

The Dialogic Necessity: Acknowledging and Engaging Monologue

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I contend that dialogue is a continuing hope for this hour; I support this assertion via insights from the field of communication and an opinion section from the New York Times. First, I review the scholarly landscape of dialogue in general terms. I then underscore why the study and practice of dialogue must commence with monologue as narrative ground that functions as the pragmatic fulcrum that can enable the hope of future dialogue. I illustrate this proposition as I turn to two opinion pieces from the New York Times section called The Stone, penned by an internationally known scholar, Slavoj Žižek.

Hope for the possibilities of dialogue between and among persons has been a persistent anticipation since the devastating and tragic acts of two world wars (1914 – 1918; 1939 – 1945). Martin Buber (1967) in 1952 stated that dialogue is THE hope for this hour. His assertion of more than 60 years ago continues to register as factual in our current world situation. A global community in trouble is in dire need of dialogue that meets and addresses the increasingly repetitive discounting of those different from us. In an early scholarly statement on dialogue, *Communication and Community: Implications of Martin Buber's Dialogue* (Arnett, 1986), I opened the first chapter on “Communicative Crisis” with a quote from Martin Buber:

Man is more than ever inclined to see his own principle in its original purity and the opposing one in its present deterioration, especially if the forces of propaganda confirm his instincts in order to make better use of them. . . . He is convinced that his side is in order, the other side fundamentally out of order, that he is concerned with the recognition and realization of the right, his opponent with masking his selfish interest. Expressed in modern terminology, he believes he has ideas, his opponent only ideologies. This obsession feeds that mistrust that incites two camps. (Buber, 1967, p. 307)

Perhaps, today, the lone difference between Buber's plea and our present moment is that polarized camps have fragmented into multiple factions of contentious denial of others. We are no longer just polarized; we have disintegrated into manifold pockets of disregard for positions other than our own.

This historical moment, defined by escalating disregard and hate, continues to call forth appeals for dialogue. I join with voices championing the importance of dialogue in our troubled communities, from neighborhoods to points of global tension and crisis. I concur with the hope of dialogue. The question in this historical era is how to invite dialogic encounter in an era of augmenting difference. I contend that a historical moment of disparate narratives and virtues necessitates a shift from conceptualizing monologue as a communicative style to that of narrative ground that is of fundamental importance to another. That is, monologue can no longer be relegated to disparities in communication

style; monologue houses the narrative ground that matters. Monologue is the ground of conviction that figures our identity, a conceptual position akin to the insights of Charles Taylor (1989) in *Sources of the Self*—monologue is the narrative ground upon which we stand that constitutes identity associated with what is of primal importance (p. 50). I contend that in an era defined by narrative and virtue contention, attentiveness to monologue (the ground of importance that matters to self and other) is the pragmatic fulcrum upon which the hope of dialogue depends. When one ignores the monologic ground that is of importance to another, dialogue remains but an optimistic mandate emanating from a disposition of narcissistic expectation that the world conform to our singular demands.

My assertion is that hope for dialogue commences with patience manifested in learning from monologic narrative ground that matters to another. Learning about what is of fundamental importance to another does not, of course, assure the emergence of dialogue, but an unwillingness to meet and learn about what another holds dear will inevitably relegate dialogue to the realm of feigned concern that eschews burden and inconvenience of learning from genuine alterity.

Before I continue to outline the importance of monologue functioning as the pragmatic fulcrum for the *bienvenue* of dialogue in this historical moment, I will situate this moment and outline the conceptual terrain of this essay.

Introduction

I am honored to join you at the 78th Annual Ohio Communication Association. I owe much to this state, which made possible my education in the communication program at Ohio University. The names of Paul Boase, the Director of the then School of Interpersonal Communication, and Ray Wagner, my advisor and director of M.A. thesis and Ph.D. dissertation, continue to influence my personal and professional engagements—each has been gone much too long. They framed my professional direction, linking the field of communication with hope for the human condition. Paul Keller, my undergraduate professor, introduced me to dialogue. He had just published *Monologue to Dialogue: Exploration of Interpersonal Communication* with Charles Brown (1979). My years with Paul Keller at Manchester ensured a love of ideas. Remarkably, both Dr. Boase and Dr. Wagner were graduates of Manchester College. These wonderful teachers inspired a love of the field of communication understood as a hope for this historical moment. They instilled in me a conviction that this field of study can assist in the amelioration of many ongoing struggles within the human community. This conviction continues to propel my career—indeed, my vocation—as a communication professor. Ohio University graduated a hopeful 24-year-old who, to this day, continues to witness to the importance of communication study as a hope for this hour—a sense of dialogic hope.

The Dialogic Landscape

The notion of dialogue has been understood within a backdrop of difference; there are numerous schools of thought on the topic. Generally the schools of dialogue are tied to major scholars, such as Martin Buber (1878 – 1965), Paulo Freire (1921 – 1997), Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900 – 2002), Nel Noddings (b. 1929), and Mikhail Bakhtin (1895 – 1975). Within the field of communication, there are two major reviews of

dialogic schools that frame the scope of such scholarship. The Cissna and Anderson (1994) appraisal essay was groundbreaking, representing the first treatise on differences in the emerging schools of dialogic thought. The work of Arnett, Grayson, and McDowell (2008) added additional voices to this conversation, underscoring the contributions of Hannah Arendt (1906 – 1975) and Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995).

These review essays suggested that the different schools of dialogue exhibit a horizon of agreement. I contend that there are four major common ground assumptions about dialogue: (1) relationships between and among persons matter; (2) creative perception emerges “between” a single person, text, or object, not abstractly within the person alone; (3) dialogue is defined by “meeting,” not imposing information upon another; and (4) temporal truth belongs to the relationship and cannot be possessed or colonized. These points of agreement suggest a relational conception of communication that acknowledges the importance of radical alterity, difference resistant to ownership and possession.

In addition to these coordinates of agreement among contrasting schools of dialogue, there is also a fundamental difference centering on origin: the commencement of communication between persons as the overture of dialogue or, in contrast, the monologic narrative ground that is meaningfully inhabited long before the communication begins as the prelude of dialogue. Dialogue as initiated by the moment of conversation is in stark contrast to dialogue nurtured by monologic narrative differences. These two perspectives constitute two divergent dialogic paradigms.

These paradigmatic differences lead us to fundamentally different worldviews (Arnett, 2012). I began this differentiation in 1981, 33 years ago, in “Toward a Phenomenological Dialogue.” My overt stress on monologue as narrative ground is publically disclosed in a 2012 article, “The Fulcrum Point of Dialogue: Monologue, Worldview, and Acknowledgement.” Early on I understood that there were fundamental paradigmatic differences between the therapeutic insights of Carl Rogers and the religious narrative that guided the discernments of Martin Buber; they announce differing places of dialogic origin. In a Rogerian or therapeutic view of dialogue, communication begins as persons encounter one another, an orientation that guides much of the American use of the term. This understanding of dialogue commences when persons inaugurate communication with one another, underscoring the process of dialogue, which fits neatly with the classic proposal of David Berlo (1960) in *The Process of Communication: An Introduction to Theory and Practice*. Dialogue, Americanized, is framed within process and communicative style.

The second paradigm of dialogue begins with the assumption that narrative ground houses identity, acting as the origin of any invitation to dialogue. This approach is closer to that of continental philosophy; this orientation to dialogue rendered by the dialogic corpus of Martin Buber and Hans-Georg Gadamer, with the latter stressing the inevitability of bias and prejudice in communication (Gadamer, 2013). The communicative origin of this perspective assumes that acknowledging monologic ground of importance is the fulcrum of dialogic invitation. This dialogic framework does not originate with the *process* of communication, but rather with monologic narrative *content* that shapes identity. This perspective on dialogue assumes that we stand within an ongoing communication, narrative ground, which has content roots that are *a priori* to the process of communicative engagement.

The dividing line between and among schools of dialogue is a paradigmatic variance over process and content, the immediacy of conversation and narrative bias that one brings to a given conversation. A process conception of dialogue is aligned with “optimism.” Monologic narrative ground invites dialogue via “tenacious hope” (Arnett, 2013, p. 77; Lasch, 2013, p. 78). An initial differentiation of optimism and hope surfaces in Voltaire’s critique of the optimism of Dr. Pangloss in *Candide* (2004) which was a parody of the philosophy of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz.¹ Optimism unites communication with a culture of consumption; the ever-expectant customer alternates between expectation and demand that existence itself align with one’s own expectations. Such is the reason I wrote *Dialogic Civility in a Cynical Age: Community, Hope, and Interpersonal Relationships* with Pat Arneson in 1999. Cynicism is fueled by unmet high expectations. Optimism associated with a dialogic communicative consumer invites cynicism when the world moves contrary to our unstated demands, ending in the often-uttered phrase, “This person just refuses to do dialogue.” Dialogue morphs into such a cynical utterance of frustration as it fails as a social weapon capable of securing one’s own demands.

As written by Baker-Ohler and Holba (2009), tenacious hope can be understood as a demanding labor of care. This image is represented by persons rolling up their sleeves and going to work, learning from each experience—understanding difference and refusing to equate this with that. Tenacious hope eschews a communicative model of the consumer. Instead, such an orientation opens the world to work that requires participation without guarantee of outcome. Tenacious hope permits the meeting and understanding of monologic ground that matters to another. This act of acknowledgment invites the possibility of dialogue. Such learning, however, offers no guarantee; it does, nevertheless, assume that optimism is often an ironic home of communicative failure when there is much at stake. Engaging monologue, what is of narrative importance to another, resists frailty of communicative optimism. Such action requires tenacious hope if one is to invite dialogue—learning what matters to another is demanding communicative work.

I now turn to the *New York Times* opinion section called *The Stone* in order to illustrate the importance of learning from monologic narrative ground. Such action is the communicative fulcrum upon which the possibility of dialogue rests.

The Stone

Simon Critchley is the chair of philosophy at the New School for Social Research in New York and moderates *The Stone*, an opinion series. Critchley is the author or co-author of numerous books. He is considered a major voice on narrative themes of disappointment, both in political and religious realms. He engages significant continental thinkers through his scholarly books on Emmanuel Levinas, Martin Heidegger, and continental philosophy in general. Critchley’s public recognition and his intellectual mobility make him an ideal moderator for this opinion series.

¹ Voltaire’s critique was originally published in 1759, forty years after Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz’s *Theodicy*.

² Jacques Lacan (1901 — 1981) was a French “philosopher of psychoanalysis,” who has been called, after Freud, its “most important theoretician.” His teachings and philosophy gained popularity in his native France as well as in North America and world-wide. Some of Lacan’s writings include *The Triumph of Religion*, *On the Names-of-the-Father*, and *The Language of the Self: The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis*. Lacan’s writings on psychoanalysis and on Freud have been edited into the collections *Écrits: A Selection* and twenty volumes of *The Seminar*. Rabaté, J-M. (2003). *The Cambridge companion*

On May 16, 2010, *The Stone* was introduced as a “forum for contemporary philosophers and other thinkers on issues both timely and timeless” (“What is A Philosopher,” 2010). On the same date, Critchley initiated the forum with an essay, “What Is a Philosopher?” The defining characteristic of a philosopher is someone thinking and considering while rejecting a hurried and pressed decision. The philosopher avoids action without necessary reflection. We cannot forget, however, the price of thinking—“PHILOSOPHY KILLS,” a message inherent in the death of Socrates and the fact that the same fate almost befell Aristotle. As Critchley (2010) reminds us:

A couple of generations later [after the death of Socrates], during the uprisings against Macedonian rule that followed the death of Alexander the Great in 323 B.C.E., Alexander’s former tutor, Aristotle, escaped Athens saying, “I will not allow the Athenians to sin twice against philosophy.” (“What is a Philosopher?,” para. 12)

The killing of Socrates and the threat against Aristotle are mere exemplars of repeated attempts to silence philosophical thought, witnessed from antiquity to the present. There is a risk associated with thinking that is otherwise than convention. Critchley ends his introductory essay by stating that Socrates defined the philosopher as exhibiting every virtue seemingly known, with the exception of one basic virtue, “moderation.” From the vantage point of this essay, the lack of moderation in communication bespeaks of monologue that consists of narrative ground of fundamental importance to the other.

Critchley states that the task of *The Stone* and that of the philosopher are both dialogic. He differentiates this communicative experience from monologue. As you might expect, I only halfway agree with the assessment of Critchley (2011). Critchley states:

Philosophy is a shared activity, it is dialogue. And dialogue is not the simple exchange of opinions, where I have my faith, my politics and my God and you have yours. That is parallel monologue. One of the goals of dialogue is to have our opinions rationally challenged in such a way that we might change our minds. True dialogue is changing one’s mind. I very much hope that readers of *The Stone* have had occasion to change their minds once or twice. (“Stoned,” 2011, para. 16)

Critchley’s stress on dialogue is vital in an era defined by the importance of engaging of difference; my contention is that our primary hope for getting to dialogue rests on the fulcrum of monologue. We must begin with narratives that matter to another. We must be willing to learn from dissimilarity.

I now turn to Slavoj Žižek’s insight recorded in two essays published in *The Stone*. Žižek is an internationally known scholar. He is a senior researcher at the Institute of Sociology at the University of Ljubljana, Slovenia. He has been a visiting scholar at a number of American schools, including Critchley’s New School for Social Research. As Sharpe and Boucher (2010) note, Žižek is well known throughout the world as an academic “rock star.” He is particularly known for his creative interpretations of Jacques Lacan (1901 – 1981).² Žižek gathered public notoriety while working as a columnist and

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as a result of his political activism, which is substantiated by his significant corpus of scholarship.

[Žižek was] a columnist . . . for *Maldina*, a magazine aimed at youth which criticized the Titoist regime. The magazine gained notoriety for its stance against certain aspects of the times Yugoslavian politics, in particular the increasing militarization policies aimed toward society. Up until October of 1998 Slavoj Žižek was an active member of the Communist Party of Slovenia. He quit during the protest against the JBZ-trial. He was not alone in this protest, he quit along with thirty two other public intellectuals with origins in Slovenia. Slavoj Žižek was involved with the Committee for the Defense of Human Rights, a social movement fighting for democracy in Slovenia. In 1990 the first free elections were held in Slovenia. At this time Slavoj Žižek ran for President aligned with the Liberal Democratic Party. (“Slavoj Žižek—Biography,” 2012, para. 5)

He has published more than thirty books. His first scholarly book written in English was *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, which called for a return to German Idealism, Marx, and even to the notion of a Cartesian Subject. His work on ideology is another way of suggesting that monologic narrative ground matters. I now turn to two of Žižek’s essays published in *The Stone*.

In *Mandela’s Socialist Failure, December, 6, 2013*, Žižek acknowledges the massive contribution of Nelson Mandela’s efforts in ending apartheid in South Africa. According to Žižek, however, Mandela made concessions to do so—abandoning socialist principles in order to enact capitalistic participation in the global marketplace. Žižek laments in his essay the miserable life of the poor within South Africa. Physical and financial insecurity continue to define the day. He asserts that the shift of power within the country moved power from an old white ruling class to a black elite. Žižek then pauses and wonders if Mandela ever had a chance to alter the capitalistic mechanisms within the country.

Žižek then alludes to Ayn Rand’s *Atlas Shrugged* where she contended that money is the foundation of all possible good (1992, p. 415). To ignore this existential fact results in destruction. Žižek ends by reviewing the monologic plea of Rand, stating that communist structures cannot simply seek to abolish market conditions. They must encourage production and exchange, recognizing their necessity. Otherwise “[capitalist] domination returns with a vengeance, and with it direct exploitation” (“Mandela’s Socialist Failure,” 2013). In order to learn from another and enhance one’s own monologic position, one must attend to narratives alien to one’s own narrative ground. Žižek points to monologue as the holder of conviction and meaning—in this case, monologic narrative ground that undergirds the power of production and exchange.

In yet another venture into unconventional opinion, Žižek wrote for *The Stone* on September 3, 2014, “ISIS Is a Disgrace to True Fundamentalism.” He recounts how artificial boundaries were carved out after World War I that continue to lend credence to anti-colonial resistance. Žižek states that the ISIS objective is enforcement of religious rules, not concern for the humanitarian conditions of the people. ISIS ignores issues related to what Foucault termed “biopower” (“ISIS is a Disgrace,” 2014). The question is whether or not ISIS is a premodern entity; Žižek asserts that ISIS is better understood as “perverted modernism,” a renewed witness to the 19th century “conservative modernizations” in the Meiji restoration of the Japanese industrial machine. This form of

modernism demands an “ideological form of ‘restoration,’ or the return to the full authority of the emperor” (“ISIS is a Disgrace,” 2014). The photo of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of ISIS, standing with an expensive Swiss watch and the fact that their organization has a presence financed via the international web announces modernity. ISIS rails against permissiveness in the West only to engage in gang rapes, orgies, and torture and murder of the alien other—infidels.

Žižek then pauses once again and brings Friedrich Nietzsche into the conversation. He contends that Nietzsche offers a vocabulary that aids our understanding of this tragic drama. Žižek revisits Nietzsche’s emphasis on the Last Man—the one without passion and commitment, who functions as a defining character of Western Civilization. Žižek asserts that today we are witnessing a global spectacle of nihilism—one “passive” and the other “active.”

We in the West are the Nietzschean Last Men, immersed in stupid daily pleasures, while the Muslim radicals are ready to risk everything, engaged in the struggle up to their self-destruction. William Butler Yeats’ “Second Coming” seems perfectly to render our present predicament: “The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity.” This is an excellent description of the current split between anemic liberals and impassioned fundamentalists. “The best” are no longer able to fully engage, while “the worst” engage in racist, religious, sexist fanaticism. (“ISIS is a Disgrace,” 2014, para. 5)

Žižek then returns to his thesis question: Is ISIS genuinely fundamentalist? His contention is no; they lack the “absence of resentment and envy” and an active indifference to nonbelievers. Witness the daily testimony to such fundamental beliefs in the Amish and Tibetan Buddhists. For Žižek, ISIS is a disgrace to any genuine form of fundamentalism. Žižek does not confuse the passionate intensity of the mob with true conviction. Žižek then once again complicates his thesis. He asserts that the problem is not the standards of the West, but the fact that ISIS members have “already internalized our standards and measure themselves by them” (“ISIS is a Disgrace,” 2014). Žižek contends that what is missing in this dispute is “true conviction” propelled by narratives that matter. We are fighting those who have already absorbed the standards against which they rant—such is the propelling force of envy that leads to violence that is ever void of genuine conviction.

Žižek points to monologic narratives that matter to the point of permitting one to be indifferent to those contrary. Indifference is central to ethics in the West, detailed by Immanuel Kant and Emmanuel Levinas. The monologic narrative ground of fundamentalism must gain its power within that very monologic narrative ground—not from acts of social comparison. Žižek’s essays within *The Stone* argue for monologic positions that matter, calling into question sacred assumptions. In the case of Žižek, genuine monologue houses insights that educate a thoughtful opposition and remind us of the contrast between nihilism and monologue—only the latter is the home of what matters to a point of indifference to positions contrary.

I conclude with three final contentions surrounding the field of communication, which I learned to love in the state of Ohio. First, communication studies needs to attend to what genuinely matters. Second, communication studies needs to understand that what matters to another is the beginning of passion, conviction, and energy capable of both sustaining and destroying communities. Finally, communication studies needs to

acknowledge the importance of *content*—long before the *process* of communication begins, monologic narrative ground nurtures what is worthy of struggling for. The hope for this hour must return to Nietzsche's unmasking of nihilism, which is only accomplished when we study and practice that which genuinely matters. The hope for this hour rests within a return to monologue as the home of meaning, significance, and conviction. The study of monologue does not ensure dialogue or peace. However, to ignore monologue is to invite destruction within the human community. Within the power of monologue dwells our salvation and, additionally, our potential ruin. There is a risk in engaging monologic narrative ground. However, a greater danger resides in a passive nihilism that invites a slow and steady descent into an abyss where our radical opposition then performs the other side of nihilism—an active destruction of what matters to another.

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