

The Moral Foundations of Narrative as Grounding for Dialogue

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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

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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