continuation of all other rights to be an autonomous, equal, and responsible member of human public community. This is specifically important in an age where such public domain and universal rights to autonomy and equality are being assaulted by technocracy and materialistic reductionism of all functions of human life to cause and effect and hence to irresponsibility. By now it ought to be obvious that autonomy and equality are not pre-given empirical data but are phenomena that remain as long as we enact them. This is the case with education—a process from authority to autonomy—where autonomy is developed and finally exercised with full responsibility. This means that any refusal to participate in autonomous engagements is identical with the loss of autonomy (Fink 1978).

Publicly appointed officials are bound by the communicative ethos to maintain this arena and thus are called to communicate about public issues. Any communication that is based on obfuscation and designed to advance a particular group is inappropriate for this domain. In various ways, such a communication becomes a monologue and rejects the dialogical structure and exchange of information that is required to maintain the autonomy of the public. Seemingly, those who claim to have expertise in the design and manipulation of rhetorical images do not have anything to do with the public domain or free speech; rather, they add to the legitimation crisis that leads, finally, to public cynicism. Such rhetoric is not responsible and a disrespect of the public. It treats the latter as gullible and equally irresponsible. Of course, the users of such rhetoric have no respect for themselves. The political free press, as part and parcel of originating and maintaining the political society, serves all by providing information that is of public concern for educated and responsible persons.

Assume that one form a political society deals with its public affairs by establishing an institution of representative government. To be democratic, this government must meet certain conditions. First, any person appointed by the public is allowed to perform only what the public requests. All other activities purported to be for the sake of the public good are illegitimate. This stems from the view that the sole source of legitimation is public agreement. Public officials do not lead, but serve. Second, an election is a dialogical process. People offering to serve the public present their solutions to what they believe are important questions. If a person is appointed to office, such proposals become a covenant. This means that since the public agreed with the proposals and placed a candidate in office, this person is duty-bound to carry out the proposals. Any failure to do so is equivalent to breaking a binding agreement. These derelict officials have no legitimate claim to remain in office and thus must be dismissed from or leave office immediately. Depending on the public agreement, they might be prosecuted for criminal activities, i.e., for breaking the agreement with the public. Third, people who appear to serve the public should not only submit their proposals but, in light of public debates and input, should modify them. Dogmas of all types, whether ideological or moralistic, should not be treated as universal truths but, rather, as one person's proposals that should be open to possible discussion and modifications. In a political society a candidate's duty is not to expound on future hope and grand visions, such as "my dream of a better life" or "don't worry, be happy," but should articulate and communicate his or her concerns in public to reach an acceptable platform. This means that political dialogue is responsible for all the statements that are made. Yet in this sense, private interests, motivated by causes and irrational drives, conceal, if not abolish, rational, logical, and free discussion of issues.

Discussions need not be simplistic or without controversies. Yet a public discussion requires that political dialogue be understood. This dialogue is triadic: someone speaks to someone about something. The "something" is the subject matter of concern, which is addressed by a speaker and the public not as a passive listener but as an active partner. The dialogical process avoids the surface view, often paraded as fair and objective, that if two opposing opinions are presented, then the public has an understanding of an issue. A competent dialogue requires a thorough exposition of the subject matter prior to its obfuscation by the so-called "different viewpoints." A simple exposition of positions does not constitute objective information; the subject matter of each position is the essential component. In turn, direct participation in the public sphere requires that the public be cognizant of the subject matter to be discussed. Full rationality requires nothing less. It would be nonsensical to debate a public policy on nuclear energy without a thorough articulation of the effects, benefits, and risks of this form of energy. Clearly, the duty of everyone, and above all a candidate for office who claims to possess an ability to serve the public, is not only to be well versed on the issues that are important, but also to be able to introduce these topics intelligently for public consideration. We must understand that political dialogue as public is not simply about "politics." As was argued above, the political is the public domain of autonomous and equal persons. Accordingly, political dialogue

pertains to concerns that are significant to the public. Such an understanding excludes all informal arguments and the psychologization of issues. The term “psychologization” covers emotional appeals as well as rhetorical exhortations related to the use of images, rituals, and slogans. This *modus operandi* is designed to treat the individual not as autonomous and rational but as subject to manipulations and irrational outbursts. In effect, public issues are obfuscated. The current political figures are very adept at engaging in “informal fallacies.” Instead of addressing an issue, there is an immediate personal attack: “he is stupid, low-life scum, communist, fascist, insane, enemy of the people.” This is the complete abolition of communicative ethos.

If publicly appointed figures, or those running for public office, engage in this level of rhetorical obfuscations, they disqualify themselves from public service. This claim carries no moralistic undertones; it simply follows from the principle that the political is primarily public and relates to proposals for open discussions about public matters. No such justification as state secrets, known only to the leaders, can be used to either prevent public debate or to avoid addressing important public concerns. Presumed by this practice is that only the officials are in a position to decide what is good for everyone. This is known as paternalism and is modeled on the mistaken view of the political state as a family. Sure, there are temptations not to become embroiled in politics and to leave these activities to the government, but in this case the citizen has duties and surrenders his or her rights. This tendency may appear even in a representative democracy if the representatives begin to assume that all public problems can be resolved by the wisdom of the leaders. This ideology is obvious in the case of a charismatic representative’s appeal to the public. Such an appeal allows an official to pursue undebated his or her personal dogma, thus leading to disastrous results—so obvious from the popular “leadership” of recent years.

## **Free Press**

The input means a free press which cannot be hindered by ideological absolutes but must also engage in a dialogue on public issues. At the outset, such dialogue includes economy, education, and public health. None of these aspects can be private. For example, economy is at the outset “political economy” in the sense that it is a public institution; the public decides what aspects of economy will be private and what laws must delimit economic activities. The same applies to education, since the latter is designed to allow for responsible public citizens, equally capable of engaging in dialogue concerning all issues—fully cognizant that none have an absolute truth. The attack on such public institutions is an attack on individual rights and responsibilities as a citizen of a democratic society.

In a political society the press is not merely free to print or show anything at random. Instead, various events are supposed to be reported as they occur. Of course, there are various epistemological arguments concerning the possibility of reporting events without interpretive mediation, and no doubt these claims should make the public vary and remain critical. Yet the principle remains,

specifically in the domain of public affairs: in order to participate in the public domain, every citizen ought to be informed publicly about relevant affairs. This knowledge, together with its transmission by mass media, is a fundamental public institution of democracy. Indeed, one could plausibly contend that the transmission of information is coextensive with the continuous establishment and maintenance of the autonomous source of all laws and legitimation. An uninformed citizen is not in a position to comprehend public issues and to form a rational judgment. Moreover, this very knowledge is a condition for public dialogue, debate, and adjudication. The public domain and its participants as a process of constant self-maintenance includes at its core the necessity for information that is available to everyone, not simply for the sake of extraneous purposes, but as part of the ethos of democratic activity. This may be a difficult point to convey in an age that assumes the legitimacy of interest-laden, technical, and purposive rationality; yet, to speak in terms of mass media, the argument could be made that irrespective of the type of information, knowledge is offered for its own sake as an exercise of universal freedom to bring into the public domain the voices that create and maintain the polity. As was noted with respect to the dialogical domain, the freedom of the press does not originate with the right to free expression, but from the necessity in a political society to establish the public domain as a place for free and mutual understanding and the adjudication of issues. Thus, what is called the free press should be the facilitator of dialogue and, as an institution, play a leading role in keeping this discourse open and public. The activity of free press, in this sense, is coextensive with communicative ethos. If the press has the freedom to report and to inform, then members of the press have an obligation and duty to defend the public arena wherein open and uncompelled debates are carried out. In a political society the institution of a free press is one of the basic modes of communication. In this sense, there is no such thing as apolitical reporting. This is to say, at this level the free press is basically political communication prior to any question of ideology or any other agenda (Kacerauskas and Mickunas 2024).

Within a political society, various technical processes are a matter for public discussion. As indicated earlier, any interest that in any way enters the public arena becomes subject to the citizenry and, by extension, to the free press. In democracy, the public must be informed, and the ethos of free press requires the reporting of events that interest and affect the public. Crucial to the coextension between democracy as its own purpose and the free press as an institution is the principle that whenever members of the press publish information, they are part of developing and maintaining the autonomous public domain. The public's right to information is not natural, but political. Personally, it might be more convenient and beneficial to a member of the press to serve the interests of the public officials and their friends by publishing the "right" stories. Yet such a subjection becomes instrumental, purposive, and interest-laden, and thus social and not political. A press that is subjected to these conditions is no longer a part of the political domain, but merely markets specific commodities owned by a seller. This type of newspaper is in private business and sells "designer news" or, bluntly, provides technical knowledge to public officials that is counter to public interests. Thus, free

press is not to say whatever one wills, but to serve the public domain and its dialogical autonomy. It exercises “free press” and not “freedom of press.”

While one must report the news, one need not stop at this level. A free press, if it is free, is also responsible for informing the public what the officials are hiding behind the obfuscations, theatrics, rhetoric, and equivocations. At the same time, what is relevant to the public must be exposed to ensure that public figures explain their rhetoric or the introduction of myths, moralities, or ideologies into the public arena. Clearly, the institution of a free press is one of the key institutions of political society and is linked inextricably to the continuous maintenance of such a polity. It will not do to argue that the main mass media is currently dominated by huge enterprises which are interest-laden and present prejudicial views to serve such interests. In brief, alternative media must have an equal voice to present other viewpoints. No doubt, but it is important to note that the very institution of the public domain allows alternative media to have a say and maintain a plural public. Yet it must also be clear that while the mainstream media might be dominated by interests, it cannot be counted as journalistic mass media designed to maintain the public domain of autonomy and equality, but simply as a social and private institution engaged in advertising private ideologies, moralities, and other designer wares. If the alternative media are to serve the public domain, they cannot fall into the same trap of presenting their own private and social interests but must counter the mainstream media by filling the gap where the mainstream has failed.

With all the seeming failures of democracy, our discussion has silently granted that democracy is not a system but a constant self-creation and maintenance, posing its own challenges and creating the ways of overcoming them. In this sense, it cannot be overthrown without ending up with a society in which not freely established laws rule, but one entity or a group rule over others. But this is also a destruction of autonomous, equal, and responsible humans and a return to slavery.

## **Postscript**

The best indicator of the collapse of dialogical communicative ethos is the dismantling of democratic institutions—the separation of powers: administrative, legislative, and judicial. In all autocracies, whether Hitler’s, Stalin’s, Trump’s, or Orbán’s, there is an abolition of the separation of powers as a guarantee of human rights and autonomy. While the United States claims to have such separation, the judicial and legislative bodies are at the service of the administrative. The latter is also abolishing other institutions, with free press as enemy of the people and universal education.

The latter, providing a development of critical thinking, dialogical engagement, autonomy, and equality in research, is subjected to attacks as liberal and communist. In its place there should be training for technological skills for jobs, but no discussion of politics, foreign or domestic policy, equality, or historical facts of slavery. History is what the sole, ruling institution—the administrative—

will decide. Thus, the rights and responsibilities of the public are abolished, and we return to society where one monological power in society rules over the population.

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## The Moral Foundations of Narrative as Grounding for Dialogue

Preston Carmack

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**Abstract:** This essay examines the moral foundations of dialogue as being inescapably tied to an understanding of narrative ground, drawing from the work of Alasdair MacIntyre and Ronald C. Arnett. By building upon a set of coordinates for navigating the interplay of dialogue and narrative through publicly told moral stories, this paper reminds us not only of the moral foundations of dialogue but also its narrative foundations. Furthermore, it emphasizes the importance of reconnecting dialogic relationships and narratives through these publicly told moral stories.

**Keywords:** narrative; communication ethics; dialogue; moral stories

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Alasdair MacIntyre, the Catholic ethicist and philosopher, warns about the dangers of logical positivism and the larger tradition of neoliberalism (MacIntyre 1981, 1988, 1994, 1999). Part of what concerns MacIntyre is the tendency of positivism, as an intellectual movement, to bracket questions of morality off from questions of community, politics, public life, and scientific inquiry. As one of MacIntyre’s biographers summarizes, “By disregarding the perspective of the good embedded in stories and traditions, the individual loses the very foundation of practical rationality” (Perreau-Saussine 2022, 131). For MacIntyre, human community is intimately tied to human rationality; the two are inseparable, constitutive of one another, and cannot be bracketed off from questions of morality (MacIntyre 1981).

The break between morality and rationality becomes especially concerning when applied to the realm of human dialogue. Voices such as Mikhail Bakhtin (1981), Leslie Baxter (2011), Martin Buber (2002), François Cooren (2010), and Lisbeth Lipari (2014) repeatedly emphasize the importance of a contextually dependent understanding of dialogue, grounded in the presupposition that a moral foundation is significant. In her essay on “Some Questions of Moral Philosophy,” Hannah Arendt (1994) points to the dangers posed to communities by the collapse of moral foundations. Arendt (1993) also develops this theme further in *Between Past and Future*, where she posits tradition as a lifeline that anchors us as humans between the past and the future. Similarly, Michael H.

Mitias (2021, 2024) reminds us that sacred moral ground is what anchors dialogue. When the moral foundations of dialogue are ruptured or threatened, our connections to larger narrative structures are threatened.

This essay explores the moral foundations of dialogue as being rooted in narrative, as defined by MacIntyre and Ronald C. Arnett. According to Arnett (2002, 2005), a narrative is composed of three primary components: publicly told moral stories, practices, and a community that accepts and adheres to those moral stories and practices. This essay seeks to establish a connection between narrative and dialogue that is specifically predicated on the nature of publicly told moral stories as the first component of narrative. It is from these narratives that human-shaped communicative meaning emerges in various ways, including through dialogue. The first section of this essay explores MacIntyre's concern about the separation of morality from human life. The second part closely engages Arnett's work at the intersection of dialogue studies and narrative. The final section of this essay builds upon both of these coordinates to offer a set of coordinates for navigating the important connections between dialogue and narrative through publicly told moral stories, as well as ways to care for dialogue through the care of publicly told moral stories in the context of narratives enacted within communities. Dialogue does not take place in a vacuum; it is intimately connected to the moral stories that give shape to the narratives we live our lives within. These moral stories provide scripts for practices that communities buy into. In connecting dialogue to narrative and public moral stories, this essay reiterates not only the importance of the moral foundations of dialogue, but also the narrative foundations of dialogue and how we can promote the health of dialogic relationships and narratives by reconnecting with publicly told moral stories.

## **Part I: Publicly Told Moral Stories as the Foundation of Narrative**

Within the field of communication, MacIntyre is often credited as a source of inspiration for the development of a theoretical understanding of narrative (Arnett 1987; Fisher 1984; Fritz 2020). Both Walter Fisher, in his narrative paradigm (1987), and Arnett (2002), in his recasting of narrative as ground, draw heavily on MacIntyre (Fritz 2020). For Fisher (1984), MacIntyre provides an understanding of humans as first and foremost storytelling creatures. Humans make sense of the world, their environment, and their place within it all through stories. These stories are told in the context of communities, embodied within individual persons. These coordinates gave rise to Fisher's (1984) framing of narrative fidelity and narrative rationality as ways of determining the validity of stories as making sense of the world. Arnett, coming from a different theoretical background of dialogue and peace studies, built upon Fisher's work to expand the understanding of narrative (Fritz 2020; Kearney and Mancino 2024). For Arnett (2002, 2005), narratives are not just simply stories we tell or use to make sense of the world; it is the very ground underneath our feet. As such, it is made up of three primary components: publicly told moral stories, narrative practices, and a community that

buys into the stories and practices. This interpretation gives a sort of ontological spaciousness to the idea of community, as well as a sense of responsibility tied to narrative, that is perhaps lost in Fisher's understanding of the narrative paradigm (Carmack 2025).

At times, it can be easy to lose sight of the scope of the rest of MacIntyre's project in light of the implications of his ideas that lay the foundations for Fisher and Arnett's conceptions of narrative. However, it is important to keep in mind that MacIntyre's usage of the term "narrative" can refer both to narrative as ground and to narrative as story (Carmack 2025). In *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, MacIntyre (1981) sets the stage by linking narrative to virtue structures. The primary thrust of the latter half of MacIntyre's work, which is the work that he is most known for, starting with *After Virtue* (1981), is concerned with the moral foundations of society (Schneewind 1982; Hochschild 2023). At the heart of his scholarship, MacIntyre is a moral philosopher and an ethicist, not a scholar of communication or narrative theorist. This is important to take stock of because it reorients us around what mattered to MacIntyre and thus colored the larger portrait of his work.

For MacIntyre, questions of morality were at the bedrock of human interaction and existence in the world (Perreau-Saussine 2022). To try to lay claim to some sort of neutral, objective, or morality-free ground from which to analyze human existence is a misguided endeavor at best. MacIntyre's early philosophical work was heavily influenced by the social currents of the post-World War II era (Murphy 2003; Perreau-Saussine 2022). With the Allies victorious, the overwhelming question of the historical moment was what philosophical, political, cultural, and moral order would be the one to fill the vacuum in the nations that had been defeated or left ravaged by the war (May 2012; McKenzie 2023). This existential contestation had its roots not just in current events, but in philosophical movements and narratives (Sisson 2024). It was a contest of ideas: a contest of capitalism versus socialism, of the philosophies of the Enlightenment versus post-imperialist Russia (Sisson 2024). It was a question of whose justice and which rationality would fill the vacuum left by World War II as countries and peoples were rebuilt (MacIntyre 1988; Sisson 2024).

Post-war Great Britain in the 1940s and 1950s was no different. MacIntyre found himself part of a new generation of intellectuals for whom the socialist ideas that had been radical in the 1920s and 1930s prior to the Second Great War were now in ascendency (Perreau-Saussine 2022). Following its landslide victory in July of 1945, the Labour Party was in power, and many of the once radical ideas of social democracy were being implemented by the government of Clement Attlee (Beer 2020; Beckett 2015). Attlee's government implemented reforms that would become bedrock for Great Britain's political system for generations to come. These reforms included the creation of a universal free healthcare system in the form of the National Health Service (NHS) in 1948, the implementation of a comprehensive social security system, the nationalization of key industries and public utilities, the launch of large-scale urban development and housing building programs, the decoupling of Great Britain from her colonies, and a strong support for international cooperation in the United Nations and NATO (Page and Silburn

1999). Although voters would return power to the Conservative Party in 1951, led by Winston Churchill, the Labour Party had in many ways achieved its major objectives.

The victory of the Labour Party presented a quandary for the younger generation of socialist thinkers, sometimes referred to as the “New Left,” who were discontent with the complacency of the Labour Party’s old guard as well as disillusioned with the project of social democracy (Hall 2010). The New Left was particularly critical of Labour’s stance on foreign policy, social issues, and the structures of the democratic socialist state. These ideological differences were both philosophical and political (Hall 2010; Matthews 2013). MacIntyre was a part of this group of thinkers who were frustrated with the desire of the Old Guard to rest on their laurels, to proclaim victory—not only in the wake of victory over Adolf Hitler and the Third Reich, but victory over old ideas, Victorian mindsets—and to lay down the fight (Perreau-Saussine 2022).

In addition to their pushback against the policies of the Labour Party, there were two watershed moments that precipitated a largescale abandonment of idealism regarding Stalinism and social democracy. Following the victory of the Second World War, Stalinism and its policies in Russia seemed attractive to certain parts of the left in the West (Perreau-Saussine 2022). Especially early on, the socialist reforms of Stalin were held up as a model for the kind of changes that could be implemented in the West as well (Matthews 2013). However, that outlook quickly soured in the wake of the 1956 Soviet repression of the Hungarian Uprising (Gotzler 2019). Stuart Hall, in a 2010 article for the *New Left Review*, paints a picture of the stamping out of the Hungarian Revolution by Soviet tanks juxtaposed with the invasion of the Suez Canal by British and French tanks. The two events, which took place within days of one another, highlighted the failures of Stalinism on the one hand and the broken promises of social democracy on the other.

These twin visions shattered the rose-tinted glasses that MacIntyre and many of his peers had around Stalinism in particular and socialism more broadly (Perreau-Saussine 2022). For MacIntyre, the 1950s and 1960s were a season of attempting to reconcile the Marxist ideas of his youth with the realities of the world around him (Perreau-Saussine 2022). MacIntyre’s first book, *Marxism: An Interpretation* (1953), celebrates the Marxist emphasis on human agency and practice while, at the same time, raising a warning about what he saw as a problematic shift in later Marxist thought toward determinism. MacIntyre (1953) took issue with strains of German ideology that influenced a deterministic social stance in Marx and Engels’ work. Even in the very early iterations of his philosophical outlook, including in his first book, MacIntyre took issue with modern liberal individualism (Beadle and Moore 2020; MacIntyre 1953). In the book, he positions Marxism as counter to modern liberal individualism’s push to isolate individuals and dissolve ties that bind humanity together. MacIntyre saw values, through a Marxist lens, as being more than just individual preference or choice, but as having a societal context to them. He situated morality within the contextual reality of community. Rather than condoning modernity’s break with

rules and tradition, he saw those structures as an inescapable part of human nature and part of what enables human action (MacIntyre 1953, 1971).

Although MacIntyre became disillusioned with some of the ideas of Marxism and socialism as a political movement, especially Stalinism, one of the foundational cornerstones of his thought that we see quite early on was his suspicion of the modern neoliberalism, as expressed in philosophy, economics, and politics (MacIntyre 1953, 1959). There are two major concerns that MacIntyre has with neoliberalism that seem helpful to unpack at this juncture. One of these concerns appears very early on in MacIntyre's scholarship; this is the positivists' divorce of morality from the public sphere. The second major concern we will explore is the rise of emotivism.

Especially in *Against the Self Images of the Age* (1971), a collection of essays originally published prior to the 1970s, MacIntyre takes issue with the philosophical movement known as logical positivism and its attempt to apply the methodological framework of the natural sciences to human life and morality. Logical positivism was a philosophical movement developed in the 19th century out of the Enlightenment and rooted in an empiricist framing of reality (Weinberg 2000). It emphasized the importance of objectivity, value neutrality, and universal predicative laws at the expense of a contextual understanding of human existence. For MacIntyre, this divorce of historical, social, and teleological roots from subjective human existence was deeply problematic (Perreau-Saussine 2022). Perhaps the most concerning aspect of positivism is the way in which it attempts to divorce morality and questions of morality from public life and from the pursuit of knowledge.

Part of the danger of the positivist position that MacIntyre raises the alarm over is the bracketing of moral foundations off from human activity. In his 1966 book *A Short History of Ethics*, MacIntyre critiques positivism's influence on moral philosophy, arguing that moral concepts are historically contingent, not timeless or universal. Society and the institutions that comprise it shape conceptualizations of morality. As such, the history of society and its institutions is an important part of understanding moral frameworks. He also critiques the illusion of value neutrality that positivism brought to certain spheres of human life, such as technology and medicine. From a MacIntyrean perspective, especially as portrayed in *A Short History of Ethics*, logical positivism directly contributed to the impoverishment and fragmentation of modern moral discourse, which has left us bereft of a moral language of sufficient substance.

MacIntyre's critique of logical positivism is part of a larger pushback against Cartesian dualism that began to appear in the middle half of the 20th century (Kind 2018). Other voices pushing against the Cartesian mind-body split include figures from analytic philosophy such as Ludwig Wittgenstein ([1953] 2010) and existentialists such as Martin Heidegger ([1927] 2001), Gabriel Marcel ([1935] 1949), Jean-Paul Sartre ([1943] 2021), and Maurice Merleau-Ponty ([1945] 2013). For MacIntyre, the effect of this divorce was dire. In many ways, the concern about moral foundations was also echoed by some of the other leading voices of MacIntyre's generation and historical moment. This includes figures like Hannah Arendt, whose monograph *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*

([1963] 2006) reframed a post-mortem of what happened in the lead-up and implementation of the Third Reich's extermination of Jewish people during World War II.

*Arendt and the Erosion of the Moral Foundations of Society*

Through *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt banished the figment of an evil boogeyman who somehow stood outside of human experience to implement the atrocities of the Holocaust and reminded the world that it was ordinary people who consigned millions of fellow humans to concentration camps, dehumanizing medical experimentations, and extermination. Part of how they were able to commit these atrocities was through the bracketing of responsibility, of moral questions, from their actions: "What has come to light is neither nihilism nor cynicism, as one might have expected, but a quite extraordinary confusion over elementary questions of morality" (Arendt [1963] 2006, 319). Arendt unpacks this disconnect between morality and action in stark detail in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, as well as in her magisterial volume on *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1973). In his defense of his actions, Eichmann repeatedly stated that he was simply "doing his duty." According to his own testimony, he did not have personal animosity or hatred towards persons who were Jewish. He simply wanted to do his duty and sought personal advancement in his career.

For Arendt, the erosion of the moral foundations of society was personified in Adolf Eichmann's routine execution of what he saw as his duty. Instead of being a villainous iconoclast who could take the place of Adolf Hitler in the imagination of the public, he was a modest personality: meek-spoken, quiet, and altogether unassuming. The evil of Eichmann was a banal one.

Since Arendt's report on *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, other voices have pushed back against her diagnosis of the "banality of evil" that led an entire nation to attempt a systematic extermination of the Jewish people. Her interpretation of Eichmann's trial and the underlying causes of the Holocaust had multiple notable critics, including Gershom Scholem, a Jewish mystic and former friend of Arendt; Gideon Hausner, the chief prosecutor in the Eichmann trial; and the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) (Robin 2015). However, what is clear in Arendt's engagement with the social forces that enabled the Third Reich to commit its many atrocities is that many average, everyday, and ordinary German citizens did not set out to inflict the harm that they perpetrated. Rather, these atrocities were enabled by the divorcing of responsibility, of moral foundations, of tradition—of the things that anchor us to responsibility for the world—from human action. The themes of responsibility and human action recur in Arendt's corpus. *The Human Condition* (1958), in particular, examines and critiques modern society's prioritization of the *vita contemplativa*, or contemplative life, at the expense of the *vita activa*, or the active life. For Arendt, both the contemplative life and the active politically engaged life are important parts of the human condition. Arendt's work in this work and her posthumously published magnum opus on *The Life of the Mind* ([1977] 1981) point to the importance of creating space for both authentic political action and genuine contemplation. Without this space, the connection between

moral foundations and action is eroded, potentially leading to the kind of atrocities that transpired in the Second World War.

MacIntyre mirrors some of Arendt's concerns in his critique of positivism and its tendency to bracket questions of morality from action and the pursuit of knowledge across a range of disciplines and domains of human life. This critique would be further developed as a recurring theme in MacIntyre's thought throughout his long career. Perhaps the fullest articulation of MacIntyre's critique of the negative implications of logical positivism and the project of the Enlightenment is found in *After Virtue* (1981). *After Virtue* presented a vision of a world that was so disconnected from questions of virtue and morality that it was left only with artifacts of its existence, not the real understanding of what a life of virtue or morality would entail. This post-apocalyptic, morally dystopian universe could trace its roots back to MacIntyre's original critiques of the positivists. However, one of the major differences between MacIntyre's critique in *After Virtue* and his earlier concerns with positivism was the foundation from which he made those critiques. By the time he published *After Virtue*, MacIntyre had moved away from a Marxist lens toward a neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics framework that prioritized telos and ultimate human goods (Perreau-Saussine 2022). This would be even further developed as MacIntyre converted to Catholicism and more fully embraced Aristotelianism by way of Thomas Aquinas (Perreau-Saussine 2022).

For MacIntyre, what was needed in the wake of a lack of moral language was a reconnection to virtues and articulations of what an endpoint, purpose, or ultimate good for human flourishing might be—to reconnect people with telos. This vision has been misunderstood and misinterpreted by scholars on the left and the right (Carmack 2025). However, MacIntyre's articulation of the implementation of this vision is often less proscriptive than his critics or interpreters may presume (Perreau-Saussine 2022). It is a vision of a society, of community, that has its foundations in a particular moral tradition—whatever that tradition may be—and is anchored in a particular engagement with the questions of morality, not shying away from those or bracketing them off from any part of human experience. For MacIntyre, the great sin of neoliberalism is its adoption of positivism and the divorce of moral foundations from human experience.

This leads us to our second major point around MacIntyre's critique of modern liberalism, which has to do with the rise of emotivism. When he published *After Virtue* in 1981, it sparked a resurgence of virtue ethics and hotly contested pushback against modern liberal incarnations of the Enlightenment project (Heatherington 2025). A major component of his diagnosis in *After Virtue* is the way in which modern moral discourse is defined by emotivism. For MacIntyre, emotivism is a cultural condition that stems from the Enlightenment project's failure to provide an empirical foundation for morality (MacIntyre [1966] 2007, 1971, 1981). MacIntyre understood emotivism as the position that moral judgments are not based on anything other than personal preference (MacIntyre 1981; Schneewind 1982). Questions of community, religion, faith, obligation, responsibility—all of these are filtered through the lens of the individual's personal preference. Personal preference is the exclusive basis for any moral

decision making. There is no larger moral framework, narrative, or guiding story to anchor that person's moral decision making.

MacIntyre further details the larger social forces at play in the rise of emotivism and offers a counterbalanced understanding in two books written in the wake of *After Virtue's* impact: *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (1988) and *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (1994). In *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, MacIntyre examines multiple moral traditions and the frameworks that they provide for human understandings of justice and rationality. The moral traditions that he examines at length include the Aristotelian tradition, the Augustinian tradition, the Thomistic synthesis of the medieval period, the Humean/Enlightenment tradition that defined modernity, and the liberal individualist tradition that positions the individual as an unencumbered agent. Each of these moral traditions has assumptions about the world that are inherited by the people embedded within them. These assumptions, these understandings of the world, form the basis for individual decision making for the people that inhabit them. For MacIntyre, each of these moral traditions pushes against the philosophical conceptualization of a single or neutral standard of justice and rationality that is universally applicable. MacIntyre's rationality is tradition-dependent and bound within particular geographic and chronological spatiality. As presented in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, human reasoning takes place within concrete historical and social contexts and traditions of inquiry. Although traditions operate from incommensurable conceptual schemes, this does not predicate relativism. Instead, what emerges in the midst of multiple moral traditions is a friction or rational conflict that forces moral traditions to grapple with inconsistencies in logic, even at times incorporating elements from other moral traditions. It is in these moments of friction and conflict, or epistemic crisis, that rational progress within a tradition occurs. Epistemic crises force a rhetorical interruption that necessitates coming to terms with the world as it is rather than as we may want it to be.

In his analysis of the liberal individualist tradition, MacIntyre (1988) takes issue with the tendency of modern liberalism, or neoliberalism, to attempt to stand above the conflict of moral traditions and collapse them all into the realm of personal preference, leaving for itself the domain of objective reality. Ironically, at the same time, the Liberal Individualist tradition refuses to acknowledge that it is itself a moral tradition, seeking to disguise itself as objective. This insidious move enables positivism and the expulsion of moral frameworks for moral decision making at a societal scale; all that is left to adherents of neoliberalism for moral decision making is the resources of an individual self. Religion, faith, moral frameworks—these are not allowed within “objective reality,” except as a matter of personal preference. This leaves the individual self naked in the face of reality and without resources for decision making other than one's personal wants, desires, and preferences.

MacIntyre's warnings were not issued in a vacuum. Christopher Lasch, the American historian and social critic, also picked up on the dangers of modern liberalism and individualism, warning about the dangers of cultural narcissism, the psychological effects of a society in crisis, and an unreflective belief in progress

(Lasch 1979, 1984, 1991). For MacIntyre, the problem is that rationality and justice are shaped by community. We are story-centered persons who make sense of the world, ourselves, and our place in it through community (MacIntyre 1999).

MacIntyre's understanding of moral traditions is closely related to what Arnett calls "narratives." From an Arnettian lens, narratives are made up of three constitutive elements: publicly told moral stories, practices, and the people that are embedded within those moral stories and practices (Arnett 2002, 2005; Fritz 2023). Rationality and community are not simply complementary for MacIntyre and Arnett; they are part and parcel of one another. Therefore, neoliberalism's separation of moral foundations from making decisions and engaging in actions is not simply problematic; it is fundamentally disruptive to the notion of what it means to be human.

## **Part II: Dialogue and Moral Stories**

At this point, it seems helpful to introduce the work of Ronald C. Arnett more formally into the conversation. Arnett is a scholar of communication whose work has been deeply influential on multiple subdisciplines of the field in the latter half of the 20th century and the first part of the 21st century (Holba 2023). As one of the founders of the Communication Ethics Division of the National Communication Association, Arnett's imprint on the study of communication ethics is profound and far-reaching (Fritz 2023). Arnett coauthored the definitive textbook on communication ethics (Arnett et al. 2018), as well as writing two of the seminal essays (Arnett 1987, 1988) that launched its formalization as a field. The first of these two articles is a survey of different kinds of communication ethics. The second is an examination of the pedagogical coordinates of communication ethics within the classroom and in the basic communication course textbook. In addition, Arnett, as the chair of the Department of Communication & Rhetorical Studies at Duquesne University, hosted a semi-annual communication ethics conference. All of these contributions, taken together, made major advances in promoting communication ethics as a distinct area of study within the larger discipline of communication.

In addition to his work that falls within the realm of communication ethics, Arnett has made significant contributions to the study of conflict, dialogue, educational administration, interpersonal communication, management, organizational communication, phenomenology, rhetoric, philosophy of communication, and religious communication (Holba 2023; Kearney and Mancino 2024). Arnett's scholarship spans five decades and comprises 19 books, 50 book chapters, 13 encyclopedia entries, and 88 articles. His methodological approach is an interpretive one that is rooted in philosophical hermeneutics, protecting and promoting the dynamic interplay of "dialogue within the human experience" (Arnett 2017; see Kearney and Mancino 2024).

In particular, the connection points between Arnett's studies in dialogue and his communicative understanding of narrative contain particular relevance for our discussion here. His scholarly interest in interpersonal communication, which was his PhD focus at Ohio University, as well as his involvement in the nonviolence

movement of the 1960s and 1970s set the foundation for his first scholarly monograph, *Dwell in Peace: Applying Nonviolence to Everyday Relationships* (1980). From *Dwell in Peace*, Arnett's work matured into a deeper examination of dialogue as a communication theory. This especially coalesced in his second book, *Communication and Community: Implications of Martin Buber's Dialogue* (1986).

Martin Buber's work is one of the major fountainheads for the study of dialogue within the field of communication (Arnett 1986; Friedman 2001). For Buber, dialogue was intimately tied to questions of community and how we relate to one another in terms of responsibility and ethical choice-making (Buber 1923; Buber 1947). In *I and Thou* (1923), one of Buber's early monographs, he discusses his own phenomenological experience with dialogue, talking about a moment as a boy when he had a certain connection with a horse—this moment of understanding, this moment of seeing the horse as an "other." For Buber, dialogue is possible only when I encounter the other as a "Thou" — an other that is both alien and similar to myself, one that cannot be controlled, one of "radical alterity," and yet with a possibility for glimmers and moments of deep connection and shared experience (Buber 1947; Friedman 1974; Friedman 1983).

Buber (1923) warns against the dangers of possession in interpersonal relationships and especially in dialogue. The temptation for possession leads to the destruction of a relationship between an "I" and a "Thou," reducing the other to an "It" — an object that can be controlled, owned, or possessed. Arnett latches onto this idea in his monograph from 1986, where he specifically examines the dangers of objectification and possession within interpersonal contexts and dialogue. In his examination of Martin Buber's work, Arnett looked forward to the communicative challenges of the 21st century with an almost prophetic clarity, calling out the danger of polarization within communication and dialogue as one of the biggest challenges that Western society faces. Arnett ties this problem of polarization back to dialogue, specifically understanding Buber's conceptualization of dialogue as requiring a willingness to be moved from one's own position in engagement with the other. To put it more plainly, for Buber and for Arnett, dialogue is impossible if one is not willing to be wrong (Arnett 1986). If one is not willing to be moved in engagement with the other person from one's own dearly held convictions, then being engaged in genuine dialogue is impossible.

This does not mean that dialogue requires a lack of conviction or moral relativism (Arnett 1986). What it does require is a posture that is resistant to unthinking dogmatic ideology. Dialogue requires one to bring one's authentic, vulnerable, genuine, and curious self to engagement with the other. One must be open to the possibility that even sincerely held convictions might be wrong on one level or another. Dialogue requires one to continue to engage, to continue to grow, to change if necessary. To change, to grow, to learn in the process of dialogue with the other is central to Arnett's work—both his scholarship around dialogue and his work in communication ethics, which frames the task of communication ethics as protecting and promoting the good of learning (Arnett 1986; Arnett et al. 2008).

This commitment to learning positions Arnett, perhaps more than any other communication scholar of the past century, as a model of the dual commitment

required to care for moral traditions. On one hand is the importance of being rooted in a particular moral tradition. On the other hand is the dialogic good of learning, of growth. Arnett brings this dialogic conviction of the necessity of being able to be wrong into his engagement with the importance of moral traditions (Carmack 2025).

The majority of Arnett's works, including the Buber book and the communication ethics textbook, are anchored in particular stories of individuals and movements who were rooted in distinct moral traditions. Although he does not have one particular book or monograph exclusively on narrative, the body of his major works is a broad exploration of the importance and applications of moral traditions and narrative ground. *Dialogic Education: Conversation About Ideas and Between Persons* (1992) highlights the importance of education as a profession with practices and moral stories. *Dialogic Civility in a Cynical Age: Community, Hope, and Interpersonal Relationships* (Arnett and Arneson 1999) outlines the important stakes and philosophical roots of practical civility in the public sphere. *Dialogic Confession: Bonhoeffer's Rhetoric of Responsibility* (2005) examines Dietrich Bonhoeffer as a model for conviction rooted in story-centered trust, not the individual self. *An Overture to Philosophy of Communication: The Carrier of Meaning* (Arnett and Holba 2012) examines communication as being composed of both foreground and background communication, which has important implications for the idea of narrative as ground. *Communication Ethics in Dark Times: Hannah Arendt's Rhetoric of Warning and Hope* (2013) highlights the importance of the Augustinian "derivative I" while calling communicators to be "holy sparks" in the midst of the false light of modernity. *Conflict Between Persons: The Origins of Leadership* (Arnett et al. 2014) calls attention to conflict as a hermeneutic entrance to narrative and organizational care. *Levinas's Rhetorical Demand: The Unending Obligation of Communication Ethics* (2017) provides an attentive account of the importance of care that is rooted not in interpersonal liking but in the immemorial call to be our brother's keeper. *Corporate Communication Crisis Leadership: Advocacy and Ethics* (Arnett et al. 2017) reframes crisis as a moment for narrative-rooted leadership. Finally, *Communication Ethics and Tenacious Hope: Contemporary Implications of the Scottish Enlightenment* (Arnett 2022) examines an alternative to a particular articulation of the Enlightenment that influenced modern individualism. Each of these monographs, anchored within the study of communication and the particularities of an person's story or a historical moment, serves as a kind of practical examination of the importance of narrative as publicly taught moral stories, practices, and communities that buy into those stories and practices.

Within the field of communication, there are multiple interpretations of the term "narrative." One of the major definitions of narrative comes from the work of Walter Fisher (1984, 1987). His work on the "narrative paradigm" unites MacIntyre's understanding of the story-centered nature of human beings with rhetorical theory (Carmack 2025). For Fisher (1987), narrative is a paradigm that encompasses all of human communication. In this framing, narrative is the fundamental basis of how we understand the world and our place within it. He examines what he calls "narrative rationality" as our way of making sense of the

world. We think in stories; we place ourselves within stories. Things are determined to be true through a process of “narrative fidelity,” whereby we determine whether or not something makes sense (Fisher 1984, 1987). For Fisher, it is this narrative rationality which defines humanity, in opposition to a “rational world paradigm,” which he sees as related to Cartesian dualism and deeply problematic (Fisher 1984).

Although Fisher’s narrative paradigm, upon its initial introduction, received significant pushback from other scholars in the field of communication, Fisher’s understanding of narrative rationality and the narrative paradigm has increasingly become accepted within the field of communication, as well as more broadly within other academic disciplines and society as a whole (Carmack 2025).

Arnett’s work on narrative is complementary to Fisher’s: additive rather than subtractive (Fritz 2020). However, he does channel an understanding of narrative in a slightly different light than Fisher. Fisher and Arnett agree on the story-centered nature of human rationality and communication, both drawing heavily from MacIntyre (Fritz 2020). However, Arnett is much more expansive in his understanding of narrative and how it moves beyond individual storytelling (Carmack 2025). It is at this juncture, between narrative as story and narrative as ground, that Arnett’s background in diverse subdisciplines of communication—coming from an interpersonal background as well as strong emphasis on dialogue, rhetoric, and organizational communication—really matters. Fisher’s understanding of narrative is almost exclusively influenced by one particular moment in MacIntyre’s scholarship: the ideas that are found within *After Virtue* (Carmack 2025). Arnett, however, draws on the more expansive body of MacIntyre’s scholarship, which also includes *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, as well as later works like *Dependent Rational Animals* and *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*. In these works, MacIntyre more strongly develops the idea of moral traditions and the role that they play in human rationality and conceptualizations of justice. This more expansive understanding assists Arnett in his understanding of narrative as publicly told moral stories, a set of narrative-informed practices, and a community of people that buy into and commit to those publicly told moral stories and the implications that they carry for one’s actions (Arnett 2002, 2005).

Although humans are story-centered rational animals, we have created these narrative structures that define the shape of the world around us, and these are more than just stories. They have a moral component that is married to action. In many ways, this understanding of narrative follows in the tradition of MacIntyre, which reconciles the artificial separation that the positivists enacted between morality and human action. Narratives—understood as publicly told moral stories and practices enacted within the context of community—are the foundation of moral traditions and the fabric that neoliberalism has attempted to destroy through its co-opting of “objective” language.

### **Part III: Restoring the Moral Foundations of Dialogue and Narrative**

Both MacIntyre and Arnett point to the importance of the moral foundations that undergird human action and dialogue. By understanding MacIntyre's conceptualization of moral traditions and Arnett's framing of narrative, we begin to see a picture of human communicative action that is fundamentally rooted in a contextual understanding of human nature. MacIntyre reminds us of the importance of moral traditions that anchor a subjective and situated understanding of telos and human flourishing. By their nature, moral traditions come into conflict with one another. There is a friction and tension between their different interpretations of what the good life is. MacIntyre (1988) assures us that this is ultimately beneficial for human existence, giving fertile ground for new ideas and understandings to grow. The danger lies in neoliberalism's attempt to create a monoculture that masquerades as objective reality rather than entering into the contest of moral traditions.

Arnett synthesizes many of the ideas of MacIntyre for the field of communication, pointing us back to the importance of stewarding publicly told moral stories and practices within the context of community. The moral foundations of dialogue, for Arnett, begin with an understanding of the ground beneath a communicator's feet. Without an understanding of this background communication, there is no basis for resisting the artificial separation that modern neoliberalism and the project of the positivists would make between questions of morality and human action. By directly linking moral stories with practices, Arnett pushes back against the decoupling of dialogue from its moral foundations.

Dialogue, communication, and the enactment of narrative do not take place in isolation or a vacuum. Rather, they are brought to life within the context of community. Dialogue and narrative are intimately connected to one another through an understanding of publicly told moral stories and practices. Together, narrative and dialogue remind us of the importance of the moral foundations that anchor our focus of attention and care for the other as well as the ground underneath one's feet.

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## “Go Touch Grass!”: Inaugurating a Terrestrial Ethic through Planetary Dialogue

Robert Foschia

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**Abstract:** Late in his career, Bruno Latour turned to focusing his actor-network philosophy onto the topic of climate change, specifically the political arrangements that contribute to this crisis. Across multiple works, Latour analyzes how we organize along political, philosophical, and even spiritual lines to either participate in and or work against denial of this problem. This paper highlights his work between the Out-of-This-World, those with fantasies of escape of the earthly condition, and the Terrestrial, those who ground themselves in a dwelling with the earth. I highlight how dialogue studies is often situated as a detriment to climate discussions, where “dialogue” means conversations that go nowhere and produce little action. Latour, taken with dialogic ethics as theorized by Ronald C. Arnett, can be found to make productive engagements in climate-adjacent action by firmly situating our positions of where we stand and what our ethics amount to.

**Keywords:** dialogue; climate; Latour, Bruno; ethics; terrestrial; escape

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Attempts to identify a moral foundation to address the climate crisis have been multiple, with many iterations stalling in the wake of economic, technological, and political upheavals. Disinformation continues to run rampant in terms of painting a picture of scientific non-consensus and skepticism, and with more immediate, immanent risks in the present, the public conversation has detoured to these. Multiple forays have been made into fostering better dialogism between science communicators and the general public on these issues, including interventions from rhetoric (Hawhee 2023), rhetorical methods (Lynch and Rivers 2015), philosophy, (Morton 2013) and economics and degrowth (Klein 2014; Hickel 2019). While each endeavor here is useful in its own right for lending critical tactics in this historical moment, one engagement in need of further development for a discussion of ethics in the Anthropocene is the work of Bruno Latour. Latour’s corpus towards the end of his life situates his philosophical acumen with strategies for assessing the world amidst this impossible situation.

Insights found in Latour's later work, especially in *Down to Earth* (2018), *Facing Gaia* (2017), and *If We Lose the Earth, We Lose Our Souls* (2024) further address the impasses that arise in discussion of the Anthropocene, climate, and the immense tangle of subjectivities, systems, and scale that we as humans are implicated in. Across these works, Latour facilitates a grounding of morality in our shared home, calling us as a species to recognize our uniqueness but also related-ness; rather than an erasure of difference. This move privileges our non-similarity while acknowledging that there are forces seeking to continue inhibiting dialogue around shared action and responsibility. For this, Latour offers a new grounding for dialogue in the age of the Anthropocene, when climate denial runs rampant and political and social polarization continues to divide.

Latour casts the climate emergency as one in which if we truly addressed it as a crisis, like wars or pandemics, we *would* have done something about already. Instead, we are driven mad by inaction and denial. This fundamentally shifts the territory to a discourse of action (what is to be done?), whereas other climate discourse seeks to sketch out boundaries and description à la Timothy Morton (2013), who addresses the crisis as having an unknowable, undefinable character due to its scale. Latour plots our predicament along new axes in order to preserve agency and hope while also setting out immense stakes.

This is a movement away from his early work critiquing modernism and endorsing a view of the world as actants and networks (Harman 2009). Latour's Gaia-infused philosophy from 2017 on solicits an inventory of things and subjects based on relationality (Harman 2014). This relational aspect is the basis of a needed addendum for dialogue studies to approach the Anthropocene and its challenge to *relate* to so many actors. Specifically, Ronald Arnett's deployment of Levinasian philosophy and the problem of the third is, in the Anthropocene, exponentially increased to a point beyond our normal comprehensible faculties.

One of the strengths of Latour's approach is his givens for argument: he starts from the position of the Anthropocene, a contested idea stemming from the realization that humans (especially in the post-1945 time period) have been dramatically impacting the geologic and atmospheric composition of the Earth and should be treated as a geologic force in and of themselves. Latour provides a background of the conversations surrounding the term—whether or not we are truly in the Anthropocene, whether humans contribute to it, and the inner politics of academic committees—as but another layer to the base problem. This base issue is a historical period in which we are currently living through an ecological mutation, and the denial or avoidance of talking about this very obvious fact is driving everyone mad. Whether that madness is from a lack of hope in the future, manufactured doomerism, or a desire for escape, this simple observation motivates his project.

If we take the historical moment of the Anthropocene as a major challenge to the future of the human species, then a new era of moral reasoning is required. And while there has been fantastic work done on the connections between climate and capitalism (Chakrabarty 2014; Haraway 2015), no one seems to capture the ethical importance of forming praxis-based responses to this catastrophe quite in the manner that Latour does. A cognitive dissonance inheres where indifference

to the “slow cancellation of the future”<sup>1</sup> saps motivation (Fisher 2009). This paper then seeks to salvage parts of Latour’s political project to map them to communication studies, particularly those approaches such as philosophy of communication. In an era where everything appears on fire, it appears hard to know even what to do, and a reevaluation of everything, find moral foundations for a new future, built from the ground up.

Latour’s project starts from the *literal ground* of the Earth, or returns to it, in an unsentimental way. He provides caution from becoming entrapped in the concept of nature that denies politics and conflict, or a pantheistic New Age spiritualism that leads to narcissistic inaction. Instead, he defines new agonistic poles beyond political left and right, adding to this compass a third attractor of the Out-of-This-World – “the horizon of people who longer belong to the realities of an earth that would react to their actions” (Latour 2018, 34), and the Terrestrial – those who are tired of the denial of the problem and existing in a phantasmagoric hyperreality and who are ultimately looking “for a place to land” (2018, 11). While Latour doesn’t make entries into the world of dialogue, much of the language he uses mirrors or complements concepts inherent in the work of Arnett, particularly on dialogue and hope. Arnett takes an expansive view of dialogue in which it serves as the protector of difference (and therefore ethics) in a cynical age, keeping hope alive in dark times, and finding “grounds” or dwelling places that protect this difference.

Deploying Latour (to take his own terminology) as a mutation of this line of thought, dialogue studies can take from this work an additive perspective that effectively addresses the same questions across several different registers, including science, politics, economics, and communication. The engagement with politics is necessary for discussing Latour since his *Gaia* project and the contributions to thinking this “new climatic regime” in an ethical sense. I then describe the poles, the Terrestrial and Out-of-This-World and the connections each has to relationality and dialogue. Finally, I attach these findings to existing work from Arnett to address the climate through a philosophy of communication.

Latour’s project starts with a reconceptualization of the Earth and Nature, but at its heart it is also implicitly interested in dialogue. His central question, whether or not we can “come down to Earth; [that] we shall have to *land* somewhere,” orients his approach to action in the public sphere (Latour 2018, 9). We face an existential question of whether to continue “to nourish dreams of escaping, or [to] start seeking a territory that we and our children can inhabit” (2018, 11), or to continue *hoping* for a salvation divorced from communicative action. My interpretation of Latour focuses on this imperative to *come down*, to find moral ground to stand upon. This *moral* choice, as I will argue, is not simple and involves a paradoxical demand – we must choose *which* side in the “total war” that

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<sup>1</sup> This term emanates from Mark Fisher’s *Capitalist Realism* and is used in light of neoliberal economic policies impact on culture; while not unrelated to the climate crisis, I am here directly deploying this term out of context to highlight the similarities between disparate political projects seeking to flesh out and protect a future worth having.

has been occurring in the background of the twentieth century, defining friends and enemies (Latour 2017, 9), while also establishing connections with others we disagree with. Note that Latour often casts this choice not as a deliberative one, but one in which there is a right and a wrong decision to be made—in other words, as a moral choice. Situating the moral choice in the agonistic realm seems like a reframing that occurs on the side of climate denialists and nihilism, not one born of solidarity and care.

Latour's view of nature helps us define this impulse here. For Latour, the politics of the last fifty years have been, regardless of intent, framed around climate denialism (2018, 8). Despite an abundance of scientific facts and consensus, the discussion has been one of entertaining debates where audiences walk away "manipulated," thinking, "Who knows anything?" (Latour 2017, 30). This also highlights Latour's underappreciated insights in discussing dialogic communication: his insistence on ground manifests in these debates, as his conceptualization takes an indifferent public and recasts it as one unaware of the terrain. Apathy emerges not due to groundlessness, but because the public can't find "where they are" (Latour 2024, 13). Climate touches everything, and while Latour sees a positive moral virtue in returning to the Earth, it also raises serious political questions that are entirely new. He contends: what "was possible for Aristotle is no longer possible today: nature cannot unify the polity" (Latour 2017, 21). Not only is a fully holistic picture of the world impossible, but this romanticized version is also potentially self-defeating. Nature in the Latourian sense is a sensemaking operation that smooths out differences between various human and nonhuman agents in the world, removing politics and, therefore, the ability to get anything done.

Yet, this is precisely what I propose we use Latour's philosophical project to found a new organization of the public upon a sense of embeddedness in the Earth as a terrestrial home. Whereas for Aristotle this occurred in logic, here in the contemporary moment of the Anthropocene I suggest this must occur along *moral* lines, with some important considerations. For Latour, there can be no simple returning to the Earth, where recognition of planetary concerns magically erases legacies of oppression and disaster. This in turn becomes a denialism all of its own, whereby ecopolitics is substituted as a master discourse that will eventually lead us back to the same precarious moment we currently occupy. This naïve ecopolitics acts as a force that is pacifying, sentimental, and romantic, which allows us to float above the Earth and become groundless, unaffected by the moral and material challenges of our time. This disciplining function suppresses deliberative discourse by fixing a murky moral law, which works to "recall to order those who are straying from it" (Latour 2017, 24). We are all "in" nature, share common characteristics, and have common needs, but nature also differentiates and can be taken to defend hierarchy and entrenched statuses. Any discourse calling on nature in this way appeals to a natural order or natural "law" that is never defined and can be moved, twisted, and bent to serve human interests. There is no "Supreme Court of nature" (Latour 2017, 33) to appeal decisions to; that state of nature à la Hobbes is a manmade legal fiction, arising in a specific place under

specific historical circumstances. The “natural” is rotten through and through with the rhetorical.

This rubric of nature “immunizes against the risks of politics. It was conceived for the purpose” of masking the deficiencies of the social order it ultimately obfuscates (Latour 2017, 225). “Nature” creates a shared harmony that is in fact rhetorically constructed and easily crumbles under scrutiny. There is no shared story in this vision, and coalitions fall apart rather easily. It creates a shared universal that is never defined or concretized, leaving us with a dangerous primitivist myth that “if we turn toward ‘nature’ and its laws, we are necessarily going to reach agreement” — a myth that Latour shuns (2017, 226).

The ultimate moral question to ask ourselves (and one another) is *if and where* we are going to land on Earth; in the schema of nature, this central divide becomes impossible, because instead of friends and enemies we have only those we have to rehabilitate (as in: they aren’t climate deniers, they just don’t understand the science) and those we have to punish (as in: fossil pipelines are bad, but the *real* culprit is actually this other thing!). The nature perspective allows us to see the world from a false bird’s-eye view that is inaccessible, permitting delay and indifference. However, the counter to this is to advocate from a grounded place that is defined, known, and dwelled in. Latour laments that this often places a speaker in the position of being accused of apocalyptic discourse, or in a somewhat attenuated version, catastrophic discourse, which is what is *exactly* needed in order to address these questions. Communicators should not fear treading on apocalyptic undertones when that is the ground we currently inhabit—to do so is its own form of denial. Rather than scientists attempting to hide credentials and expertise, they should speak with more authority on such issues and acknowledge bias as a necessary part of existence.

## The Out-of-this-World

Latour’s attempts to send us *back* to the ground of the Earth constitute a project that seeks to address the challenges of the Anthropocene while avoiding a sentimental view of nature that neuters ethical action. Latour’s climate-based works have taken a variety of subsets that continually point back to this basis of the Earth as a reconfiguration of our present predicament. In *If We Lose the Earth, We Lose Our Souls*, he discusses how even the figure of the Terrestrial (the ‘down-to-Earth’) is abstract and needs attention to the “entanglements of the beings that constitute our soil, our habitat. These are shared exercises in the description of the conditions for life” (Latour 2024, 12). Solidarity comes not from political ideology but from shared resources for the sustaining of life and ecosystems between the human and nonhuman.

In a similar register, in *The Ecological Class: A Memo*, Latour articulates how the solidarity of a future ecological society would not be based on magical thinking of economic justice but on the struggle over classification (2022, 5). While these may appear as Latour delving into subjects that he knows little about, such as

religious scholarship<sup>2</sup> or economics, they help further sketch his depiction of the climate problem as an all-encompassing one. Even though we may all indulge a doomerism that declares the future as fully calculable and fixed, this line of thinking primarily emanates from a billionaire class that has extracted unprecedented amounts of wealth from the Earth and now seeks to “cover their tracks” as they plot escape, whether that is away from Earth or into localized, fortress-type social arrangements. Latour’s critique is best suited at the individual level, dealing with the cognitive indifference and madness of the Anthropocene, from which he suggests new forms of social organization can grow.

A compelling supplement to this account comes from Luke Winslow, a communication scholar specializing in economic history. His monograph *American Catastrophe* links several competing<sup>3</sup> discourses together that I will argue also constitute this Out-of-This-World thinking. For Winslow, there is a melding of advocates of Second Amendment rights, evangelical religious movements, and climate change denialists under the banner of “catastrophe,” which “fuels an oligarchic art of governance marked by selective forms of state intervention to defend the resources of the rich and powerful” (Winslow 2020, 154). This new political force is bound by a yearning for an eschatological moment “represented by demolition-minded perverts— arsonists with Molotov cocktails seeking to burn down institutions” in order to keep in place existing social structures (2020, 16). Winslow notes that our Habermasian, deliberative social arrangement treats such conspiratorial thinking as merely an alternate rationality so long as “myth, magic, and divine revelation . . . stay in their lane” (2020, 11). What is compelling about this account is not only the linkage of such competing ideologies operating under a single rhetorical umbrella, but its inclusiveness of eschatological disasters. Whether conscious or not, this grouping poses a discursive roadblock for thinking beyond the climate crisis to a possible future. What is needed then is a counter-discourse that overcomes this initial cynicism to thinking about other possible futures.

One competing vision of the future that I would add to Latour’s Out-of-This-World are the futures promoted by the tech industry over the last decade. One might immediately think of Elon Musk, owner of SpaceX and vocal supporter of space colonization, or Jeff Bezos, Amazon founder and owner of Blue Origin; while they are tied together both through wealth and the venture funding of space programs, what primarily ties them to the Out-of-This-World is participation in what Vanis Varoufakis (2024) calls “cloud capital,” computational systems whose opaque infrastructure continually extracts digital “rent” through everyday

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<sup>2</sup> In both *Facing Gaia* and *If We Lose the Earth, We Lose our Souls*, Latour makes special note of the work of Pope Francis in *Laudato Si’* for connecting the “cry of the Earth” with “the cry of the poor” as an interlinking call for action and the denial of climate denialism.

<sup>3</sup> Winslow also notes, like Latour, that many of these issues are linked by climate change, which acts as “the quintessential issue of our historical moment. It engages the entire human condition. And it combines narrative elements of big business, global economies, religion, politics, science, and media—all with the possible fate of civilization itself on the line” (Winslow 2020, 63).

activities. Musk's philosophical interests, longtermism,<sup>4</sup> focuses specifically on the deployment of such systems through artificial intelligence to extend current moral values to the solar system and beyond through the funding of these projects. MacAskill (2022) works from an existential risk frame that tries to prevent catastrophe by using computational methods to assign calculative value to scenarios. While MacAskill acknowledges a risk such as climate, it is a potential risk, but not as calculably large as *not* developing artificial intelligence, which could influence society for "millions of years" (2022, 79). In this scenario, a habitable earth is *calculably worth risking* in order to advance a technology that may pose an enormous existential risk.

Not only is the risk worth it for longtermism, but this calculative ethic is reflected in the move to create as much "value" as possible. This value becomes one enmeshed in capitalist profit maximalization, where the goal is the creation of as many consciousness as possible through artificial superintelligence. This digital natalism argues that through the promulgation of billions of intelligences in the far future is the highest ethical imperative to follow, with longtermism providing "a systematic ethical foundation for mitigating 'existential risk,' while also ensuring the development of artificial superintelligence (ASI)" (Gebru and Torres 2024, 98). Torres (2023), in his work, confirms that for longtermism "moral truth lies in the numbers. Morality, on this view, could be seen as an extension of economics" (387).

Rather than madness, such ideologies when amassed together are revealed to be perfectly sane. Perspectives such as longtermism that recognize the threat of climate change are ultimately culled by the drive for profit and extraction. It also helps illuminate the point Winslow goes on to make, that climate change denialists and evangelicals are not madmen unaware of the decisions they are making; some are even plotting on investing in the end of the world. For Latour, whether it be through technological engineering or religion, this mimics a "clumsy providence" (2017, 96) that engages in an algorithmic predestination. Such futures are presented as open, but upon closer inspection they present only one narrative of survival that closely resembles that status quo arrangements. Fantasies of escape presented through digital and material raptures are used to justify ignoring the call of responsibility to our habitat.

The linkage between tech oligarchs with extraterrestrial ambitions and Latour's Out-of-This-World is not accidental, as his metaphor is only partially meant as metaphor; he acknowledges that we could develop space programs at huge costs and "would succeed at best only in transporting a half-dozen encapsulated astronauts across inconceivable distances, from a living planet towards some dead ones" (2017, 81). His discussion verges on pathologizing,

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<sup>4</sup> Musk tweeted in 2022 that MacAskill's book, *What We Owe the Future*, and longtermism specifically were close matches for his own personal philosophy (Vaidhyanathan 2022). Although someone from the Effective Altruism movement might take pains which such a conflation, Musk, as well as Gebru and Torres's TESCREAL bundle, lump these philosophical positions together. Although they are different, I am also combining them here as a form of ethics centered on calculation.

describing the obsession with “*escaping* their attachments to the old Earth. Ready for detachment, they seem excessively naive when they encounter the prospect of reattachment to a new residence, of the alienation of a new *nomos*. They resemble astronauts ready to take off without space suits” (2017, 243). The economic injustice of such actions at a time of catastrophic disruption is also addressed, as Latour compares a specific founder as the new Medici:

“You can’t really take them seriously,” I’m told, “these pseudo-scientific ramblings of an independent old inventor who calmly asserts on television that seven-eighths of humanity will soon be wiped out because, like a new Malthus, he claims to have calculated the ‘carrying capacity’ of the planet Earth—about 300 million; and he says it’s all the same to him, anyway, because he’s going to die far above the earth, in a rocket, during a trip to space, thanks to a free ticket offered him as a reward, sponsored by none other than Richard Branson!” (2017, 84).

Despite the weight of the situation, and evidence of mounting tipping points and calamities, Latour focuses on a new relationality based *in* and *of* the Earth. Latour calls this a planetary confinement, not in the sense of a prison sentence, but as a call to recognize the important relations in the here and now, not in some catastrophic post-apocalypse fantasy of the future.

## Terrestrial Ethics (Ethics Must Be Defended)

While Latour situates an earthbound ethic, he does so in a manner that goes back to the problem of Nature: we must reject this sentimental version that destroys the backgrounds and story of those different from us. Latour meanwhile expands the notion of *who* and *what* counts while rejecting a sentimental and universalizing specter of nature that removes action. Between doomerism and sentimentalism, Latour opts for a language invoking war, opting for a praxis-oriented vision rather than stoicism or indifferent cynicism. Rather than defining an alien Other to be attacked, Latour instead asks of us what we cannot live without and what needs to be preserved, making a synthesis of what Crowley describes as the “ontological egalitarianism” which leads to a “...patient politics of negotiation, discussion, and compromise” (Crowley 2021, 100).

Latour’s negotiation in the unseen war of the twentieth century then resembles a form of dialogue, particularly one endorsed by Arnett in his philosophical call to protect difference. Arnett’s conception of an ethic stemming from dialogue focuses on human communication, acknowledging that conflict is inherent to the political animal. Grafting Latour’s work onto the study of dialogue reveals how the planetary scale necessitates a meeting between dialogue and Latour to navigate a new Anthropocene responsibility.

Even though in the Anthropocene humans act as a geological force, we are not “universifiable” (Latour 2017, 122). The Anthropocene becomes complicated because of the massive responsibility it puts on the unified category of “human action” while further splintering the notions of what the human is. We become interpellated by more and more agents, and responsibility climbs at a moment

when our ability to organize as a political group is increasingly harder. When we think of Latour, we often categorize his work under the actor-network theory umbrella or in science and technology studies; thinking through his work as that of an “accidental organization theorist” (Czarniawska, 2017) permits a vision of Latour-as-cataloguer, arranging the various human and nonhuman beings to save them best. In the Anthropocene, the act of cataloguing, or saving resembles ark imagery recalling Noah.

Latour produces a calculative argument counter to longtermism or catastrophic discourse. Latour *accounts* for other actants that help facilitate human survival, acknowledging that we are all “in it” (the “it” being the climate crisis), and that no forms of escape are truly possible. There are no saviors, whether religious or technological, coming to bail us out. We must recognize who and what we can save and continue to make dialogic alliances that help save others. Catastrophic discourse recognizes that others could be saved, but at the cost of putting oneself at risk.

We need others in order to live and exist, to continue the ecosystems that provide the delicate balance of life here on the planet. While the human (his disdainful category for those who embrace their anthropocentrism) enacts this as a top-down mastery, the Earthbound or Terrestrial do so in solidarity with other creatures who are also facing this existential threat:

To track the Terrestrials is to add conflicts of interpretation regarding what a given actor is, wants, desires, or can do, to conflicts about what other actors are, want, desire, or can do—and this applies to workers as well as to birds in the sky, to Wall Street executives as well as to bacteria in the soil, to forests as well as to animals. What do you want? What are you capable of? With whom are you prepared to cohabit? Who can threaten you? (Latour 2018, 73–74)

It is the locating of “dwelling places”—for Latour, that means more than dots on an administrative grid. Such a list is not a compendium of genus and phylum to control, but an overwhelming acknowledgment of the *lack* of care we provide, even though, for our own survival, we must preserve biodiversity and ecosystems. While catastrophic discourse puffs out its chest and declares its intention to fight for supremacy, Latour acknowledges the moral position is one that states a desire to fight for solidarity—how many can I help, how many can I save?—as the new Anthropocene virtues.

Our virtues, then, should come from the ground we walk (the Earth) and from our recognition of finitude in the acceptance that the habitable planet of our childhood is gone, but not lost. Latour recognizes that nihilism is but another false escape when there is so much still to save and protect. He squarely opposes the Out-of-This-World as a negative force which, if allowed to continue, will never relinquish the fantasy that has gotten us here in the first place. It is an agonistic view paradoxically rooted in care, seeking to move past the bad news it heralds and move onto the hard work of talking and building connections.

In this last turn, Latour dodges any fallback into a romantic sentimentality that would unite people, cultures, animals, plants, and others under some global banner and (finally) allow us to declare war on climate change. Such calls are

designed in order to dissuade us from action by catastrophists who see climate denial as the basis of political or financial projects that herald the end of one world and the opportunity for another. Although we are all “in it,” Latour situates this new political consciousness not in connection but in conflict, due to the inability to distribute responsibility to *all* things. Rather than a *kumbaya* moment of togetherness, the Anthropocene immediately invites conflicts, some from the catastrophists, but also amongst those we which we aim to save. This *scalability* (Tsing 2012) of responsibility declares predictive, purely calculative models as defunct without concern for otherness. Life itself is dialogic, based upon loops and feedback from different scales of systems that we often do not even perceive. To attempt escape from this is to float in an empty, lonely abyss.

This call to responsibility has deep resonances with the work of Arnett and his corpus on communication ethics and dialogue. Starting with the call of the Face from his interpretation of Levinas, Arnett (2017) works to understand relationality from a philosophical viewpoint that privileges difference but also respects that difference from being a permissive, relativistic wave that enables all action to be absolved therapeutically.<sup>5</sup> Both Arnett and Latour return to their respective areas of study with that weight of responsibility or, phrased differently, with stakes. Arnett reminds us that “dark times” have always existed; in a single page in his book on Hannah Arendt, he touches upon both her lament over the Sputnik launch (men attempting to escape the earth) as well as the major contradiction within modernity of labor being both glorified and automated away at the same time (Arnett 2013, 64). These present as similar issues to the ones we face today from Out-of-This-World projects which promise escape.

Arnett’s vision of dialogue and Latour’s vision of climate politics also have similar connective tissues in regard to this particular historical moment; while Arnett maps out the importance of identifying historical situatedness so that we may actually stake out and know our grounding, Latour sketches a political project where the act of grounding is in itself a moral endeavor. His Gaia project “is a *power of historicization*.” More simply, as its name indicates, “Gaia is the signal telling us to come back to the Earth” (Latour 2017, 219). The specter of dark times is often more terrifying on the horizon to come; in dark times, we still find joy, hope, love, and community even amidst difficulty. Being aware of living in dark times or not is central in shaping action.

Politics and dialogue mix in this search for ground. As Matt Mancino (2024) articulates in his essay on Arnett’s metaphors of ground, soil, and mud, reference to the world around us demands more than just an abstract philosophical system, which can result in what Arnett terms “existential homelessness” (2024, 116). It is the *stuff* of the everyday that makes up our communicative lives and gives us our story and meaning; this is not to say that calamities examined through existential risk studies are not pertinent, but when they eclipse the self and become the entire

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<sup>5</sup> For more on this permissive structure pertaining to Dostoyevsky’s famous quip on religious prohibition, see Slavoj Žižek, “From Politics to Biopolitics . . . and Back,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 103, no. 2 (2004): 501–21.

story, we lose our sense of place. In *To Lose the Earth* he laments this desire to drive away from the soil and muddy things that make life worth living, exasperatingly claiming that “to ‘escape’ from their grip is therefore meaningless; you might as well not want to exist at all” (Latour 2024, 29). *They* in this scenario being the worms that aerate the soil, the birds that then feast on these and help pollinate our wilds, and the greater ecosystems we participate in (Latour 2024, 29). In an era where the fantasy of escape to dead planets presumes the loss of a planet we still have, grounding ourselves, knowing our ground, becomes a profound imperative.

The terrestrial project, then, is not one in which a definitive vision of a post-climate-crisis world might look like, but the recognition of others sharing time on a planet in crisis: “there is nothing more contemporary than to negotiate landing on some ground” (Latour 2018, 49–50). It is, above all else, a dialogic project, one that acknowledges difference not as some abstract value, but as a basis for communication itself. To deny the perils of the climate crisis is madness, but to insist on a nonpolitical flattening of difference also invites chaos. We must recognize in the rhetoric of the catastrophists that there will be tough decisions, but those who, unlike them, stand terrestrially, in solidarity with the Earth and its occupants (human and nonhuman), stand a far better chance. Who I can protect and what I choose to protect do not come from some natural law that ultimately turns out to be human, all-too-human; rather, it is the dialogic decisions of who I choose to meet and what vision of the future I choose to invest in—the catastrophist, escapist one, or the one that I can walk outside this moment and touch. The Gen-Z slogan to get off the internet and to “go touch grass” rings out as a fine philosophical position.

Again, Latour positions Gaia not as a sentimental nature or goddess but as a “simple result of such a distribution of final causes is not the emergence of a supreme Final Cause, but a fine *muddle*” (2018, 100). There is no easy, clean way out of this. This is where the Mobius strip of an Arnett-Latourian conjunction bears fruit: whereas Latour provides a diagnosis of the issues in finding ground, his agonistic vision derived from looking into the future can be tempered (but not softened) with dialogic language. The Levinasian call is also not simple, nor non-threatening; it serves as a relentless, supernatural force that stalks, even compels us to responsibility—it is the phone continuing to ring despite being turned off or its battery being removed.

Arnett’s dialogic vision (and here, I argue, Latour’s as well) appears different in that it advocates not for an “us-versus-them” interlocutor relationship but for a recognition of position based on meaning and story. As the author has attempted (poorly) to explain to his five-year-old while introducing him to card games, we are playing with the cards face up—not to *cheat* but to *learn how to play the game better*. Once this common ground is established, and once we understand clearly articulated positions, play, agile maneuvering, and political gamesmanship can all enter and enhance the experience. Without understanding the base rules or sharedness of the game, it collapses in on itself. Insisting on some playing face-up while others are in the dark allows the fantasy of different worlds (and false categorical superiority) to fester.

What makes this an especially important contribution to dialogue studies today is Latour's call to *both* a warlike defense of strong positions on issues while also fostering connectivity with those on the opposing side presents a paradox that dialogue can mediate. We are to signal who are allies and who are enemies, which seems to increase polarization; yet Latour's real adversary is not political alignments, which he sidesteps with a new set of axes based on the Earth *as ground* and the Out-of-This-World, but indifference and cynicism that rests purely in this middle position. The cynicism of unmet high expectations (Arnett and Arneson, 1999), situates the burned-out true believers on either pole who eventually end in a muddled middle. In an era of AI deepfakes, post-truth, and fractured reality, Latour's fixation on the Earth refers us back to a common ontological referent from which to address one another, one grounded (literally) in everyday experience.

This "realism" is less a realist school than a rejection of the denialist claims. After postmodernism, the rhetorical play of an unbiased commentator or neutral ombudsman that is without sin (religious, financial, or mediated) or impurity has suffered epistemic attacks in this period. Latour's own history, from actor-network theory progenitor to a champion of science, empiricism, and shared reality, highlights the need for new forms of communication on important topics. Latour as a rhetor professes his bias, dictates what is shared between him and a *global audience* (the Terrestrials), and advocates for mutual understanding and action. While the call of the Earth is incredibly inclusive (we all live here), it does create antagonists; those committed to destruction, both of the planet and of consequences of such adventures. He calls attention to what is shared and loved between one another as a species, the shared air, beauty, resources, and ground that make up the planet and serve as connective tissue for a new politics and communicative praxis.

What is special about Latour's project is that it is animated not by a call to primitivism but by a recognition of a shared world along with shared responsibilities for that world, although distributed unevenly and oftentimes unjustly. It is these details that often fracture coalitions, which is why Latour's grounding in the Earth, a thing most of us shall never leave and can touch at any time, returns over and over as a north star. It is the simplicity that resists rhetorical interventions. In the film *First Reformed* (Schrader 2017), Ethan Hawke's character Reverend Toller is a priest of a local failing parish next to a rising megachurch. Toller has a parishioner radicalized by climate politics, and the stewardship of the planet begins to weigh heavily on him. In a conversation with a local business owner who is financing the renovations to his church, he asks that Toller tone down any climate rhetoric at a lavish reconsecration ceremony. Mr. Balq insists that many climate issues are "complicated" and not easy. There are data and scientific models, political allegiances, national security, economic interests—Toller retorts that it *can* be simple. Latour's grounding gives us this foundation, not so we can become entrenched, but as a starting place to *talk* from.

We must heed Latour's call to return to the Earth while not, at the same time, revisiting a sentimental view of nature that removes our responsibility for action and that asks of us who we are willing to defend and protect. This does not necessarily frame an implicit need or desire for violence but rather protects values,

people(s), and institutions that require unending amounts of care and work to keep them going.

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## Marcel on Friendship in a Digital Age

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**Abstract:** The rapid proliferation of digital technology in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has disrupted interpersonal relationships and contributed to increased societal levels of depression, anxiety, and loneliness. The present article first reviews previous scholarly attempts to remedy this disruption. Following the review, the philosophical tenets of Gabriel Marcel are employed to probe deeper into the conditions of human relations underlying the “broken world” and to reclaim friendship in the digital age. Primarily, the concept identifies how Marcel’s concepts of authenticity, availability, mystery, and presence can be employed in everyday life to cultivate meaningful and lasting relationships in the digital era. Marcel’s concepts are interwoven with real-word examples. Broad implications are drawn for media studies, marcel studies, and friendship studies.

**Keywords:** media studies; media ethics; Marcel, Gabriel; religious communication; digital media; interpersonal communication

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In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the different types and uses for various technological advancements have proliferated rapidly through society, affecting the professional, personal, political, and quotidian lives of everyday individuals. Though certain digital technologies have been touted as ways to improve overall quality of life, research suggests exactly the opposite with reported rates of depression, anxiety, and depression at all-time highs. At base, we regard these diseases as the result of disruption in healthy intersubjectivity—our intrinsic dialogic nature—required of wellbeing. The disruption is a moral matter inasmuch as it harms human thriving and disturbs our ontological nature as beings-in-relationship.

To address this widespread issue, we turn to Gabriel Marcel. Noted for his philosophical writings on human experience and connection, Marcel offers a uniquely positive framework borne from Catholic existentialism that can serve as an antidote to current cultural conditions. With consideration to other programs for combatting our digital media environment, the present article applies Marcel’s teaching on authenticity, availability, mystery, and presence as tools for repairing the moral tear in the fiber of human intersubjectivity and for fostering friendship

and connection in the digital age. Our essay surveys Marcel's account of the dialogic conditions that promote not merely existing but thriving.

The moral hermeneutic that we propose as a moral foundation, a sort of meta-ethic, is one that encourages a particular orientation toward human connection. That foundation is grounded in Marcel's philosophy of the human person, communion, the ontological mystery, and intersubjectivity. In closing, we provide specific strategies for restoring more humane conditions in our increasingly technologically mediated existence. Broad implications are drawn for fostering and sustaining meaningful dialogue in personal, professional, and political arenas.

As digital technology continues to expand limitlessly, individuals and society have experienced unprecedented rates of technological change in their personal, professional, and political lives (Quareshi 2021). While many new technologies claim to have improved physical, mental, and spiritual health, academic and public research suggests that exactly the opposite has also happened: increased rates of depression, anxiety, loneliness, feelings of not belonging, and a lack of substantial connection with other people (Johnson 2023). While the significant harms of digital technology are all but common knowledge in 2025, what is less acknowledged is the cost of such ailments. The calamine provided for individuals in distress from their technological condition comes in the form of pharmaceuticals and counseling that now constitute billion-dollar industries (Jacobson 2015). Paradoxically, it seems that as we become more connected—and medicated—we seem to lose both our ability to connect and our health.

The proliferation of digital media forms—and the consequent slough of changes they bring to our relation to our fellow humans—have been addressed by scholars of many different stripes, each with their own nuanced inspiration and program of action (Petricini 2020; Rauch 2018; Rushkoff 2019; Shlain 2019). Each of these programs—such as taking a “tech shabbat” or supporting “slow media” practices—are contingent on choices being made by people as to how we should manage the external technologies that engulf us. However, they do less in the way of asking how exactly we as humans reckon with *ourselves* under these conditions.

Enter Gabriel Marcel. Many of the issues that have been held up as paragons of the digital world were issues that Marcel was keenly aware of and concerned with in the previous century. Spanning topics from inauthenticity and unavailability to intersubjectivity, presence, connection, and mystery, Marcel taught us to look inward and outward simultaneously for the answers to this central problem of his—and unfortunately—our times. Marcel insisted on an ethic of care and compassion that starts with oneself and extends to the bedraggled masses under the yoke of contemporary demands.

The following article seeks to inject the ideas of Gabriel Marcel into the contemporary conversation on programs of media use in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and beyond. Specifically, we focus on the concept of cultivating friendship in the digital era through an enactment of the dialogic and interactive principles outlined by Marcel. The following essay places an increased importance on a spiritual and dialogic elixir of authenticity, availability, mystery, and presence to cultivate

friendship. To demonstrate the utility of these concepts, they will be (1) explained in brief, (2) viewed vis-à-vis proposals in the media ecology literature to create balance in the digitally mediated world, and (3) illustrated in the authors' own experiences. The essay thus endeavors to provide individuals with a conscious application of Marcel in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## **Gabriel Marcel's Concepts of Authenticity, Availability, Mystery, and Presence**

Prior to delving into Marcel's place in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is first important to delineate exactly how his ideas were originally articulated. The main impetus for Marcel's writings was his contention that we live in a "broken world" in which individuals are equally blunted by unconscious pure relativism and pure objectivism that results in complete disregard—if not outright attack—on the personal (Marcel 1995). Marcel acknowledged that the silencing of the "ontological exigence" of individuals is significantly impacted by the techniques and ways of being imbued in our technologies (Marcel 1964). The following subsections present both the symptoms and the cures to the broken world as he proposed. We conceptualize them as "prongs" and outline them here to propose them as a critical lens for describing and offering an antidote to our current condition digitally induced disconnection.

### *Authenticity vs. Inauthenticity*

Inauthenticity might best be characterized by an individual's refusal to confront—or, more probable, one's lack of awareness of—the constraining nature of objective, empirical, and strictly compartmentalized paradigmatic thought about matters pertaining both to our identity and our ideas (Treanor 2021). In other words, inauthenticity stems from our inability to break through the neat disciplinary barriers set up to define a range of acceptable thoughts and actions. To live inauthentically would be to succumb to the external roles and categorizations thrust upon an individual (Gerber 1967). When we define ourselves by such, ourselves and worlds become lost to us. Our current cultural landscape is laden, in particular, with contested identity roles, including those of gender, race, religion, and politics or ideology. On top of that, digital media promote the donning of fake roles such as avatars and screen names or hashtag identities, as well as highly edited Facebook profiles and Instagram images. In essence, inauthenticity has cloaked itself as authenticity and created exigencies for individuals that erode the foundation necessary for sincere and sustained human dialogue.

What is needed, therefore, is authenticity, a first prong. At its core, authenticity, per Gerber (1967), is "the fidelity of man to his ontological appeal" (548). Articulated by Marcel as a need for transcendence, this ontological appeal requires individuals to heed more than the distractions placed before them, and to move past objectivist definitions of self and other in favor of a unified, inner urge.

For an individual to be authentic—or to live authentically—simply means acknowledging with humility that being found in the other is a gift for which we feel unworthy and thus fear losing.

### *Availability vs. Unavailability*

If authenticity directs us inwardly, the second selected prong of Marcel's philosophy, availability, directs us outwardly. Marcel augurs to have us recognize in our "broken world" the *indisponibilité*—or unavailability—that we exhibit to each other. But the availability to others to which Marcel counsels us is not a philanthropy doled out to the other seen like a patron of a food bank. Marcel stresses that our own individual being is bound up with others. Availability to others really means, through them, at the same time availability to ourselves. As Marcel put it, "Fundamentally I have no reason to set any particular store by myself, except in so far as I know that I am loved by other beings who are loved by me" (Marcel 1951b, 8). The move towards intersubjectivity and presence is not possible if individuals do not give themselves to others.

In writing about giving oneself to another, Marcel is really indicating the importance of giving psychic "space" to the other, being empty of our own preoccupations or perceptions in order to be at the disposal of the other. In a very real sense, giving for Marcel really means "receiving" the other. To hone the concept of availability, Marcel speaks of what it means when someone is available to me, which makes me feel seen by the person, a presence to that person: "At the root of presence there is a being who takes me into consideration, who is regarded by me as taking me into account" (Marcel 1967, 153).

When persons are available to one another, the mutual availability affects an intersubjectivity in which the "I" of each co-abides. Says Marcel, "I become immediate for the other who in these conditions ceases to be pure other: the opposition between the self and the other is transcended or reduced" (Marcel 1967, 176). To capture what Marcel intends by the term "availability," he provides the terms "porous" and "permeable." The terms convey that availability is an expression of a readiness to welcome the other (obviously at various levels) into our *esse* and to enter the mystery of being together. A parent listening to a child's complaint in the van ride home from school, two friends making time for a walk between meetings at a conference, a professor lingering after class for the student who waited until the class end to raise a topic—all instantiate the availability that Marcel had in mind. For Marcel, to be available to someone is ultimately to kindle hope for, or at least be open to, a shared venture: "I hope in thee" means "I hope for thee in us" (Marcel 1962, 60). In Marcel's words, availability is seen as an "aptitude to give oneself to anything which offers, and to bind oneself by the gift . . . it means to transform circumstances into opportunities" (Marcel 1962, 23). To be available then becomes an all-embrace of the interactions which occur.

### *Mystery vs. Problem*

The third and final prong of Marcel's approach that we have chosen to highlight is that of mystery. If the move towards authenticity is foremost an individual one, and the move towards availability primarily a relational one, then Marcel's conceptualization of mystery becomes an indispensable adhesive which functions to bring together the individual and the other.

The problems of which Marcel speaks are those elucidated in his presentation of the broken world, to which we alluded in the first paragraph of this essay. However, where Marcel finds issue is that in our dealing with our problems, we unilaterally seek to root out any mystery inherent in the problems (Marcel 1995). We "datafy" and prescribe based on preexisting schemata; and we medicate in hopes of diminishing the mystery of others and ourselves.

Mystery has no such exigency. If we try to remove ourselves from the problem, there is no way to make an accurate assessment of that which is actually occurring. As put by Marcel, mystery can be thought of "as a problem that encroaches on its own data" (Marcel 1995, 19). By dissociating ourselves from mystery and "datafying" it or assigning it to prefabricated categories, what we are and what is outside of us become spurious at best and detrimental at worst. Through this disassociation and datafication of a common moral—and physical—ground we are rendered ultimately unavailable to one another.

### **Presence and Friendship**

When two people are mutually available to each other, or intersubjective to each other, the two experience an immediacy and aliveness that renders both present to one another. One ceases to be an other or an object of one's awareness like any other object comprising one's physical environment and becomes, instead, alive-with each other. The two become "co-esse" with each other. Marcel describes the phenomenon of presence by drawing a distinction from its opposite:

We can, for instance, have a very strong feeling that somebody who is sitting in the same room as ourselves, sitting quite near us, someone whom we can look at and listen to and whom we could touch if we wanted to make a final test of his reality, is nevertheless far further away from us than some loved one who is perhaps thousands of miles away or perhaps, even, no longer among the living. We could say that the man sitting beside us was in the same room as ourselves, but that he was not really present there, that his presence did not make itself felt. But what do I mean by presence, here? It is not that we could not communicate with this man; we are supposing him neither deaf, blind, nor idiotic. Between ourselves and him a kind of physical, but merely physical, communication is possible; the image of the passing of messages between a reception point and an emission point, which we have rejected on several other occasions, is in fact quite applicable here. Yet something essential is lacking. One might say that what we have with this person, who is in the room, but somehow not really present to us, is communication without communion: unreal communication, in a word. He understands what I say to

him, but he does not understand me: I may even have the extremely disagreeable feeling that my own words, as he repeats them to me, as he reflects them back at me, have become unrecognizable. (Marcel 1951a, 205)

What is clear in this formulation of presence is that it is not bound in space or time. One can feel the presence of a friend across the globe or, as in a communion of saints, of a loved one who has died. This is so because presence, borne of the mutual availability of persons, in the intersubjectivity of them, generates a reality that encompasses and exceeds the two persons' individual selves even as it makes of the individuals more fully themselves. Presence in this way stretches the boundedness of both of the two friends, rendering both of them immediate and near to each other even when great spans of space or long periods of time separate them. This is because presence manifests a communion between friends, which transcends time and space. Here we speak of friendship not in the banal or objectifiable sense, such as those numbered in the hundreds or thousands on our Facebook account or in our Instagram followers. We speak of friendship here to refer to what Marcel styles as communion. In this regard, it is closer to a Trinitarian paradigm of the mutual indwelling of the three Persons or to classic definitions of friendship, such as the formulation on friendship often ascribed to Aristotle that it consists of "a single soul dwelling in two bodies" (see, for example, Laertius 1925, passage 5.20) and thus endures in time and space. As an oft-quoted line from one of Marcel's screenplays puts it, and friends, whose friendship is born of authenticity, mutual availability, mystery, and presence can say of their friend, "Thou, thou at least shalt never die" (Marcel 1951a, 171).

## **Current Proposals of Media Use**

As alluded to in the introduction, recent literature in the field of media ecology has proffered ways in which the humanness of experience can be rescued from the death clutches of technology. For our purposes, we have selected two of what we found to be the most compelling articulations of a human approach to media. Below we provide an overview of the proposals called "slow media" and the "24/6 doctrine." Each program of thought contributes in part to the development of our own proposal.

First, let us discuss the doctrine of slow media. Inspired by the terms "slow journalism," "slow food," and the like, which date back to the early 2000s, the slow media movement was developed by Jennifer Rauch. Essentially, the term refers to the "imaginative responses to mediated life" (Rauch 2018, 5). Slow media is not a doctrine but, instead, a practice. Slow media corresponds not to the technologies themselves but to the manner in which we use them. One need not swear off the fast media which dominate our markets and command our attention and participation. Instead, adherence to a slow media approach is to use media in a way that focuses mindfulness of our usage. Rauch's argument is that "slow media are good, clean, fair, mindful, post-luddite, progressive, collective, and democratic" (Rauch 2018, 123). By seeking to break down binaries between types of media use, Rauch does well to eschew the typical dichotomy drawn between

analog/electric/digital technologies that often obfuscates the overarching message. The end goal here is not to revert to past media forms, but to use any and all forms of media available to us in a manner that privileges the human aspects of communication so that we may create sustainable relationships with ourselves, others, and the world in general.

Second, Tiffany Shlain offers a compelling idea for conceptualizing and curtailing media usage. Steeped in the Jewish tradition of Shabbat, Shlain offered a similar notion that applied the core presumptions of the religious convention to contemporary media use. Using the term “24/6,” Shlain proposes that we deliberately and consciously carve out time to limit our media usage. Her version meant that one day of the week, there would be a strict limitation of media that would be used. By doing so, Shlain (2019) argues that “Tech Shabbat is part of the solution. Living 24/6 works as the prefrontal cortex does: it forces you to stop what you’re doing, examine your circumstances, slow down, and focus on what’s important. To think before you act” (166).

In practice, the 24/6 proposal necessitates that individuals come up with their own list of reasonably attainable technological restrictions for at least one day of the week. This doctrine is customizable to the extent that one may allow media to be used more or less on the day in question. Through this practice, Shlain found that there was an increased reverence for unmediated time that allowed her and her family to reconnect in a manner not possible before.

The above two proposals have several unique, as well as uniting, factors that can aid any individual hoping to carve out a new approach to their media usage substantially. For instance, each doctrine is focused heavily on mindfulness and selection. The two doctrines provide useful complementary criteria in this realm: Rauch offers a way of living day to day, while Shlain offers a more retreat-oriented weekly approach. Each of these platforms is brilliantly nuanced and, by consequence of space, vastly oversimplified here and addresses how to create habits and routines that allow one to cope with the technological condition.

However, they both focus on habits, routines, and uses of technology that users can adopt *as* individuals. In contrast, we shift the focus, as Marcel does, to a more relational or intersubjective perspective on use of digital means of communication, instead of leaving our humanity to arise through conditions of our individual use of digital media.

## **Cultivating Authenticity, Availability, Mystery, Presence and Friendship in the Digital Era**

The authors suggest that conscious use of our media technologies may be part of the solution, but more important is that we first deal with the human side. To do so, let us take a tangible, specific example in which we might consider the above tenets. For the purposes of familiarity—as well as the anecdotal significance to us as authors—we offer the example of the academic conference.

As any participant in any academic conference will note, there is much more to such events than the presentation and reception of research. In fact, for many

this may even be an ancillary activity when compared to social and networking happenings. When one of the authors of this essay was a young master's student, he was told by a likely disaffected senior scholar that academic conferences are "an excuse to hang with friends and drink wine." While we as scholars certainly do not subscribe to such a sentiment—or at the least would not announce this to our students—it can be indisputably asserted that conferences have a social element as close in importance to that of the research presented itself. They are places where we bump into—sometimes literally—old friends and colleagues, meet individuals of similar interests, spontaneously attend lunches and dinners, and even form lasting professional and personal relationships in what seems like a happenstance manner.

Conferences in this traditional in-person format are predicated on the notion that individuals put down their phones and laptops and engage deeply with ideas of others. Scholars of all ages and levels of experience are—by physical requirement—available to others interested in their work. Conferences serve as a quasi tech shabbat—as envisioned by Shlain—where scholars can get away from their emails and grading to provide their undivided attention to their peers. Just as laid out by Rauch, we as scholars are allowed to slow down: to break out our pen and pad, to listen to people speak, to reflect, to be together. But more to our point, in Marcellian terms, conferences provide a space in which the perquisites for participation rely on availability (via nametag in the simplest sense; via the sharing of deep thoughts and ideas in a more significant sense); authenticity (by way of showing who we are and how we think); mystery (by way of grappling with problems that may or may not have solutions); and presence and friendship (through relationships born and nurtured through the opportunities for interaction). Though it may not always be the case, academic conferences create a space in which we are thrust into a situation which makes the remedies Marcel sought for the broken world easily accessible and adaptable.

Perhaps it is a personal attribution, but conferences have often provided the authors with new energy, vigor, and excitement for possibilities. With all the solitary work needed to produce scholarship, the presence and being-with that conferences afford is of paramount importance to the authors. This view, of course, brackets the stillborn or even nefarious activities that can happen at conferences. From ill-advised comments after a glass too many, to stolen ideas and predatory relations, and even to ambiguous hotel room invitations, conferences are obviously not all glitz and glamor and Marcellian communion. But we maintain that these spaces present optimal opportunities for participation and presence with the other.

However, as we all know, in Spring 2020 all scholarly activities went digital. Conferences—once jovial and spontaneous—were now moved online with scheduled online welcome ceremonies and happy hours. Gone were the chance encounters. Many individuals attended only their sessions and perhaps one or two others of interest. The ability to hide, to portray an ideological and personal front, and even to be only ostensibly present became quite easy. So, what do we do with our media now?

Here is where we find that Rauch and Shlain fall short—not in theory, but in practice. To retreat from the new platform of conferences—or even to attempt to be choosy about the tech we use to attend to the proceedings—is untenable. While the above statement implicates a drastic oversimplification of what both Shlain and Rauch ask of us, if either of their platforms has been an individual's key to dealing with their technological condition, then we are left somewhat adrift in the outlined situation.

## Ontological Exigence and Authenticity

This is where Marcel can help us. In many ways, the online conference leaves the socialite dejected. But this need not be. Instead, we start with the first prong laid out above: authenticity, to which we connect another key insight of Marcel on the ontological exigence.

Marcel says that the quality of intersubjectivity for which all yearn, wrought first through an impulse to transcend ourselves—i.e., go out of ourselves—begins with either a certain dissatisfaction with something we perceive ourselves to lack, as an inner urge, or, in the opposite direction, out of a desire to create something, to externalize, out of all that we have absorbed. Marcel depicts this impulse as an ontological exigency (Marcel 1980, 34). The authors felt this exigency with particular intensity during the period of time in which they met. One had recently experienced the ugliness of the realities of academia that darkened his enthusiasm for liberating scholarly and pedagogical pursuits, and the other had become similarly disillusioned with his career path as professors and peers appeared to him like dead men walking. And yet both had shown up in a show of hope that maybe something could offer relief to a broken world. Recognizing in the other the ontological exigency, a vague uneasiness, as well as the spark of excitement for facets of our field that hold promise in repairing dystopic elements of our culture created spacious openings for friendship (Marcel 1951b, 44–45). Marcel depicts the guilelessness of one to the other, the authentic unaffected presentation of broken but still hopeful selves to one another, as the welcome light on the front porch of intersubjectivity. As Marcel put it, “there must be an appeal, an invocation, an ‘abide with me’ that is more or less enunciated” (Marcel 1952, 170).

For simplicity, let us consider this prong as dealing—at least primarily—with ourselves. To be available is first to gain a modicum of self-awareness. The point of such self-awareness is not only to understand oneself—at least not in the Marcellian sense—but to be aware in order to reduce the exterior barriers between self and other. A term we may be more familiar with is to be transparent: to have our motives, goals, ideas be easily apparent to the others involved while maintaining mystery that respects the fact that the other is never completely knowable.

To be authentic in the digital world is not to take a break once a week, nor is it necessarily to limit media use to that which makes us feel right. Instead, to be authentic is to use all tools available to be wholly ourselves; not to subscribe to the external categories put on ourselves and the other, but to access the transcendent

properties of self, other, and that which is intermingled. The digital conferencegoers cannot simply be two people on either side of the screen. Instead, each is all of the possibilities that exist outside of the medium despite the perceived constraints of the medium.

For instance, the two authors of this essay started their interaction as presenter and audience member—though unbeknownst to the presenter as the presentation itself was digital. The first point of contact was not even registered. However, the email reaching out indicated a shared interest in the topic of the talk: media portrayals of dystopic societies. At the height of the pandemic, a shared interest in the abysmal might seem to be a run-of-the-mill or even creepy interaction; however, it was the deeply held concern, coupled with a tempered optimism, that endeared us to one another. During difficult times, we both turned to one of the darkest possible topic areas—that is, imagined dystopic futures in which the most pessimistic of outcomes arose.

What is perhaps equally interesting to the content area that bonded us, was also the different lives from which we came: one of us, a graduate student asphyxiated by the death throes of comprehensive exams, dissertation tasks, and multiple jobs; the other a senior faculty member disheartened by campus politics. Even though both of us were in wildly different stations in life, the email chain that was started was not just words strung together and cast to electronic screen—well, it was also that—but it was a signal, like colored flares, of two sailors meeting in the maelstrom with little idea how they got there. It started with that impulse and yearning for connection that had previously been severed, or at least severely frayed, for both of us. In reaching out to each other, we were able to remove the blinders and revisit the worlds we had been so disconnectedly inhabiting.

### *Availability*

If we are to return from this interlude of our conference trope to our pronged approach, we find ourselves at the second prong: availability. This component follows nearly sequentially. In our choice to be authentic, we are simultaneously choosing to open ourselves to the other; to those properties which transcend ourselves. It means that we, in turn, be radically open to the other. As Marcel stated, availability is “the aptitude to give oneself to anything which offers, and to bind oneself by the gift . . . it means to transform circumstances into opportunities” (Marcel 1951, 23). Perhaps one of the more easily intelligible and pinpointable concepts of Marcel’s availability simply requires us to be attentive to our environment and people within it. As far as the digital conference goes, this might be as simple as an email, a response, or even a thumbs up/comment in the Zoom window. Any and all offerings from the other must be heeded.

These offerings—and their subsequent responses—come in many different forms. They are fostered not just in face-to-face contact, as perhaps believed by the Luddite. Instead, we can find them in all sorts of interactions should we be on the lookout.

For instance, as the email chain between these two authors became insufficient to carry all the information we wanted to convey, we found ourselves

scheduling random Zoom meetings, picking up on random little tidbits available in the medium available to us. As had the effects on Marcel of the personal belongings of fallen soldiers that he sorted through when he served as Red Cross director in Paris, it was the little things about each other that we began to notice. It was the little things like a Seiko wristwatch we both wore habitually. It was little things like finding out we both had a lifelong affection for and kinship with golden retrievers. It was the little things like an off glance or squirm in the chair at certain phrases, names, events, ideas, and others. It was the little things like the way we kept our offices, homes, selves, and so on that began to stand out in our growing availability to each other. Each of these components might be ignored, or perhaps not even noticed in many circumstances. But it is Marcel who instructs us to be available and attentive, willing but not unscrupulous, to engage with whatever is presented as with food dishes like meatloaf, goulash, and cassoulet, in every culture that were born out of sheer food scarcity but are found now in high-end restaurants. Perhaps our orientation towards our media technologies leaves us inclined to think the worst and thus encourages us to relinquish responsibility. We tune in and drop out without the slightest attempt to heed the offerings that are present. To be clear, technology is not a replacement for human contact, but if it is all we have available, then it is not tenable to continue walling ourselves off merely because it is not a total replacement.

### *Mystery*

Third, we find ourselves at the third prong: mystery. If we have resolved to be authentic to ourselves in the world and to be available to any offerings presented by the other, we are part of the way there, but not yet entirely there. One of the problematics that has been largely glazed over is the unfortunately substantial degree to which humans fail each other and even intentionally exploit each other. In the case of conference attendees, this might be individuals disguising their authentic selves for various reasons. We might perceive something like an email from a random conference goer as an offering, when in reality it is either a transactional or even predatory attempt. Life, digital or otherwise, is never without these risks. However, if we are forced into inactivity or reclusion by such risks, we are shunning potential opportunities for connection. This is the primary difficulty of responding to the availability of the other in the digital world. And yet—and this is a primary impetus driving our argument—availability is essential so that one may be taken not only by a view of the other in his uniqueness but also in the “mysterious relations which link them together” (Marcel 1964, 147). The two become so aware of the mysterious link that it unavoidably becomes a topic of discussion among them.

Decidedly one of the most dangerous threats to a Marcellian approach to technology is a low tolerance for mystery that is imbued in society. With the amount of information that is recorded and shared about people, we have come to think that we can know everything there is to know about people. It has led us to be suspicious of any information we cannot find. Gaps in the linkage (i.e. the

mystery laden in being) should not signal undoing; indeed, the mysteriousness of the link is that which we should be celebrating.

Each of us will do things that are foreign or even concerning to the other—whether they be, for example, long spells of non-contact or hypersensitivity to certain comments. In some interactions, a simple nonresponse or ambiguous comment might lead individuals to cut ties, to close doors, to return to their walled off spaces. However, if we are to follow Marcel, these instances of physical or emotional disconnection can be fruitful areas from which we would learn more about ourselves and each other through a new perspective thrust upon us. They can become catalysts for growth in intersubjective understanding. This, of course, is perhaps the trickiest of the Marcellian concepts, as it forces an individual truly to take a leap of faith. Yet the reward that can be had from approaching others in this manner can be immeasurably positive in one's life.

### *Presence*

Finally, the fourth and ultimate rung on the ladder that Marcel suggests that we all seek to reach, and what seems most deficient in the staggering data on loneliness, isolation, and depression, is presence, which culminates in communion. As we will show below, the recognition of the ontological exigency by the authors in each other together with the hopefulness that the other might offer something pertinent to the felt need and shared interest of themselves can remove the barriers that otherwise wall off people from one another. Their porous availability and recognition of such in each other made space for each to enter the being of the other and awakened a sense that each was a gift to the other. In turn, what gains salience is not the person as object—a “he”—but the interpersonal interaction between the two. Marcel presents it as a kind of mutual indwelling:

When I say that a being is granted to me as a presence or as a being (it comes to the same, for he is not a being for me unless he is a presence), this means that I am unable to treat him as if he were merely placed in front of me; between him and me there arises a relationship which, in a sense, surpasses my awareness of him; he is not only before me, is also within me—or, rather, these categories are transcended, they have no longer any meaning (Marcel 1995, 38).

And of the effects of presence, Marcel (1951a) writes that “presence does really make itself felt, it can refresh my inner being; it reveals me to myself, it makes me more fully myself than I should be if I were not exposed to its impact” (205). And when it is engendered through mutual availability, “there is ‘an influx of being.’” This communion, says Marcel, “belongs on the ontological plane” (Marcel 1951, 213). A distinct characteristic of presence is that it stretches beyond the place of intersubjective encounters (coffee shop or Zoom call) and lingers in an afterglow like steam on asphalt after rainfall on a sunny day. Marcel presents presence that is sensed between friends as immortal—an enduring communion.

Put together, this four-pronged approach, informed by Marcellian concepts, can be applied systematically and pragmatically to any situation with any

combination of media forms and contextual factors. Although this approach relies on a leap of faith, the leap is not altogether different from an in-person interaction. Simply put, the digital environment—and in our example the scholarly conference—requires a certain sensitivity to different contextual factors and symbol systems than that of in-person proceedings.

The above four-pronged approach is exactly how the two authors of this article met, precisely at an academic conference carried out virtually. From a simple email sent as a follow-up to a presentation, followed by correspondence, zoom meetings, coffees, cancelled meetings, and so on, we feel deeply that we have first stumbled upon and second cultivated a degree of presence that we wish all might be able to experience. We cultivated a soulful presence by making use of our digital media environment to combat the alienation that it often triggers. As our experience has shown, Marcel's four-pronged approach avoids technodependence as well as technophobia and luddism, aiming instead to leverage digital technology and all means of communication to foster dialogue and connection that enhance human wellbeing.

Out of a simple display of authenticity and availability, a lifelong friendship was formed. This friendship was not without its difficulties, from distance to nonresponse. However, it is that acceptance of a degree of mystery that formed an intersubjectivity. Through this all, the thing we sought is radiated in every interaction—not just those in-person or digital.

Of course, what has just been described is the ideal. Just as in-person interactions assume risks, so do digital interactions. In a traditional setting one might be stood up for dinner. In a digital setting one might be left unread. The problem is not accurately identified if we ascribe it solely to our technologies. If we have learned anything from Marcel, we must look inward should we wish to solve the issues of our broken world even as we look outward at the person put beside us in our interchanges. To be clear, this is not a call to be open to all, to put ourselves in harm's way on purpose, but instead a call to look at each of these four prongs as their own graduated scales in which we work towards that mystical communion which is so desperately needed in our broken world.

Even though the above program is surely not a complete application of Marcel's ideas, we offer it to provide an accessible entry point for those wishing to cultivate friendship in these trying digital and divisive times. To restate, by consciously building Marcel's four-fold elixir of availability, authenticity, mystery, and presence as a moral foundation from which one may cultivate more meaningful human interactions and connections, individuals and groups create the conditions by which they may be able to lead more fulfilled and engaged lives. Our own experiences, incorporated into the pages above, serve as a testament—albeit it an imperfect and highly personalized—to the possibility of these stated positive and, more importantly, human outcomes.

## Conclusion

While applauding the work that Shlain and Rauch have added to the conversation on managing in a world dominated by digital technology, we recommend a return to the fundamentals of intersubjectivity that Marcel has left us. It is an a priori argument that starts with ourselves and is manifested outside of ourselves in ways that do not always have clean and clearly drawn terms. What we have presented here requires individuals to reflect upon themselves and making themselves available to persons they find themselves beside physically or virtually prior to engaging with their technology. This is not to say that the technology is to be a secondary consideration, but instead it should be thought of as useful tool, an instrument, but above all, a bridge between two souls longing to fulfill themselves as intersubjective beings.

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## An Examination of the Ethics of Care and Care/Harm Moral Foundations in the X Cativeverse

Adrienne Darrah

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**Abstract:** Comprised of both real and imaginary cats and kittens, the “cativeverse” is a digitally mediated space within social media platforms where cat owners and enthusiasts gather to share their adoration and dedication to cats. Utilizing a content analysis of X (formerly Twitter) posts relating to the care of a sick cat (Wintery) by its owner (@PawsleyTheCat) during summer 2023, this study examines the application of the care/harm moral foundation within the X cativeverse utilizing an ethics of care framework. Moral conflicts between cativeverse denizens in summer 2023 were shaped by misinformation and disinformation relating to Wintery’s care, differing notions of animal suffering, and competing ethical considerations between a pet’s distress and its owner’s emotional needs. This study addresses the question: In the context of a feline health crisis, how does the care/harm moral foundation structure user interactions and influence support among community members within the X cativeverse?

**Keywords:** X; Twitter; cativeverse; cats; moral foundations

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**Editor’s Note:** *This essay studies social media messages that include inappropriate and crude language. To ensure authenticity of the study, original language has not been altered in order to provide clear, transparent, and authentic representation of these messages.*

The cat universe or “cativeverse” is a digitally mediated space within social media platforms where cat owners, lovers, enthusiasts, fans, advocates, activists, and rescuers meet to share their adoration and dedication to cats. Comprised of both real and imaginary cats and kittens, the cativeverse is based on a foundation comprised of trust, reciprocity, and solidarity. Participants in the cativeverse celebrate one another’s cat-related joys while also sharing in the heartache and challenges that come with animal caregiving.

While some scholars argue that humans should not possess domesticated animals (Clement 2003; Hens 2009), when meeting the needs of these animals there is an interdependent human-animal relationship created and an ethics of care role in which humans assume responsibility for animal well-being transpires (Clement

2003). This relationship between human and domestic animal is one that is deeply reflective of the dualism between nature and culture as well as between agency and power (Haraway 2003). As the online space in which individuals share their experiences with cats, the cativerse reveals how this tension is negotiated through everyday interactions.

Within the cativerse, individuals are held accountable for the well-being of their cats while benefitting from practical, emotional, and sometimes even financial support to aid in that care. This dynamic is reflective in not only the users' care for their cats but also in the reciprocal support that is extended to one another through the highs and lows of animal caregiving. In its prioritization of alleviating pet and owner suffering, protecting vulnerable animals and individuals, and the promotion of empathy and compassion in social relationships, an ethics of care lens reflecting the care/harm moral foundation dominate the cativerse.

Though a typically close-knit community, tensions in the X (formerly Twitter) cativerse began to emerge in July 2023 when one cativerse user's approach to caring for their ill cat sparked division within the group. Through a qualitative thematic content analysis of X posts dated between July and August 2023 and concerning the care of @PawsleyTheCat's sick cat Wintery, this study illustrates how competing moral ideologies contributed to a breakdown within the X cativerse. The findings in this study suggest that while the ethics of care and the care/harm moral foundation are dominant in the cativerse, moral conflicts arose due to misinformation and disinformation relating to Wintery's care, differing notions of animal suffering, and competing ethical considerations between a pet's distress and its owner's emotional needs.

## Theoretical Framework

As a feminist approach to ethics, the ethics of care emphasizes "attending to and meeting the needs of the particular others for whom we take responsibility" (Held 2006, 10). Challenging the traditional, masculine model of ethics by shifting the focus to empathy, relational responsibility, and attentiveness to the vulnerable, gendered interactions and inequitable power dynamics in social groups are shifted to focus on mutual support (Held 2006). Moral foundations theory further supports this perspective through the care/harm foundational morals which are rooted in human empathy and compassion (Haidt 2012). The ethics of care and care/harm moral foundation are central to the cativerse's focus on meeting the needs of cats and community while prioritizing compassion, mutual aid, and the alleviation of cat and owner distress.

### *Ethics of Care Theory*

Introduced by Carol Gilligan (1982) and extended by Nel Noddings (1984), ethics of care is a feminist normative moral and ethical theory that challenges the traditional, masculine model of ethics which focuses on productivity and fails to recognize the importance of emotional care within stakeholder decisions. Embodying a relational view of ethics, ethics of care centers on emotional

awareness in stakeholder decisions, a trait that is often associated with femininity (Held 2006; Oruc and Sarikaya 2011; Panagiotarakou 2016). Ethics of care also emphasizes the inequities and relationships associated with gendered power dynamics (Held 2006) by stressing empathy, responsibility, reciprocity, and compassion (Montes and Pombo 2019).

As a result of being a feminine response to a masculine model of ethics, some argue that ethics of care's association with feminine traits reinforces gendered stereotypes and contributes to the continued marginalization of women (Sander-Staudt n.d.). Others argue it is an inadequate framework pointing to its limitations in resolving conflicting moral demands (Held 2006) and its perceived neglect of utilitarianism and environmentalism in ethical decision making (Panagiotarakou 2016). However, with a foundation built on emotional responsibility, ethics of care finds its strength in caring about the wellbeing of those who are dependent on and vulnerable to others (Held 2006; Hens 2009; Sander-Staudt n.d.).

Underscoring the importance of the relationship and not the individual (Held 2006; Oruc and Sarikaya 2011), ethics of care is particularly relevant in the human-animal bond which is rooted in trust, shared dependency, and compassion. As humans took responsibility for domesticated animals (Clement 2003), an ethics of care framework naturally emerged. Often regarded as a family member (Brown 2023), emotional bonds between pet and human may even transcend those of other human being bonds as pets may fulfill the basic human need of affection (Herzog 2010; Panagiotarakou 2016). Stressing this sensitivity to others' needs, this emphasis on empathy, responsibility, and compassion is also reflective of the care/harm moral foundation.

### *Moral Foundations Theory*

Introduced by Jonathan Haidt (2012), moral foundations theory posits that human morality is rooted in six sets of innate psychological foundations—care/harm, fairness/cheating, loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, sanctity/degradation, and liberty/oppression. These foundations influence human moral judgment and reasoning and are biologically rooted, beginning to develop while in utero and further cultivated by sociocultural experiences during childhood (Haidt 2012). Although these moral foundations are universal, they vary across cultures, creating cultural similarities and differences (Haidt 2012). This paper focuses specifically on the care/harm foundation.

The care/harm foundation finds its basis in the evolutionary development of human attachment to others and the need to nurture and protect offspring (Haidt 2012). Care/harm is triggered by perceived suffering or violence against the innocent, motivating a moral response to want to care for and protect those who are unable to care for themselves, such as children (Haidt 2012). Empathy plays a key role in the care/harm moral foundation, enabling individuals to recognize and be emotionally impacted by the pain in others, consequently creating a biological and emotional inclination to care for and respond to the harm of others.

Tensions emerge in the care/harm moral foundation when the imperative to care and aversion to harm are prioritized differently between individuals. As

domesticated animals are dependent on human care, cats may become central to these moral conflicts. The domestic cat's widespread presence in society can further amplify the potential for such tension. Today, cats are the second most popular pet in the United States with 46.5 million United States households reporting owning a cat (Megna 2024).

### *The Cativerse*

The intertwined relationship, which is reflective in the dichotomy of nature and culture (Hens 2008), not only exists between human and cat but also carries over to human and cativerse. Existing across social media platforms, the cativerse is a mediated space for cat owners, lovers, enthusiasts, fans, advocates, activists, and rescuers to celebrate one another's cat-related joys while also sharing in the heartache and challenges that come with animal caregiving (Podhovník 2023). Comprised of both real and imaginary cats and kittens, the cativerse celebrates both celebrity cats (e.g., @mrfishtopher, @thegoodcatboy, @JortsTheCat, @Number10cat, @SimonsCat, @Pusheen) as well as everyday cats.

Cativerse users often utilize the cativerse to find answers to cat-related questions as well as to find practical, emotional, and financial support they may not be able to find elsewhere. As Podhovník (2023) notes, the cativerse is a "park we can take our cats to, which is something we cannot really do in the real world" (4). Bridging both geographical and social distances, the cativerse fosters a sense of community and shared responsibility among cat owners.

While Gilligan in her early work on ethics of care ignored the human-animal relationship (Sander-Staudt n.d.), at the heart of the cativerse are the values of trust, reciprocity, empathy, and solidarity, values akin to those in the ethics of care. In extending the theory, Noddings acknowledged that ethics of care should be applied to the human-animal relationship but only for animals in a human's immediate circle who are open to care and capable of reciprocation (Sander-Staudt, n.d.). In 1996, Donovan and Adams opened the door to all nonhuman animals in the ethics of care framework due to what the authors argue are human beings' moral obligations in the human-animal relationship.

More recently, Engster (2006) argued that humans' moral obligations to animals exist only when the animals' survival, well-being, and functioning are reliant on those individuals. This applies to pets as well as farm and work animals (Clement 2003) and explains why the cativerse is a prime example of an ethics of care and care/harm framework. As such, the following research question is proposed: In the context of a feline health crisis, how does the care/harm moral foundation structure user interactions and influence support among community members within the X cativerse?

## **Methodology**

To address the research question, this study utilizes a qualitative thematic content analysis (Berg 2008) of X posts dated between July and August 2023. The analyzed posts were publicly shared by individual X users and posted in response to the

@PawsleyTheCat account regarding their sick cat Wintery or to other X users who had engaged with @PawsleyTheCat's posts. Posts serve diverse purposes and represent a range of perspectives. User metadata was examined to evaluate post reach.

Shortly after Wintery became ill, @PawsleyTheCat set their profile to private. Their profile has since become public, but out of respect for @PawsleyTheCat during the time the posts were collected, @PawsleyTheCat posts were not collected for this study. In total, 217 posts from 140 individual X user profiles were collected.

Due to the relatively small subset of posts and X profiles in this study, the data was manually collected and examined for prevailing themes. While it is acknowledged that X's public API is of low quality (Vicente 2023), given the focus of this study, it was deemed unnecessary to delve deeper into the X data. This method of sampling, however, may lead to selectivity bias given users' decisions to either take part in or refrain from the online conversation (Vicente 2023) as it related to Wintery's care and @PawsleyTheCat's behaviors.

### *The Saga of Wintery the Cat*

On July 13, 2023, X user @PawsleyTheCat reached out to the X cativerse for emotional support after their one-year-old black, purebred cat Wintery had gone a week without eating or showing interest in his usual activities. Following a visit to the veterinarian on July 15 and subsequently posting the bill, @PawsleyTheCat continued to keep the cativerse updated on Wintery's condition. With a reach of 17,000+ followers, @PawsleyTheCat received an outpouring of sympathy, diagnostic suggestions, and eventually donations. User @luvasunnyday broached the topic of supporting @PawsleyTheCat through financial contributions by posting, "Remember if you need any help just ask as we all love you guys and lots of us I'm sure would be happy to contribute [growing heart]" (Irene 2023).

After a visit to a clinic two hours away, it was announced on July 17 that Wintery may have contracted FIP (feline infectious peritonitis). A viral disease, FIP is often fatal and requires extensive medical treatment. In response, @katfan4eva announced to their 11,000+ followers that Wintery was named the cat of the day, posting, "His hoom . . . needs to urgently contact someone who knows about #FIP" ([cat]Cat Fan Forever[cat] 2023). @PawsleyTheCat also posted a link to their page for those wishing to contribute toward their mounting veterinarian expenses, prompting several followers to repost the call and/or send financial assistance.

By July 18, it remained unclear whether Wintery had contracted FIP or was being treated for another illness. It was clear, however, that Wintery had not been discharged from the clinic and was not receiving FIP medication. Some followers encouraged @PawsleyTheCat to trust the veterinarian's judgement (e.g. Claire Long 2023; [Sparkles] Owl @ Con Crunch [Arrow Soon] Otakuthon! [Sparkles] 2023), while others advocated for covertly administering FIP medication to Wintery (e.g. Sooty & Rocky [Paws] 2023; Splash&Cody(RIP [Rainbow] [Single Tear]) 2023). On July 19, Wintery began eating again and the notion that he may have cancer began to float through the X cativerse. This diagnosis, however, was soon rejected.

On July 21, @PawsleyTheCat's followers began suggesting they stay in a hotel near the clinic to reduce travel time between their home and the clinic. That same day, Wintery was transferred to another clinic for a second opinion. As @PawsleyTheCat defended their use of donated funds, rising costs prompted them to make a plea for additional financial help.

As uncertainty persisted about Wintery's condition, posts through July 23 remained largely supportive, with most users sending hugs, paws, purrs, good vibes, thoughts, and prayers. Roughly two weeks after the onset of Wintery's symptoms, however, tensions in the cativerse began to emerge. While supporters reassured @PawsleyTheCat that they did not need to return or justify the use of the donated funds, others began asking @PawsleyTheCat to let Wintery pass peacefully.

On July 24, @joeyfreckle announced to their 12,000+ followers that anybody supporting @PawsleyTheCat was enabling them and part of the problem (olde joey [left arrow][right up arrow][black heart] 2023). Over the next two days, both @PawsleyTheCat and their supporters began to attack @joeyfreckle, and on July 25, @MyKittyVinnie posted a public plea to @PawsleyTheCat writing, "Nathalie, I've mostly kept quiet about this, but you're taking this too far. Attacking Joey's mom for expressing concern about prolonging Wintery's suffering is NOT helping anyone. Not you, not your cats. Take some time away from the internet" (vinny [orange heart] thomas 2023). In a post addressed to @PawsleyTheCat, @Talkative\_red noted they finally "crossed a line" (Tricia Wright 2023), a sentiment many X users also seemed to share.

While Wintery showed signs of improvement by July 25, a diagnosis remained unclear, and emotions among X cativerse users continued to run high. Debates began to emerge over the use of euthanasia, with some users arguing that responsible pet owners know to limit their pet's suffering (e.g., Mary Pat loves [Purple Heart] Aggie,Scruf,Wini,Bear,Mr.P... 2023), while others argued that all avenues to save a pet need to be exhausted before euthanasia should even be considered (e.g., tekbrat 2023). Ongoing requests for donations for a cat some felt was being kept alive for selfish reasons also became offensive to several users (e.g., Ana 2023, Mister chedda [Jelly Fish] 2023).

Around this time, @PawsleyTheCat indicated that if Wintery were to die they would purchase another purebred cat from the same breeder that had bred Wintery. This caused a deeper divide in the cativerse given that @PawsleyTheCat was crowdfunding for vet bills they could not afford but could seemingly afford to purchase another purebred cat (e.g., haley 2023; Jenn[Pride Flag], Luki[Black Cat], & Ty[Orange Cat] 2023). As @CatsSurname posted to their 16,000+ followers on July 27, "It's still crass as fuck to beg for money to save a dying purebred cat AT THE SAME TIME you are talking about buying another one from the same breeder if it dies." (Rain's Cat 2023a).

By July 27, @PawsleyTheCat made their X account private in order to curb bullying they reportedly had been receiving. While the account was no longer publicly accessible, discussions regarding Wintery's condition and @PawsleyTheCat continued. Some users who retained access to view and comment on the account's posts, occasionally shared screenshots allowing others

who did not have access to @PawsleyTheCat's profile to follow Wintery's developments indirectly.

Much of the criticism directed at @PawsleyTheCat centered on Wintery's deteriorating health and the continued solicitation of funds. However, @PawsleyTheCat's perceived erratic behaviors also fueled some backlash. For example, @PawsleyTheCat threatened other X users with legal action based on the content of their posts (e.g., Rain's Cats 2023b) and was, in turn, accused of bullying by other users (e.g., em[Rainbow] 2023).

A new uproar contributing to the building cativerse tensions erupted when @PawsleyTheCat controversially equated euthanizing Wintery, a black cat, to the historical and systematic killings of Black and Jewish people. This remark sparked widespread outrage among cativerse denizens (e.g., Pablo "Fat Bloke" Escobar [Cow head] 2023; x-biohazard 2023). In a July 28 post, @mrreddycat posted a response to @PawsleyTheCat which included a screenshot of the post in question, writing, "Why in the hell would you EVER say something like that?! @PawsleyTheCat racism and anti-Semitism isn't going to get you out of the fact we all see exactly what you're doing to your poor cat. Don't be so vile. Get offline, seek help. [Screenshot]" (teddy [cat head] 2023).

## Findings

Several themes emerged from the data in this study. The four primary themes found include posts that were in support of @PawsleyTheCat and their care for their cat Wintery (pro-posts), posts that were not in support of @PawsleyTheCat's care for Wintery or took offense at an action or comment made by @PawsleyTheCat (anti-posts), posts that were confused by the status of Wintery's care and/or survival (confused posts), and posts referencing the cativerse (X cativerse posts). Additionally, several subthemes emerged. These subthemes include posts related to personal attacks, blocking or being blocked by other users, donations, Wintery's convalescence, the humane treatment of animals, cat illnesses, offensiveness, self-care, strength and support, and unethical behaviors.

### *Pro-Posts and Anti-Posts*

A total of 133 (61.3%) posts fell into the pro-posts theme. These included posts that celebrated @PawsleyTheCat or Wintery, attacked other users in support of @PawsleyTheCat, included information on how to donate or informed @PawsleyTheCat they donated, discussions on cat illnesses, and/or support or sending strength to Wintery and/or @PawsleyTheCat (e.g., ClappTrap | RIP: P-22 [Cat Head] | [Muscle] [Blue Heart] [Yellow Heart] [Ukraine Flag] 2023; Snow Fairy 2[Purple Peace Sign][Canadian Flag][Ukraine Flag] 2023; William Jennings 2023). Two posts which also fell into this category were dismayed when @PawsleyTheCat set their page to private as they could no longer follow Wintery's progress (e.g., Lisa Turovlin 2023; Ruth and Gandalf [Cat] Fly high Scruffa [Rainbow] 2023). Overall, this theme had the largest number of posts with an average follower base of 1,788 users.

Anti-posts accounted for the second highest number of posts at 59 (27.2%). These posts were rooted in disinformation and misinformation shared in the cativerse and largely criticized @PawsleyTheCat for what users argued was prolonging Wintery's suffering. Additional criticisms stemmed from questionable comments or actions by @PawsleyTheCat (e.g., Gonzo Does Tweets [Cat] he/him 2023; Shanstar 2023). Some users questioned @PawsleyTheCat's rationality when they announced they intended to buy another cat from the same breeder if Wintery died. Not only had @PawsleyTheCat already purchased two purebred cats, but they seemingly did not have the funds to care for those cats given their solicitation of donations (e.g., Cats of Yore 2023; Steph [Books] they/them 2023). The most intense backlash occurred when @PawsleyTheCat compared Wintery, a black cat, to Black people using a racial slur, as well as likening the euthanasia of sick animals to the Holocaust (e.g., CynCyn 2023; Gina, Oscar & Lucy 2023). The average follower base for anti-posts was 6,015 users.

### *Confused Posts and X Posts*

The remaining themes included posts expressing confusion regarding Wintery's illness and/or status (e.g., dr. k [Purple Heart] Scruff 2023; Norse 2023; Tigger [Red Heart] Scruffa 2023) as well as posts reflecting on how the situation was impacting the cativerse (e.g., Jorts (and Jean) 2023; Kat 2023; Olivia, Gracie Purrl, Salvy, and Luna 2023). Similar to the anti-posts, confused posts were shaped by disinformation and misinformation circulating in the community and accounted for 19 (8.8%) posts. Alternatively, posts categorized in the X Posts theme, included 6 (2.8%) posts. Among the confused posts, there was an average follower base of 2,008 users, while the posts referencing the X cativerse had an average follower base of 37,434 users.

### *Subthemes*

Within the four main themes, eleven subthemes emerged. These included themes related to personal attacks, having a profile blocked or blocking others, donations, Wintery's convalescence, the humane treatment of animals, cat illness, offensiveness, self-care, strength and support, and unethical behaviors (Table 1, next page).

**Table 1.** Study subthemes, examples, and counts by total posts and average profile followers

Subtheme	Examples	Total Posts	Average Followers
Illness	FIP; Cancer; Veterinary care	43 (19.8%)	2202 (2.8%)
Donation	Asking for money; Commentary on fund usage/asking for money	40 (18.4%)	1513 (2%)
Attack	Name calling; Threatening lawsuits; Responding to other's attacks/threats	31 (14.3%)	6527 (8.4%)
Self-Care	Suggesting @PawsleyTheCat get rest	18 (8.3%)	1010 (1.3%)
Strength/Support	Impressed with @PawsleyTheCat's strength; Sending emotional support	17 (7.8%)	902 (1.2%)
Offensiveness	Racism; Antisemitism; Offending individuals who did not fight their pet's terminal illness	16 (7.4%)	1557 (2%)
Convalesce	Wintery eating/going home/jumping on @PawsleyTheCat's lap	15 (6.9%)	1159 (1.5%)
Humane	Letting go of a suffering pet; Forcing a pet to suffer; Euthanasia	10 (4.6%)	887 (1.1%)
Unethical Behavior	Purchasing a cat from a breeder, crowdfunding for cat's care, intending to buy from the same breeder	12 (5.5%)	19603 (25.4%)
Block	Blocking users; Being blocked; @PawsleyTheCat profile going private	9 (4.1%)	4495 (5.8%)

## Discussion

The cativerse is a digitally mediated space where cat owners and enthusiasts come together to share in their devotion to cats. Individuals who have taken on the responsibility of caring for cats, celebrate one another's cat-related joys while also

sharing in the heartache and challenges that also come with animal caregiving. Cativeerse participants can rely on each other to meet their practical, emotional, and sometimes financial need. Within the cativeerse, an ethics of care and care/harm moral foundation lens is nowhere more evident than when a cat falls ill.

When confusion arises regarding a cat's illness, individuals with experience caring for sick cats often offer their support through knowledge and advice as well as through emotional and financial support when needed. If an owner is struggling to cover their cat's medical expenses, they know they can ask the cativeerse and many will send financial support. If a cat dies, condolences and stories of other cats' passing are shared in order to comfort the owner and provide a sense of solidarity. When a famous or well-known cat dies, many X users will alter their profiles to reflect that cat's passing. When Scruffkit, "a reformed stray of the backyard," who had 30,000+ followers died in April 2023 (Siblings of Scruff kit n.d.), several X users changed their X handles to reflect the cat's passing (e.g., Puss – misses dis scruff 2023).

In the early days of July 2023, the ethics of care and care/harm foundational framework in the cativeerse functioned exactly as it was expected. @PawsleyTheCat took care of their cat Wintery's physical needs while the cativeerse took care of @PawsleyTheCat's emotional needs. When @PawsleyTheCat's emotional needs turned to financial and practical needs, followers stepped up to crowdfund and offer advice. As user @YouthfulHarlot posted, "Everyone is pulling for you and sweet Wintery. And please let us know any way we can continue to help: more donations or anything. Much love to you. [Red Heart]" (Mina 2023). This sentiment was shared by many cativeerse users as is evidenced by the donation subtheme comprising of 40 (18.4%) posts of the total 217 posts in this study, coming in second behind the illness subtheme with 43 (19.8%) posts.

For two weeks, cativeerse users continued to offer their support to both @PawsleyTheCat and Wintery. However, as misinformation and disinformation spread, tension and confusion began to arise among cativeerse denizens creating "conflicting moral demands" (Held 2006, 20). While @PawsleyTheCat and their supporters continued to solicit donations to cover Wintery's veterinary expenses, many believed the cat was suffering from FIP or cancer. Given FIP's reputation as an almost always fatal disease in cats and cancer's difficulty to cure, many cativeerse users felt Wintery was being kept alive for selfish reasons.

Some cativeerse users argued that Wintery should be allowed to "pass peacefully" (Vicki Lane 2023) or "cross over with dignity" ([cardinal]El Gato Pepe 2023), while others argued that every possible avenue to save a pet needs to be exhausted "before taking such an extreme option as putting the pet down" (tekbrat 2023). This divide among cativeerse denizens reflects the inherent tension in the care/harm foundation. While almost all cativeerse users expressed strong feelings of care and concern, the focus of that care, whether centered on @PawsleyTheCat's emotional well-being or Wintery's physical suffering, lead to conflicting views on an ethical course of action.

Not only was the ethics of care framework that is prevalent in the cativeerse starting to falter, but users began to turn on each other. When user @joeyfreckle

posted to their 12,000+ followers that “That popular account that’s prolonging its poor cat’s inevitable death is fucked up by the way and if you’re enabling them you’re part of the problem,” it was the first time a user had publicly condemned @PawsleyTheCat (olde joey [left arrow][right up arrow][black heart] 2023). Over the next two days, @PawsleyTheCat and their followers attacked @joeyfreckle exacerbating the issue and taking the focus away from @PawsleyTheCat’s and Wintery’s needs.

Once attacks among @PawsleyTheCat, their followers, and other users began, they continued unabated. Name calling, arguments, threats of lawsuits, conversations on how X users were behaving could be found in 31 (14.3%) posts. As the third most found subtheme, attacks also had the third greatest reach among subthemes with an average of 6,527 profiles having access to these posts. This helped to further solidify the divide between users of the X cativerse.

Subsequently, when it became clear that @PawsleyTheCat intended to purchase another purebred kitten if Wintery were to die, tensions in the cativerse’s ethics of care and care/harm foundational framework intensified. Several users took offense at the idea that someone who could afford not just one, but three purebred cats was crowdfunding for their veterinary expenses. X user @DollyPartonCat wrote, “Alright so I can’t hold my tongue any longer. It is insanely unethical, to purchase an expensive designer breed cat, crowd fund for vet bills, pour TONS of money into torturing the animal, and then indicate you’ll be buying another cat from the same breeder. like dude come on” (Dolly 2023). Others, however, defended @PawsleyTheCat. In a show of care, @WillowFeral argued, “And it’s not like she hasn’t insurance for her cats. She’s done the responsible thing. And as far as buying another maybe her way of coping if she loses wintry is to fill the void. Everyone is different” (Willow [Red Heart]Scruffa 2023).

Some users focused on the health implications of purchasing another cat from the same breeder. As @budypals noted, “(FIP is often spread through littermates, so if that’s truly the diagnosis, that would make the breeder possibly culpable for it. it can remain dormant for months or years before symptoms show. What an awful situation. i hope they don’t repurchase from that breeder)” (Absolute Budy’s and Pal’s 2023). Although only 11 posts addressed @PawsleyTheCat’s intention to buy another cat from the same breeder, this subtheme had the second greatest reach with an audience of 19,603 X users.

The divide in the cativerse deepened when @PawsleyTheCat equated euthanizing Wintery, a black cat, to the historical and systematic killings of Black and Jewish people. While this was not the impetus behind the cativerse divide, @PawsleyTheCat’s refusal to apologize for the comment further exacerbated the issue and polarized the cativerse. Some users came to @PawsleyTheCat’s defense arguing that they were either unaware or did not intend the meaning behind what they posted. Others, however, were shocked by the deeply inappropriate analogy. This highlights a key tension in the care/harm moral foundation where both sides express strong levels of care but fundamentally disagree in where to prioritize their concern and is suggestive of the competing dichotomy that exists in not only the care/harm foundation, but in all the moral foundations.

## Conclusion

As the digital space where cat owners, lovers, enthusiasts, fans, advocates, activists, and rescuers come together to share their dedication to cats, the X cativerse is a place where the ethics of care and care/harm moral foundation are remarkably evident. What began as a typical ethics of care moment in July 2023, quickly turned into a breakdown within the cativerse. Conflicting interpretations in users' understanding of what constitutes animal suffering as well as competing ethical considerations between a cat's distress and its owner's emotional needs led to significant tensions among users. These divisions are reflective of the complexities in the care/harm moral foundation. While rooted in empathy and compassion, the care/harm foundation became fractured when users disagreed over the focus of their care.

By late July 2023, one of the six cativerse users who would comment on the state of the space lamented, "Cat Twitter is now torn in two, this is just tragic" (Enrique Shockwave 2023). Although only six (2.8%) of the 217 posts would bring attention to the issue, the cativerse breakdown as well as the ethics of care and care/harm foundational failure was significant enough that the profiles that commented on the incident had 37,434 followers. The sheer reach of these profiles is indicative of not only their posts but also the significance of the breakdown.

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## Liquid Hope: Muddy Ground as the Place of Civility

Joshua Clements

Kristen Haldeman

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**Abstract:** This essay offers a view of the city and civilization, applying the container and magnet metaphors of Lewis Mumford and the liquid modernity metaphor of Zygmunt Bauman to show how globalization has broken down the historical structures of civilization. This situation increasingly calls for small means of navigating the now muddy terrain, as opposed to the blunt strength of the container or magnetism. We suggest dialogic civility as one such tiny adjustment. Yet civility is often sorely missing in discourse, politics, and many other areas of public life. This essay discusses the foundations of civilization, borrowing from creation stories. These stories ground the metaphorical structure of the essay and allow us to call for more dialogic civility in the public sphere, and more thoughtfulness in our personal lives. We close with a call to liquid hope, an encouragement to make small adjustments in daily interactions with others.

**Keywords:** civilization; liquid modernity; dialogic civility; tiny adjustments; place; hope

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According to Lewis Mumford, gods and religious beliefs were the original glue that held cities together. Mumford (1961) also noted that the city walls, the container, were less important than the magnetism of beliefs (86). However, Zygmunt Bauman (2005) argued that in the current historical moment, the magnetism has waned in strength and the container has cracked. To further explain the waning and cracking city, Jean-Luc Nancy (2025) described the modern city as transient (xi), drawing away (xiv), and no longer with “clear demarcation between activities, functions, and flows that come into play in different orders or sectors of social existence” (xiv). Perhaps this state of the city is the result of a postmodern period (Lyotard 1984), or better still, a “liquid modern” era (Bauman 2012), where meta-narratives and religious beliefs wane. The horizon of the city is now “obscured, muddled, closed, obstructed, obliterated” (Nancy 2025, xvi). The glue has come undone, and the container has lost its ability to hold. How are we to navigate this landscape?

This essay will offer a view of the city (understood as the epitome of civilization), applying the container and magnet metaphors of Mumford (1961)

and the liquid modernity metaphor of Bauman (2012) to show how globalization has broken down the historical structures of civilization. This situation increasingly calls for small means of navigating the terrain, as opposed to the blunt strength of the container or magnetism. We suggest civility, more precisely, dialogic civility. Yet civility is often sorely missing in discourse, politics, and in many other areas of public life. The essay will discuss the foundations of civilization, borrowing from the creation stories of antiquity. These stories will ground the metaphorical structure of the essay and allow us to call for more dialogic civility in the public sphere and more thoughtfulness in our personal lives.

We will close with a call to liquid hope, the overarching theme of the essay. Liquid hope is an encouragement to make small adjustments in daily interactions with others. Liquid hope builds upon Bauman's (2012) liquid metaphor in recognizing the flux of modernity but offers a constructive view as opposed to resignation to the given situation. Liquid hope also draws from Ronald C. Arnett's (2022) concept of tenacious hope, wherein one maintains a positive disposition while striving toward the object of that hope. Tenacious hope, and liquid hope, in turn, differ from naive optimism. Instead, Arnett invoked Albert Camus's Sisyphus as the epitome of tenacious hope. While we recognize that liquid hope is a Sisyphean task in a world of difference, violence, and self-interest, we consider dialogic civility as a means of liquid hope, which is less daunting but no less epic. Lastly, whereas tenacious hope entails a personal stance toward the absurdity of the world, liquid hope extends dialogic civility as an interpersonal metaphor for the public sphere (Arnett 2001) into the realm of relational and shared existence. We will argue that such a view is particularly appropriate in the liquid modern era.

## Carving Out a Place of Civilization

The first liquid metaphor we review begins with deep water. Genesis 1:2 describes how "darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters" (King James Bible). The word for "deep" is the Hebrew *tehom*, a place preexisting creation, yet one already having a face (Casey 1998). This deep is not a void of nothingness but a place ripe for the light of creation and moving upon. For the deep to be moved upon, it must have enough substance to be a "place, a place for and of creation. If it is true that in the beginning was the Word, it is also true that in the beginning was the Place" (Casey 1993, 18).

In the Babylonian *Enuma Elish*, the "nothing" at the beginning of existence consisted of two bodies of water (salt and fresh) which became one, Apsu and Tiamat. Their mixing creates a matrix, a commonplace from which particular places may rise. The Hebrew word *tehom* derives from Tiamat, the "primordial oceanic force" where "creation must begin with her antecedent and massive presence" (Casey 1998, 24). We see in both accounts "the deep" as a liquid space, teeming with potential yet wild with chaos. In these stories, how does the material

of the deep become the future civilizations we recognize in antiquity? How does space become place?

To tame the wild space, one must divide, conquer, or carve it into particular places, as in the ancient texts. What at first appears as destruction becomes creation by setting boundaries, delimiting possibilities, and establishing order. This is the essence of the Hebrew word *bará*, meaning to “create” in Genesis 1:1. The cognate meanings of the term include “‘to carve’ (e.g., the tip of an arrow) or ‘to cut up’ (e.g., a carcass)” (Casey 1998, 24). As an act of creation, this carving is generally a divine act, as found in the Bible and the *Enuma Elish*, rather than something conducted by humanity. This carving, via an arrow and subsequent cutting up of the carcass, is precisely what happened to Tiamat in her battle with Marduk in the *Enuma Elish*. Marduk, an offspring of the primeval matrix, conquers the abyss (Tiamat, in the form of a dragon) by splitting her belly with an arrow and proceeds to carve out of her carcass the physical world. As Casey (1998) noted, an “entire landscape is drawn out from the dismembered Deep” (28), and not only a landscape but the embodiment of Babylonian civilization: the city of Babylon (Casey 1993).

Marduk saves fashioning humans and their dwelling places for last. According to the story, Marduk created the dwelling places before he created humans “as if to say that housing is a precondition of being human” (Casey 1998, 29). Housing here indicates the next element of civilization: the creation of containers where people could live and establish themselves. The Hebrews of Genesis and the Sumerians of the *Enuma Elish* saw their societies carved out of the deep. The later Greeks, particularly Plato, began to describe the foundations of the world as a receptacle, which was neither a void nor placeless (Casey 1998). Instead, the receptacle or container would become a defining metaphor for how we think about cities and civilization.

## The Cup of Civilization Cracks

We cannot discuss civilization without understanding how the term relates to the city. Richard Sennett (1977) defined the city as “a milieu in which strangers are likely to meet” (48). This makes the necessity of civility more appropriate and also underpins the idea of civilization as a whole. Following the creation stories above, wherein the boundaries were established by deities, early civilizations may have begun as homogenous peoples with like-minded beliefs. Through time and trade between these groups, the city becomes a melting pot, a place flowing with difference. The mention of a pot is apropos here, because though the ingredients flowed in, there was often a wall, a boundary of some sort, encasing the mixture.

Mumford (1961) suggested that a pervading metaphor surrounding (forgive the pun) the people qua ingredients is that of a container. Within this enclosure, people were free to move and interact with considerably less risk from outside influence or the threat of barbarian raids. The seemingly semi-porous boundaries set by the container allowed for the selection of who was to enter and who was deemed a threat to those inside. The container also acted as a place for storing

provisions and accumulating wealth. Much of the agricultural produce grown in fields adjacent to cities would be brought in and stored away from the elements or thieving animals.

The city structure was not the only element keeping people civil within the bounds of the place. Social cohesion is not limited to enclosures. Mumford submitted that “the city is not merely a container: before it has anything to hold, it must attract the people and the institutions that carry on its life” (1961, 82). Although the container was an integral part of the city structure, Mumford noted that there was also a certain magnetism that held the city together, in some ways beyond that of the container. Before there was a literal city with walls and buildings, people had to congregate in a specific place with specific purposes. The genesis of the city was a meeting place.

The nature of the meetings was often tied to spiritual or ceremonial practices, serving as the goal of pilgrimages, “a site to which family or clan groups are drawn back” (Mumford 1961, 10). While some of these places remained ceremonial without turning into a city, such as Stonehenge, other places flourished into thriving cities. Prime examples were the Sumerian cities. Due to their religious as well as political nature, these cities were sometimes considered temple cities with the citizenry largely composed of priests, nobility, soldiers, and merchants (Sirjamaki 1964). While there were citizens who maintained adjacent farmland as well as slaves, much of the activity in these places centered around religious practice.

Sirjamaki (1964) submitted that within these cities, “social order approximated a theocratic socialism” (26). Sumerian cities were not the only example of this phenomenon. Sjoberg (1967) argued that despite the considerable diversity of inhabitants in “the Near East, the Orient and the New World, the early cities in all these regions had a number of organizational forms in common. The dominant pattern was theocracy” (47). The existence of the place and the function of its people was a product of the magnetism underlying religious belief and practice. What began as a container, the encircling of a wall perhaps, would be transformed and fortified through the magnetism of religious beliefs (Mumford 1961).

Over time, the container and the magnet lost their hold. The carved-out places began to change shape. In one sense, the changes in physical landscape indicated an increasingly ephemeral container wherein “(u)rban demolition and replacement became one of the chief marks of the new economy” (Mumford 1961, 413). Capitalism drives this new economy, perhaps even more so today than it was in Mumford’s time, who noted that “capitalism’s role was to liquidate the container” (Mumford 1961, 445). The contents of the cup began to spill out. Metaphorically, what had taken the carving up of deep waters by gods, millennia of coalescence within containers, and the magnetic cohesion of religion, was coming undone. In a figurative sense, from water civilization came; to water civilization is returning.

In his essay “City of Fear, City of Hopes,” Bauman (2003) suggested that contemporary cities “are the battlegrounds on which global powers and stubbornly local meetings and identities meet, clash, struggle and seek a

satisfactory, or just bearable, settlement” (21). This battle is what Bauman sees as a defining characteristic of the liquid modern city. In this sense, liquidity is the idea of transitioning values, blurring boundaries, and flowing social dynamics. Bauman (2012), in submitting that liquid modernity is a more appropriate term than postmodernity, described this era as maintaining “the growing conviction that change is *the only* permanence, and uncertainty *the only* certainty” (viii; emphasis original). Within this new state of existence, space no longer means as much nor creates the obstacles it once did. Natural borders cease to exist, and occupying a place has become difficult, leading Bauman (1998) to state that “spiritually at least we are all travellers” (78). This state of flux is liquidity, wherein one cannot stay put and nothing sticks.

## A View of the Liquid City

Several writers have discussed various views of what a liquid city, and civilization by extension, may look like, each with their own perspective. Jean-Luc Nancy, Richard Sennett, and Zygmunt Bauman all offer useful views of the city. From these views, we can gain a better picture of the liquid state in which we find ourselves and perhaps find footing on this muddied ground.

Nancy (2025) described the city as being haunted by communitarian immanence, as a place where one dreams of a future while being nostalgic for a past. In one sense, the city is a dream of community and a distant echo of its rural beginnings. These perspectives create a paradox for the city. In seeking to create a communal place replete with navigated difference, the city shares itself, separates and divides, “opens places to the point that they shatter,” in contrast to the country, which “keeps places closed, to the point of suffocation” (Nancy 2025, 12). The city once kept people contained, but now the place no longer holds the same magnetism. As if pushed apart due to reverse polarities, the city now diffuses in myriad directions, dissipating and spilling out, “a scattered totality” (Nancy 2025, 19). This scattering also creates the effect of “a no man’s land in which interior and exterior, here and elsewhere, yours and mine blend together and become indiscernible” (Nancy 2025, 21). This blending and indiscernibility indicate liquidity, where individuality flows but often gets lost in the mix.

Sennett (1977) recognized the changing nature of public life nearly fifty years ago. Whereas once, public interaction was a social good, it now seems to be more of an obligation, one often “formal and dry,” and at worst “phony” (Sennett, 1977, 3). In contrast to the potential Nancy saw in the liquid city, Sennett viewed the lack of engagement in public life as a symptom of decay. Couple this disengagement from participation with an emphasis on speeding through the city in private automobiles as opposed to touring it by foot or bus and one can see the motion of liquidity. The city street is no longer a place of journey from one place to the next, but a necessary means of traversing from one event space to the next, erasing the “constraints of geography” (Sennett 1977, 14).

In a later work, Sennett (2018) noted that people “move through a space and dwell in a place” (35). Moving through a city, while connecting people spatially in

one sense, diminishes their experience and understanding of place in another. Space is transitory, while place is stationary. The difference is often the speed at which people can navigate between them (Sennett 2018). The common assumption is that the faster we can get from place to place, the more leisure we have to enjoy the place once we get there. However, the addition of time via the reduction of space has not garnered the desired result. Instead, we fill the “extra time” with market goods, gadgets, and the latest technologies. Mumford (1961) understood this effect when he equated his present age with a gigantic motorcar speeding along with no steering wheel or brakes. In his haste to go faster, the driver “has quite forgotten the purpose of the journey . . . Modern man has mastered every creature above the level of the viruses and bacteria—except himself” (Mumford 1961, 559). Life is no longer about the journey, let alone the destination.

Following the assumptions of the city scattering in every direction (Nancy 2025) and denizens occupying without dwelling (Sennett 2018), Bauman (1998) suggested that in the liquid state, we are always on the move, even when we physically stay put. The world is permanently changing. In another work, Bauman wrote that the notion of the city and social change are nearly synonymous, and that change is a “mode of urban existence” (Bauman 2003, 5). In response to the ever-changing state, Bauman (2005) asked, “Can public space be made once more a place of lasting engagement rather than of casual and fleeting encounters? A space of dialogue, discussion, confrontation and agreement?” (152). We submit that it can, but with a caveat.

Mumford (1961) called for slowing down progress, breaking the cycle of expansion, and closer attention to people’s lived experiences in order to make a fresh start. Putting new wine in old wineskins causes the containers to burst; therefore, new wine must be put in new wineskins (Mark 2:22). Building on obsolete patterns and irrelevant maps only widens “urban disorganization” (Mumford 1961, 554). The liquid city cannot be left to its own devices, but neither can it be carved up as it was before. Instead, there must be a way to navigate the seemingly chaotic, uncertain landscape (perhaps waterscape may be more appropriate) that presently sprawls out before us. Re-carving up the liquid space would be, in some ways, committing violence (as in Marduk and Tiamat) or beyond human ability (as in the biblical text). Attempting to fix the container and re-energize the magnetism are hopeless ends, if not untenable. Who sets the container’s boundaries, and who initiates the magnetic pull? Modern society needs to find a way to “go with the flow” and exist civilly in liquidity. One way of navigating the unstable terrain is through dialogic civility.

## **Dialogic Civility as Muddy Ground**

Without the social boundaries of a container or the magnetism of shared beliefs, navigating the “mud” of everyday human interaction falls to communicative practices. In contrast to the monologic nature of power and grand narratives that once held tribes and cities together, dialogue offers a way forward without the necessity of conformity or command (Mumford 1961). Dialogue, as a form of

civility, recognizes differing private beliefs and viewpoints, but encourages finding common ground (Arnett and Arneson 1999). The goal of this “dialogic civility,” according to Arnett and Arneson (1999), is “keeping the conversation going in our postmodern era of virtue contention” (284). If the muddy ground on which humans exist can be characterized as the contention of differing goods and virtues (Fritz et al. 2023), then dialogic civility embraces fluidity as part of that existence. This is in contrast to the pristineness and rigidity of traditional city walls and containers. Dialogic civility also creates a malleable structure in place of the magnetism of grand narratives. Ultimately, dialogic civility is precisely what is needed when the cup breaks and the magnet wanes.

Dialogic civility emerged out of a larger concern for dialogic ethics, itself a subset of communication ethics more generally (Fritz et al. 2023). Dialogic ethics is “the meeting place for learning in an age of difference. . . . Learning is the anchor in an era that rebels against universalistic foundations. Difference opens the door to learning” (85). Anchoring in learning is a grounding metaphor within the liquid metaphor we discuss in this essay. Learning here applies to what one may gain from engaging with Otherness and alterity. Just as a ship may anchor in an area for a time before setting sail toward new horizons, a dialogic ethics approach means learning from the temporary and momentary, recognizing that what is before is all there is: take it seriously and without demand. Dialogic ethics involves respect for the Other and serious consideration of their perspectives and worldviews, intending to “negotiate new possibilities” from within the interaction (99). To do otherwise would mean imposing one person or group’s ethic (notions of “good”) on the Other.

Following dialogic ethics and its emphasis on learning more from alterity, acknowledging and respecting difference is a starting point of dialogic civility (Arnett and Arneson 1999; Fritz et al. 2023). Dialogic civility is a paradoxical phrase (Pinchevski 2024). Dialogue implies interpersonal interaction with a specific Other, whereas civility suggests impersonal solidarity and respect for “others as others” (12). Dialogic civility is an attempt to reconcile the personal nature of dialogue and the impersonal nature of civility. Given that civility indicates an “expectation of conformity to a social structure,” the Other may first appear as bad or ugly, or an intrusion into one’s social norms (Fritz et al. 2023, 97). However, dialogue, engagement with Otherness without demand, requires willingness to learn from what appears to be unique or even strange.

In many ways, recognizing difference in others testifies to their strangeness, but also to the beauty in learning from that strangeness. Noting the common etymological roots of the terms “city” and “civility,” Sennett (1977) emphasized that civility is “treating others as though they were strangers and forging a social bond upon that social distance,” going so far as to state that the “city is civility institutionalized” (264). Building on Erving Goffman’s work, Sennett noted that civility in the public sphere is similar to wearing a mask, one that covers private selves. However, he also submits that in a world where religion and grand narratives have lost their footing, the masks are not predetermined. Instead, they must be fashioned “through trial and error, through a desire to live with others” (264) as opposed to being compelled to do so by belief or social norms. These

masks are the essence of civility in Sennett's terms. Wearing them "protects people from each other and yet allows them to enjoy each other's company" (264). Enjoying each other's company is a far cry from being a burden to others, which is one way to view incivility.

If civility is the practice of being with others despite private differences, incivility is imposing oneself on others in an attempt to deny difference. Burdening others with private tastes, habits, and secrets is Sennett's (1977) definition of incivility, a condition that is sadly "built into the very fabric of modern society itself" (265). From this definition, incivility occurs when people fall prey to their own narcissism and solipsism. Narcissism is a pervading feature of many modern cultures (Lasch 1979) and can be seen manifested in many charismatic leaders today who focus their followers' attention on their own motivations rather than the good of the people (Sennett 1977). In the solipsistic sense, incivility dismisses the existence and humanity of others, dehumanizes social interactions, and disregards the need to wear a mask in the public forum. In this liquid age, where hyper-individuality reigns and values rarely align, the opposite is needed: a dialogic civility which attends to "diversity and uniqueness" without falling prey to solipsism and narcissism (Arnett and Arneson 1999, 284).

## **The Liquid City as a Place of Civility**

Bauman (2012) stated that living in the liquid modern era is comparable "to walking in a minefield: everyone knows an explosion might happen at any moment and in any place, but no one knows when the moment will come and where the place will be" (xiv). As if walking on eggshells carrying a timebomb, people often wander the world afraid to engage with others due to the fear and uncertainty of what the other person may think. Worse still is that people tend to meet as strangers, but not in the positive sense Sennett (1977) describes. Instead, meeting a stranger is an event without a past or future (Bauman 2012). The meeting is a one-off situation, with rarely anything besides the exchange of consumer goods or "small talk" between the individuals. This type of meeting is meant to keep others strange and distant with little to no lasting engagement. In contrast to these events as encounters, Bauman (2012) noted that the main point of civility is "the ability to interact with strangers without holding their strangeness against them and without pressing them to surrender it or to renounce some or all the traits that have made them strangers" (104). Civility should not only accept differences but also engage with them dialogically rather than attempting to colonize them. Dialogic civility is interested in strangers as a chance to learn rather than dismiss or deny.

Sennett (2018) shared an example of the learning that takes place in dialogic civility as it pertains to the liquid city. Sennett purchased a dud iPhone at a market in Delhi, India called Nehru Place. Much of the consumer activities here take place outside of the legal economy, and while not rigidly controlled by government oversight, they are also prone to failure. It is a place of transience. Sennett (2018) noted that "(s)hops and shoppers, offices and workers come and go" and haggling

between the buyers and sellers, with no fixed prices, creates a kind of “economic theater” (95). After buying the iPhone “wholesale” on an overturned cardboard box, Sennett found the item to be a dud. He returned to get a refund, to which the merchant simply gave him another iPhone.

If the exchange had ended there, one might consider this a prime example of the “event” Bauman (2012) suggested is indicative of the liquid modern consumer culture. Instead, Sennett (2018) introduced himself, eager to learn more about the merchant and his situation. Over a cup of tea, Sennett and the merchant, Mr. Sudhir, had a dialogue. Apparently, despite selling wares that may or may not be legitimate, in Mr. Sudhir’s case, “need rather than greed drove him, and he wasn’t a self-righteous crook” (98). Due to the difficulty of legitimate employment and the urban political economy in his city, Mr. Sudhir was forced to move up the black-market ladder. As dire as the situation was, Mr. Sudhir did not decry his fate. Instead, he “cannot succumb to disabling depression if he wants to survive; he has no choice but to believe in man as his own maker” (106). Like so many others in liquid cities, his fortitude and desperation allow him to rise above poverty.

Mr. Sudhir’s situation indicates a liquid sense of place, a transitory place. The essence of the place is in the activities happening within it rather than a deep appreciation or affinity for the place itself. This is problematic in one sense. Casey (1993) submitted that a “transitory place is better than none at all, but it only spurs further searching for an enduring or at least reliable place” (xii). As in Mr. Sudhir’s case, a reliable place is a utopian ideal. Instead, he is content with navigating the liquid landscape on his own terms, occupying but never dwelling, free to move up the economic ladder while simultaneously needing to move the ladder constantly. Borrowing a metaphor from urban planner Joan Clos, Sennett (2018) implied that Mr. Sudhir’s situation demonstrates “the watery realm surrounding the urban octopus; in the informal economy, left out of top-down, big-project planning, he makes his way, as do people like him, with little or no help from the top” (106). After the conversation, one can assume that Sennett may still find Mr. Sudhir to be a stranger in one sense. However, in hearing his story and learning about his situation, the strangeness was not one of separation. Instead, the strangeness became an aspect of their shared civility.

The above situation may be seen as an embodiment of turning toward the Other in awe and wonder. This process is what Sennett (2018) considered Emmanuel Levinas’s ethical view of the neighbor. Sennett admitted that this is a far cry from the traditional view of the neighbor or neighborhood as a place where you know each other and feel comfortable in the other people’s presence. Recognizing that Levinas may not entirely agree with his assessment, Sennett (2018) suggested that the “Neighbour as a Stranger bears on the mundane realm of the city. . . . Indifference to strangers, because they are incomprehensibly strange, degrades the ethical character of the city” (126). Arguably, one of the greatest proponents of embracing strangers as neighbors was Fred Rogers, more familiarly known as Mister Rogers.

## Won't You Be My (Dialogically Civil) Neighbor?

For over thirty years, *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* was a place where young children across the United States could meet new people, new ideas, and new opportunities. Rogers spent much of his time between Pittsburgh and New York City during his career as a television host. Coupled with his enduring Christian faith, his experience in the city helped temper his views of civility. When asked about what Rogers would think about the polarization in North America, the incivility of Donald Trump, vitriol on social media platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), his close friend and critic, Tom Junod (2019), offered a few key insights. A first lesson to learn from Rogers about dialogic civility is to remember that you were a child once too.

While his television show was aimed at children, the underlying message of the show endures “because he found a way to speak to all of us—to speak to children as respectfully as he spoke to adults and to speak to adults as simply as he spoke to children” (Junod 2019, 80). Rogers’ tact was one of humility, which was at the root of his civility. He was hyper-aware of his own way of talking and that of others. His attention to the words used by adults to convey meanings to children was a call for all to attend to their language. Rogers subjected his speech and that of others to “rigorous editing” (80) resulting in a fluent approach to dialogue, whether with children or adults. Following this practice, dialogic civility requires reflecting on and recognizing how language processes affect others.

Just as the account between Sennett (2018) and Mr. Sudhir began with Sennett having a genuine sense of wonder about the stranger, a second lesson to be learned from Mister Rogers is that wonder is necessary to learn from others. In a postmodern culture defined by diversity, listening to and learning from the other is the first principle of communication ethics and dialogic civility (Arnett et al. 2010). Junod (1998) pointed to the fact that Mister Rogers lived in a state of wonder and astonishment. This wonder was generally toward absolute strangers, people who would walk up to him on the city street or send him letters, distant or near, all part of his wonder-full neighborhood. Dialogic civility is not dissolving the differences between strangers, thus violating the “distinctiveness of the other” (Sennett 2018, 256), but approaching them with an intention to learn. One might say that *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, as a place of wonder or community of inquiry, is a philosophical dwelling, where people can “explore our world and our place in it” (Mueller and Mueller 2020, 26). Exploring a place in this community means engaging with the others within it through dialogue, through questions, and through sincere interest. Indeed, Mister Rogers shows that “it’s okay to wonder, and that not only is it more than okay to ask questions, but that doing so reflects something important to being truly human” (Mueller and Mueller 2020, 27). Whither wonder today?

Children often begin with this sense of wonder about the world and the people within it. The ability to wonder is often lost as children become adults, who instead want to hold viscerally to their now-established identities. Or, following the liquid modern narrative, they are simply too apathetic to care about asking

and inquiring of the world around us. Relearning the sense of wonder as an adult or maintaining it from childhood is not an instantaneous phenomenon. The process takes time, baby steps if you will. The way Mister Rogers framed this process of seeing and loving the beauty of the world began “by simply stopping and recognizing the beauty *in* a tree, a song, our neighborhood, a neighbor, ourselves” (Mueller and Mueller 2020, 21). The wonder in Mister Rogers’ view was never something abstract or mystical, but always something shared yet personal, situated between humans, their environment, and the other people around them.

In a near unlimited fashion, Mister Rogers found a way to care and then share that compassion with his viewers and others around him. In one instance, Junod (2019) told Rogers a story about five people stopping to help a snapping turtle cross a highway in Atlanta, Georgia. Rogers asked Junod, a popular journalist, if he was going to write a story about the incident. After Junod said “no” and asked why he thought it would be a good story, Rogers responded, “Because whenever people come together to help either another person or another creature, something has happened, and everyone wants to know about it—because we all long to know that there’s a graciousness at the heart of creation” (82). Rogers believed that people are capable of coming together to do something good, and more people should hear about it.

During the summer of 2018, a period Junod (2019) called “the summer of incivility,” where migrant children were put in cages and activists were set on destroying any notion of civil unrest, what Mister Rogers would have done arose anew with the release of a highly popular documentary about his life. Junod (2019) suggested that, in one sense, Mister Rogers would have been saddened by many of the current events, particularly those regarding children. However, he would not have let his feelings stand in the way of his civility. In his vision, the public sphere was “a place full of strangers, transformed by love and kindness into something like a neighborhood. That vision depended on civility, on strangers feeling welcome in the public square” (84). Civility was non-negotiable, even amid impassioned debates. What he would have thought of a particular activist or pundit’s politics took a back seat to what he would have thought of the person (Junod 2019).

Sadly, many have forgotten or never learned Mister Rogers’ lessons. The world is fraught with private wants infiltrating public places. As individualization grows, as liquid modernity shifts the focus from the other to selfish consumption, the private sphere colonizes the public space (Bauman 2012). Mister Rogers viewed the stranger as his neighbor, a citizen of one world where difference is valued, and human life is precious. His neighborhood was enriched by caring about others. In contrast, the globalized, liquid modern world is one where individuals or political entities care only about themselves and private agendas, wary about a good or just society (Bauman 2012).

## Back to the Primordial Space

Mumford (1961) wrote that amid the give and take, the “dramatic action” of civilization, arose “something even more important . . . one of the ultimate expressions of life in the city” (116): human dialogue. While creation stories imply a design and a vision of how places and people operate, human stories, those derived from everyday experiences without divine intervention, are much less ordered. Instead, ours is an ever-emergent, ever-evolving process that might be called “muddy.” Given the breaking of the containers and loosening bonds of magnetism from grand narratives in the liquid modern era, how are people to respond or react? Globalization makes finding a magnet strong enough to hold the whole world together virtually impossible, and the task of re-carving a new civilization is beyond human ability. So—what to do in liquid life?

In this essay, we have suggested that dialogic civility is one way to navigate the muddy terrain. Dialogic civility recognizes that in the postmodern period, there is a multiplicity of goods: what might be good for one person in one situation is not necessarily good for another person in another situation. Recognizing and respecting diversity removes the burden of imposition—not an “I” imposing a magnet or metanarrative on another, nor the other imposing a magnet on me, but a meeting together on common (muddy) ground. In such a meeting place, we, the individuals present, share something in common (such as a physical location, a job, a walk in the park, or bumping into each other in the grocery store). None of these interactions imply large feats of creation. Instead, individual molecules brush against each other for a brief moment in a liquid and flowing society, offering common ground for the moment. People can engage with each other with dialogic civility amid any differences they may have otherwise. In this manner, dialogic civility helps to navigate the “mud” of everyday life. In some ways, dialogic civility *is* the mud of everyday life. It creates the fluidity that the rigidity of traditional city walls and containers lacked and, on the other hand, it creates the structure that liquid modernity lacks. Thus framed, dialogic civility is a constructive endeavor that supports diversity, uniqueness, and structure (Arnett and Arneson 1999).

Dialogic civility also implies taking small steps (remembering that muddy, watery ground may be slippery) rather than attempting large leaps of change. Tiny adjustments allow for emergence rather than imposition. This could be something as small and seemingly banal as a conversation with a stranger in a market after he sold you a dud iPhone (Sennett 2018). In others, it might be reframing the narrative of needing to shock the world with some grand event. For instance, Mister Rogers heard the news of a 14-year-old shooter who told his classmates of his plan to do something “really big.” In light of the news, Rogers asked, “Oh, wouldn’t the world be a different place if he had said, ‘I’m going to do something really little tomorrow?’” (Junod 2019, 80).

The global connectedness and fluidity of traditional boundaries in liquid modernity forces a refocusing of energy and attention on the small things within individual control and maintaining a sense of wonder. Without attending to the

small things and the capabilities at hand, there is a danger in succumbing to the violent forces that seek to reestablish hard categories or distinctions. Dialogic civility embraces a philosophical outlook of wonder and a pragmatic view of working within given limitations. Wonder allows people to see openings and horizons, while the pragmatic view allows one to navigate the terrain as it stands.

Interestingly, Mister Rogers recognized the importance of wonder, seeing his *Neighborhood* as a place where people of all ages could ask questions and seek answers. When he opened his door (and the show began), he invited philosophers to enter, because children are natural philosophers (Mueller and Mueller 2020). Sennett noted how children in Santo Domingo use their wits and technologies to fact-check and update their understanding and information about the city. With the local spaces in flux, wonder becomes a kind of survival mechanism, meaning that “nothing can be taken for granted on the ground” (Sennett 2018, 174). Taking nothing for granted also leaves an opening for potential. With an ocean of possibilities sprawling out before them, the children in Santo Domingo and many other urban areas may be “likened to sailors who have learned how to navigate variable and often heavy weather” (174). Sailors make a wonderful analogy for the sense of adventure needed to engage in dialogic civility. One might be hard pressed to bridge vast expanses of the ocean if he were not in the least bit curious about what lies in the distance beyond the horizon. Similarly, dialogic civility as a means of liquid hope requires intrepidity and a willingness to see what lies on the other side of difference.

David Mitchell’s (2004) novel, *Cloud Atlas*, comprises six interconnected stories that share a thread commenting on the ideas of morality and mortality. In one story, a character snidely remarks, “No matter what you do it will never amount to anything more than a single drop in a limitless ocean,” to which his interlocutor replies, “What is an ocean but a multitude of drops?” (509). Just as each drop contributes to the ocean’s vastness, each agent’s voice and context in a city shapes its shared reality. In liquid modernity, taking large steps on muddy ground and making waves is difficult. Instead of such a Sisyphean task, dialogic civility as liquid hope proposes tiny adjustments, small drops of respect, listening, and learning that attend to the Other. This perspective values both the unique situatedness of individuals and the emergent, dynamic structure of the city itself—one that is constantly formed and reformed through the ongoing, reciprocal process of dialogue. This reciprocity makes the public’s “ocean” of meaning both boundless and unified, a multitude of drops in continuous exchange.

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