Situating the Self in the Mud of Everyday Life: A Call Reminding of the Practical Philosophy behind the Doing of Theory

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Abstract: This essay examines the importance of a situated understanding of the self from a communication ethics perspective in relationship to the works of Seyla Benhabib and Ronald C. Arnett. Using the metaphor of "the mud of everyday life" as a frame, this essay delves into the significance of Benhabib's work for a philosophy of communication ethics that remains attuned to the ever-changing nature of the dialogic spaces of our postmodern world. An understanding of a situated self in an age of difference dwells in the tradition of practical philosophy. Therefore, Arnett's insistence on using the metaphor of "the mud of everyday life" within the contexts of doing philosophy of communication and communication ethics reminds us of the practicality-oriented mode of consciousness and insight in these realms.

Keywords: situating the self; mud of everyday life; Benhabib, Seyla; communication ethics; practical philosophy; identity formation

> "Dialogue is not meant for the ethereal, but for those willing to walk with others through the mud of everyday life."
> –Ronald C. Arnett and Pat Arneson (1999, 32)

This essay examines the importance of a situated understanding of the self from a communication ethics perspective in relationship to the works of Seyla Benhabib and Ronald C. Arnett. Using the metaphor of "the mud of everyday life"—discussed by Arnett (1986, 2004, 2005, 2007, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2017)—as a frame, this essay delves into the significance of Benhabib's work for a philosophy of communication ethics that remains attuned to the ever-changing nature of the dialogic spaces of our postmodern world. Benhabib (1992) argues that "postisms" convey a recognition that certain aspects of our social, symbolic, and political phenomenal worlds have undergone profound and likely irreversible transformations. Situating herself as an engaged scholar within this historical moment of significant change, she explains how it can feel as if one is "staring through the glass darkly" with a dim understanding of the vast panorama and yet

unwilling to contribute to the prevailing mood of skepticism. Within this context, Benhabib asserts her scholarly approach and mission as a constructive lifelong project that brings together competing perspectives into dialogue with the hope of a light that may sparkle by breaking through the superficially shallow but fundamentally high-dimensional nature of our zeitgeist.

In fact, Arnett's depiction of our current historical moment, often referred to as "postmodernity," provides a broader perspective in understanding why Benhabib's scholarship should be read as a resistance to the deconstructive tendencies of critique, as well as a response to the fractured spirit of our times. Arnett (2017) writes, "Postmodernity as hypertextuality announces the existential fact of all historical eras being co-present; competing valences of signification of and about *the good* compete, proclaiming in action a contemporary existential fact—that no one perspective has undisputed credence" (81). Arnett provides insight in making sense of the historical complexity of our everyday encounters. It is not only the entanglement of living in a time without common public agreement on what is good but also the loss of metanarratives that confronts us; we are left struggling to operate within the coordinates of these old maps which still demand our attentiveness. Arnett, Fritz, and Bell McManus (2018) recognize the current atmosphere as an era of narrative and virtue contention that requires communication ethics of *learning*. It is a call for a walk in the mud of everyday life with humility and confidence, necessitating the presence of a situated self.

In the Mud and Confusion of Everyday Life

Arnett referred often to the metaphor of "the mud of everyday life" in his teaching, mentorship, and scholarship, particularly when he wanted to remind his audience of the significance of working conscientiously with what is in front of them. Communication ethics in dark times, according to Arnett (2013), requires attentiveness to what is real rather than what is ideal— "meeting darkness and rejecting artificial light" (261). He emphasizes the importance of "ethical discernment," which can be defined as a reflective communicative action that involves both humility and confidence (Arnett 2017). Humility, arising from the acknowledgement of not possessing all the answers, simply inspires people to attend to whatever information is before them. Confidence, on the other hand, emanates from acknowledging one's role and responsibility that repeats, "I am my brother's keeper." Arnett (2013) affirms, "Existence matters, but our meeting and response to existence are central in our responsibility for shaping the human condition" (222). These communicative dwellings that emerge in the meeting of an existential burden or an Other put ground or, in Arnett's words, "mud" under our feet, reminding us of our humanness and thus situatedness.

The metaphor of "the mud of everyday life" is a Buberian phrase. Martin Buber used this phrase in *Between Man and Man* ([1947] 2002) and *I and Thou* ([1937] 1958) to refer to the everyday creaturely life of man that does not separate existence from its world or isolate the self into a freely moving *I*. According to Arnett (2011), the mud of everyday life as a frame in communication ethics reminds us that we

must go beyond objectivity and subjectivity to an understanding of ethics that "lives within existence, not above the demands of life or in the self-assurance of a given communicator" (46). For Arnett, the problem with modernity is that it took the ground from under people's feet and gave the illusion of walking above the ground without getting any mud on one's feet, legs, and hands. In *Communication Ethics in Dark Times*, a significant interpretive project analyzing Hannah Arendt's perspective on modernity and its catastrophic consequences for the human condition, Arnett (2013) emphasizes the close relevance of her scholarship to communication studies. While analyzing the rhetorical warning of Arendt, Arnett also makes sure to keep the tone hopeful, offering a glimpse of a better future, on one condition: that we meet existence on its own terms. He writes, "[M]odernity fails as it attempts to escape burden, rejecting the very soil upon which a meaningful life is built—the meeting of toil and mud of everyday life" (262). On the other hand, exemplars like Arendt, Emmanuel Levinas, and Victor Frankl remind us that a state of serenity and contentment is possible even in the midst of burden, "not by escaping it but my meeting darkness on its own terms and somehow founding joy in toil" (Arnett 2013, 262). Metaphors such as soil, earth, dirt, ground, mud, and existence situate communicative practices and a philosophy of communication ethics in Arnett's works. He regards these concepts as an invitation to recognize hard and, at times, unpleasant work that will be done over a long period.

Situating Communication Ethics

Before moving on to the concept of self and our discussion of the communicative model of autonomy that Benhabib develops to situate the self in today's contextually sensitive realms of everyday existence, it is important to elucidate the philosophy of communication in which this essay grounds communication ethics. Arnett and Arneson (2014) argue that because there is a multiplicity of communication ethics within the social spheres of our lives—including public and private spaces—understanding the philosophy behind a given communication ethics is of vital importance: "[I]f one cannot think philosophically, once cannot question taken-for-granted assumptions. In the case of communication ethics, to fail to think philosophically is to miss the bias, prejudice, and assumptions that constitute a given communication ethic" (ix). Without a reflective communicative engagement with the other in the mud of everyday life, we cannot discern what goods need to be protected and promoted. Within this context, the mud refers to the sticky, wet earth that two or more communicators bring from their respective narrative grounds. Therefore, it is crucial to acknowledge our biases in order to meet and learn from the Other in an era defined by difference.

Plurality and diversity matter. They are the essential elements of the human condition and moral imperatives for its flourishing. Attentiveness to differences followed by thoughtful action requires a philosophy of communication, "framing a theoretical 'why' behind the 'how' of practicality" (Arnett and Holba 2012, 3). Narratives give meaning to our practices. However,

they are overlooked or taken for granted until we meet the Other. Difference is an interruption and, more importantly, an invitation to pause and reflect on the story-centered meaning behind our actions. Arnett and Annette Holba (2012) define philosophy of communication as "story-centered meaning" that is beyond information: "Philosophy of communication attentive to human meaning is a form of music that offers insight even when the pitch varies" (225). In the face of repeated incidents underscoring the impracticality of achieving a consensus on narrative and virtue structures and thus a flawless response, thinking philosophically about our communicative practices reminds us that the pursuit should be oriented toward a "relative pitch" instead of a perfect one (225). This involves attentiveness to others and the environment, aiming to attain a nuanced understanding of what could be deemed as good in each encounter.

Communication ethics, according to Arnett (2012), necessitates a Janus-like quality within this historical moment to respond to postmodernity and the normativity of crisis. Arnett explains "the normativity of crisis" (161) by referring to Alasdair Macintyre's (1981) proclamation in *After Virtue*: the default mode of our historical moment is moral crisis as a result of the legacies of modernity, namely individualism and "emotivism"—making decisions and taking actions from one's individual perspective without calling them into question (MacIntyre [1981] 2010, 11). Arnett asserts a communication ethics that adopts "a gate-keeping function that defies both the emotivism of modernity (with the locus of ethics inside the person) and unreflective traditional culture (with the locus of ethics in taken-for-granted mores of the people)" and adds that this gate-keeping responsibility demands "Janus at the gates" (162). Gate is the "metaphorical fulcrum point" where we are called into action and ethical decision making (175). The rhetorical implications of the Roman god of Janus within the context of communication ethics awakens the self to the outcomes and corresponding responsibilities linked to making ethical choices and decisions.

The dialectical nature of the acknowledgement of being the gatekeeper in an age of narrative and virtue contention has its own demands and terms. Arnett's essay, "Communication Ethics as Janus at The Gates" (2012), situates communication ethics in the mud of everyday life, reminding us that "we cannot wash our hands of the consequences of our doing of responsibility in ethical decision making" (165). Arnett's rhetorical warnings can be summarized as follows:

 1. Acknowledging the biased and tainted ground upon which one stands.

 2. Making one's peace with walking with confidence and uncertainty simultaneously.

 3. Apprehending the fact that an ethical choice is always challenged with its opposite that is present right in front of one's face. Turning to one side or one person means turning one's back to the other side or person. Something or someone will elude our attention, no matter how hard we try.

4. Lastly, reiterating to ourselves the actuality of the consequences of our ethical decisions and thereby stepping into the pragmatic act of constructing ethical dwellings with careful and thoughtful action to meet what is before us.

Arnett (2012) concludes his essay by restating, "Communication ethics is the doing of theory in the mud of everyday life . . . not pristine . . . not pure . . . not predetermined . . . [It] is the phronesis of everyday life . . . the communicative act of Janus, reminding us that there is no one right answer but that each path has consequences, some that we can see and others far beyond the range and depth of our vision and imagination." At the same time, he stresses that "this is a wonderful time to be studying communication ethics" (177). It is a time to celebrate having our feet back on earth and to heed the call to *learn* rather than tell within the context of communication ethics (Arnett, Fritz, and McManus 2018). A situated understanding of communication ethics reminds us of our humanness and limits, particularly the need for the other. Benhabib (1986), paraphrasing Aristotle's *Politics*, states, "[O]nly a god or a beast has no need of the perspective of others to constitute its own" (141). Furthermore, she underscores in the introduction to *Situating the Self* (1992) that her approach involves a reflective engagement in dialogue with feminism, communitarianism, and postmodernism, while also *learning* from them (2). She is thinking with but also against her contemporary feminist, communitarian, and postmodern philosophers. In short, Benhabib's work shows us that situating the self is a communicative act that can only be done in the presence of others by reflectively attending to multiple grounds.

Situating the Self

In her project *Situating the Self: Gender Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (1992), Benhabib adopts a constructive hermeneutic approach to develop a communicative model of autonomy within the context of the problem of moral and political universalism. David DeIuliis defines the philosophy of constructive communication: "As opposed to a deconstructive hermeneutic, which calls for substitutive change, a constructive hermeneutic engages and learns from difference through additive insight" (DeIuliis, 2015, 2). The fractured spirit of our times, according to Benhabib, has created a cynical attitude toward the legacies of modernity. While critiques by communitarians, feminists, and postmodernists call for a fundamental change of all the norms and values of modernity, Benhabib advocates reconstruction, "not wholesale dismantling" (2). For her, some ideals of modernity, like the moral autonomy of the individual, are worthy of protecting and promoting. The guiding question of her work *Situating the Self* (1992) is, "*What is living and what is dead* in universalist moral and political theories of the present, after their criticism in the hands of communitarians, feminists, and postmodernists?" (2, emphasis added). The wording of her question demonstrates her conscientious work with what is in front of her. Benhabib is a scholar who proceeds with caution and due consideration, thinking through the issues of the current historical moment. She offers the metaphor of "interactive universalism" as a framework to protect the modern self from "the metaphysical

illusions of the Enlightenment"—"the illusion of a self-transparent and self-grounding reason, the illusion of disembedded and disembodied subject, and the illusion of having an Archimedean standpoint positioned beyond historical and cultural contingency" (Benhabib 1992, 4).

Arnett (2013) also warns us about the dangers of modernity, as well as the universal, which "takes us from embeddedness, the messiness of everyday life" (258). He is much more critical than Benhabib in his analysis of modernity. He asserts, "Modernity is an ethical and moral *cul de sac* that tried to escape the earth, the tainted soil from which we do and must make our ethical decisions" (Arnett 2012, 172). On the other hand, Benhabib does work from a modernist position, while simultaneously working from a critical position as well. Therefore, the intersection of these two scholars' work, particularly Arnett's praise for Benhabib's scholarship, is worth exploring. This essay argues that Benhabib situates the self in a way that is simultaneously attentive to the universal and the particular within communicative praxis, aligning with Arnett's critique of modernity. Her scholarship can be interpreted as a constructive response to Arnett's warning against falling prey to the pitfalls of individualism. In brief, Benhabib situates the self in the mud of everyday life and human relationships by rejecting the possibility of standing above history and the historical moment.

Sustaining and Nourishing the Web of Narratives: Radical Intersubjectivity and Plurality

Benhabib (1992) writes, "As Hannah Arendt has emphasized, from the time of our birth we are immersed in 'a web of narratives,' of which we are both the author and the object. The self is both the teller of tales and that about whom tales are told. The individual with a coherent sense of self-identity is the one who succeeds in integrating these tales and perspectives into a meaningful life history" (198). Additionally, Arnett and Holba (2012), who argue that philosophy of communication is a "story in action," claim that the self who discovers identity within a story is a "great character" (13–14). Referring to Buber's *Between Man and Man* ([1947] 2002) and his conceptualization of what creates a great character, Arnett and Holba (2012) provide a definition of the concept from a philosophy of communication perspective: "a person *situated* within a great story that requires practices and commitment to an ongoing drama" (14, emphasis added). Situatedness, being the author and actor in a great story, demands consistent communicative practices and resilience in dealing with the ongoing dramas of everyday life.

Benhabib encourages us to think about how we are communicatively situated in the contexts of our communities. She is against the philosophies that conceptualize the self as a disembodied cogito or a component of abstract unities that have reduced the role and responsibility of the self. Even before *Situating the Self* (1992), in *Critique, Norm, and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory* (1986), Benhabib clearly states her scholarly mission and goal: "I want to pursue the perspective of radical intersubjectivity and plurality, and argue against the characteristic 'flight of philosophy'—in Merleau-Ponty's words—away from our

situatedness and embodiedness" (55). To create a communicative model of autonomy, it is crucial to recognize the limits of being human, as we are shaped by our time and society. Our experiences differ based on the narratives of which we are part. Benhabib explains:

> I assume that the subject of reason is a human infant whose body can only be kept alive, whose needs can only be satisfied, and whose self can only develop within the human community into which it is born. The human infant becomes a "self," a being capable of speech and action, only by learning to interact in a human community. The self becomes an individual in that it becomes a "social" being capable of language, interaction and cognition. The identity of the self is constituted by a narrative unity, which integrates what "I" can do, have done, and will accomplish with what you expect of "me," interpret my acts and intentions to mean, wish for me in the future, etc. The Enlightenment conception of the disembodied cogito no less than the empiricist illusion of a substance-like self cannot do justice to those contingent processes of socialization through which an infant becomes a person, acquires language and reason, develops a sense of justice and autonomy, and becomes capable of protecting a narrative into the world of which she is not only the author but the actor as well. (1992, 5)

Stressing human beings' capacity for communicative understanding and reasoning within the context of the communities and narratives they are situated, Benhabib argues against the Enlightenment tradition that has argued for an original position, an ideal speech situation, and a universalist moral point of view for the self, denying the plurality of the human condition.

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt ([1958] 1998) defines plurality as "the condition of human action because we are all the same, that is human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live" (8). Benhabib (2003), rethinking Arendt's metaphors in *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, reframes plurality as "a condition of equality and difference, or a condition of equality-in-difference" (196). Acknowledging equality with the framework of difference requires communicative labor, which reminds us of Arnett's metaphor of "doing communication ethics in the mud of everyday life" (2012, 177); becoming capable of protecting a narrative requires a practical philosophy, a practical understanding, and practical action as an everyday-being-in-the-world to discern what is good in the multiplicity and complexity of contexts. Arendt "resuscitates everyday-being-in-the-world with others as the basic condition of being human" (Benhabib 2003, 107). Comparing Arendt's understanding of situatedness to Heidegger's thrownness, Benhabib (2003) argues that Arendt introduces a communicative space in which we situate ourselves not because we were born into, but because we responded. It is a "'space of appearance' into which we are inserted as acting and speaking beings and within which we reveal who we are and what we are capable of" (107). Contrary to the isolated Dasein of Heidegger, the form of being is continuously shaped within the network of relationships in compliance with how we respond.

A "responsive ethical I" is what Arnett (2004) suggests as an answer to this dialogic space and the historical moment we live in. In an era of difference and contention, he argues that we have to turn to lamp holders, and Levinas is whom he mostly refers to when approaching the concept of self. In an interview on communication ethics, Arnett (2007) articulates the significance of Levinas's scholarship: "His understanding of agency is derivative, not originative. He offers a responsive 'I' rather than the agency of an 'I' that imposes willfulness upon the world" (56). As an influential communication ethics scholar, Arnett does not deny the significance of autonomy; what he protests is an "I" that stands above any ground and walks with the presumption of having all the answers. The guiding question of his scholarship when studying human agency is, "What might a communication ethic look like that does not begin with a sense of will?" (Arnett 2004, 76–7). In his essay titled "A Dialogic Ethic 'Between' Buber and Levinas: A Responsive Ethical 'I,'" he articulates a capable self that is "shaped in response, not in agency" that "moves [us] from individualism to responsible attentiveness to the Other and the historical situation" (76). A responsive ethical I listens attentively, engages in dialogue reflectively, and responds actively by contributing to a continuing worldbuilding act. It is a rough walk done in the mud of everyday human relationships with the acknowledgement of the temporality of our responses that, in fact, shape who we are.

The distinctness of one person from another appears and discloses itself in communicative praxis. Calvin O. Schrag ([1986] 2003) defines communicative praxis as the holistic space of subjectivity that includes both discourse and intentional action. Schrag argues that "[p]raxis displays a different sense of knowing" (19) and articulates the three-dimensionality of this communicative space by explaining how speech and intentional action is "for" someone, "by" someone, and "about" something. Consciousness of participating in this in-between space allows, as Benhabib (1992) claims, "the emergence of a differentiated subjectivity in the inner life of the self" (126). She further explains how speech differentiates action from mere behavior: "The one who speaks is also the one who thinks, feels and experiences in a certain way. The individuation of the human self is simultaneously the process whereby this self becomes capable of action and of expressing the subjectivity of the doer" (126). Our understanding and expression of the reason behind the "how" of our actions is what constitutes the self.

Shifting from a substantialist to a communicative understanding of reason, which Benhabib (1992) asserts as the first step of her post-Enlightenment project of conceptualizing "interactive universalism" (5), leads to a formulation of a communicative model of autonomy. First of all, communicative reason, by its very nature, is embedded. Therefore, an understanding of autonomy from a communicative perspective requires a bigger story than one's own. In other words, it is important to call attention to the fact that embeddedness does not initiate from the person itself. The story of a life does not unfold depending merely on one's own sense of will. Benhabib (1992) stresses that "[i]dentity does not refer to my potential for choice alone" but "how I, as a finite, concrete, embodied individual, shape and fashion the circumstances of my birth and family, linguistic,

cultural and gender identity into a coherent narrative that stands as my life's story" (161–62). Constitution of identity necessitates an immersion in a web of narrativities. Benhabib defines narrativity as "the immersion of action in a web of human relationships" (127) and "interpretations" (126). By engaging in a web of narratives, we become active contributors to a larger story while also claiming our role as the protagonists of our life history. Nevertheless, it is essential for the self to recognize that being the protagonist does not grant full authority or complete authorship over one's life story. Benhabib (1992) asserts that the story of a life is "a coherent narrative of which we are always the protagonist, *but not always the author or the producer*" (127, emphasis added). Benhabib professes the end of the reign of the autonomous "I" of the Enlightenment and modernity. The current historical moment requires a responsive "I," not a delusional tyrant. In the multiplicity of narratives, our stories are shaped according to how we respond. The coherent narrative of the self is a byproduct of a communicative labor done in the mud of everyday life with others.

Unavoidability of Moral Judgment: What We "Always Already" Exercise

The discussion of a coherent sense of self and meaningful life history brings us to the questions of judgment and action, particularly moral action. Consciousness of one's situatedness takes the self out of a false perception that is ahistorical and autonomous; we are no longer condemned to remain atomistic individuals, isolated and wretched. The situated self is the one who finds meaning and purpose in a life story embedded in a web of narratives. The awareness of the narrative unity of one's life constitutes self-knowledge—knowing one's own ground. From a communication studies and rhetorical perspective, this perspective suggests a self with a philosophy of communication brought to the task of navigating the earth. Arnett and Holba (2012) state that "philosophy of communication is a form of story-centered meaning that contours understanding, framing the public domain and propelling us into human communities of communicative engagement" (16). Every day we encounter countless occasions that require us to make judgments, whether they are significant or not, but always necessary to move forward. The situated self engages reflectively with those moments with the consciousness of one's bias.

Benhabib (1992) asserts that "*[m]oral judgment is what we 'always already' exercise in virtue of being immersed in a network of human relationships that constitute our life together*" (125, emphasis in text). She insists on the inappropriate nature of asking a person to have neutral judgments. For Benhabib, there can be "no value-neutral" theories of political, legal, aesthetic, therapeutic, military, or medical judgment, because in each domain a theory or a philosophy implies a vision for the most preferred, desirable, or optimal outcome. On the other hand, moral judgment diverges from all these other domains of judgment in its inevitability: "the exercise of moral judgement is pervasive and unavoidable; in fact, this exercise is coextensive with relations of social interaction in the lifeworld in general" (Benhabib 1992, 125). For example, human beings can choose the option of not exercising their political rights. However, the realm of morality is intricately

intertwined with the human condition, such that refraining from moral judgment is just as impossible as abstaining from being part of a human community or being born of a mother.

Moral judgment and action are hidden in the most mundane moments of our lives with others; one does not have to be in charge of a life-and-death decision or struggle to exercise one's moral judgment. Hans-Georg Gadamer ([1975] 2019), who has provided a positive and yet inescapable perception of bias in philosophy, describes bias as prejudgment that is a consequence of our hermeneutical situatedness, which becomes apparent in our everyday interactions and encounters as ordinary human beings. He argues that moral decisions and judgments are "not only a matter of logical but of aesthetic judgment" (36)—it is important to note that his understanding of taste is "no way limited to what is beautiful in nature and art" (35). He elaborates further:

> Every judgment about something intended in its concrete individuality (e.g., the judgment required in a situation that calls for action) is—strictly speaking—a judgment about a special case. . . . all moral decisions require taste—which does not mean that this most individual balancing of decision is the only thing that governs them, but it is an indispensable element. It is truly an achievement of undemonstrable tact to hit the target and to discipline the application of the universal, the moral law (Kant), in a way that reason itself cannot. Thus, taste is not the ground but the supreme consummation of moral judgment. The man who finds what is bad goes against his taste has the greatest certainty in accepting the good and rejecting the bad—as great as the certainty of that most vital of our senses, which chooses or rejects food. (37)

Gadamer's argument recognizes the particularity of moral judgments that arise from the dialogical nature of human meaning. Meaning is always grounded in an individual case of particular characters with life stories and thus "tastes," understandings of what is good and what is bad. Thus, moral discernment is an exercise of our "always already" present tastes "in virtue of being immersed in a network of human interactions" (Benhabib 1992, 126). That does not mean that we simply apply our value coordinates to any case we encounter; on the contrary, we usually co-determine, sometimes add and perhaps correct, but always bring our bias to the table. And although the goods we value have an immense influence on how we shape our world and impact others, we do not have a much better awareness of them than of the food which we find delightful.

Arnett and Holba (2012), reiterating the inescapability of bias and prejudice, argue that it is in fact the bias that we bring to life that gives us insight and a sense of character: "It is not our neutrality that shapes identity, but the uniqueness of the perspective that we bring to a given event" (98). Similarly, Benhabib (1992) draws our attention to why we should appreciate bias and thus its consciousness in the formation of a situated self-identity: "The conception of selves who can be individuated prior to their moral ends is incoherent. We could not know if such a being was a human self, an angel, or the Holy Spirit" (162). She eloquently emphasizes the importance of acknowledging our flaws, limits, and weaknesses, which are inherent in our human condition. These aspects not only

define our identity but also add depth and texture to who we are and provide a nuanced perspective to the moral conversations we engage in. Benhabib (1992) asserts that "individuals do not have to abstract from their everyday attachments and beliefs when they begin argumentation" (74). Neither neutrality nor objectivity are goals, nor are they sought after from a philosophy of communication ethics perspective. In her defense of universalism, Benhabib is not striving for a context-independent moral point of view that exists in the myth of "unencumbered" selves (73). On the contrary, she emphasizes the absurdity of denying bias in such conversations of moral justifications:

> In entering practical discourses individuals are not entering an "original position." They are not being asked to define themselves in ways which are radically counterfactual to their everyday identities. This model of moral argumentation does not predefine the set of issues which can be legitimately raised in the conversation and neither does it proceed from an unencumbered concept of the self. In communicative ethics, individuals do not stand behind any "veil of ignorance." (73)

The model of communicative ethics that Benhabib defends protects and promotes a dialogic space that enables continuous moral argumentation among people with different perspectives and tastes.

Likewise, Arnett, in his essay, "Situating a Dialogic Ethics: A Dialogic Confession" (2011), renounces the modern concept of holding an "original position" when engaging in dialogue. He claims that the recognition of one's bias necessitates a completely different approach to ethics:

> This approach to dialogic ethics begins with a confession that we live in *the mud of everyday life*; there is no way to escape such reality. The messiness of existence haunts us not only in time of war, death, loss of friendship, and in economic collapse, but in our engagement with the everyday. It is, however, the assertion of this author that this same existential reality gives us meaning and a place to stand. (54, emphasis added)

Confession, in Arnett's scholarship, translates to the acknowledgement of the bias we bring into the conversation and the "tainted ground" upon which we stand. For Arnett (2011), "ethics and dialogue begin with narrative ground, not the discourse itself" (55). The self who confesses the reality of their situatedness is ready to meet existence on its own terms because they now have a ground "upon which to pivot, to push off"—narrative ground "functions as a source of identity in decision making and action" (55). We gain moral autonomy by attending to the temporal ground in the unfolding drama of our lives with a recognition of and reflection on our situatedness.

Maintaining A Delicate Balance in the Mud: An Ongoing Oxymoron

The metaphor of situating the self in the mud of everyday life provides us with a real insight about why situatedness and drawing our attention back to the narrative ground are essential when achieving coherence in the stories we and

others tell about ourselves, particularly at a time defined by difference. However, Benhabib (1992) warns, "Not all difference is empowering" (198); coherent identities are what we need to keep ourselves grounded in an era of narrative and virtue contention. Situating the self and thus succeeding in attaining a coherent and meaningful life, according to Benhabib, is all about finding the right balance between autonomy and solidarity or justice and care. She writes, "Justice and autonomy alone cannot sustain and nourish the web of narratives in which human beings' sense of selfhood unfolds; but solidarity and care alone cannot raise the self to the level not only of being the subject but also the author of a coherent life-story" (1992, 198). This delicate balance in the formation of an identity echoes Buber's comments on his solid endeavor between solidarity and autonomy—"Books and Men":

> [T]he human creature! That creature means a mixture. Books are pure, men are mixed; books are spirit and word, pure spirit and purified word; men are made up of prattle and silence, and their silence is not that of animals but of men. Out of the human silence behind the prattle, the spirit whispers to you. . . . I do, indeed, close my door at times and surrender myself to a book, but only because I can open the door again and see a human being looking at me. (qtd. in Arnett 2005, 63)

Arnett considers Buber an exemplary scholar who understood the precarious and yet essential tension between the self and the community. He states, "Buber recognized that the call of life rests in the inevitability of walking in the mud of everyday life and human relationships" (Arnett 2005, 63). The hardship of meeting existence rests in lifelong communicative labor and action, not within the comfort of solitude, and yet it requires both solitude and union.

Arnett and Holba (2012) define Benhabib's work as "an ongoing oxymoron, 'a unity of contraries,'" and argue that *Situating the Self* "is a dialectical effort to reformulate the universal within communities, historicality, and temporality" (227). Similarly, Benhabib's discussion of a communicative model of autonomy is also cognizant of the dialectical character of forming a situated sense of self. She calls the tensions along the path of being a finite and embodied creature episodes—"episodes of choice and limitation, agency and suffering, initiative and dependence" (1992, 162). These are the moments in the midst of which a call for the self into pragmatic action and construction are hidden. The situated self is the one who figures out the coherence in these juxtaposing moments of one's life story through communicative labor. Benhabib (1992) considers communicative labor as a commitment to "a continuous process of conversation in which understanding and misunderstanding, agreement as well as disagreement are intertwined and always at work" (197–98). She hopes that reflective engagement with this continuous conversation can result in an "enlarged mentality." The metaphor of an enlarged mentality, which was first used by Kant and later popularized by Arendt, appears prominently in Benhabib's scholarship, particularly when elaborating on the notion of equality-in-difference. Benhabib (2018) defines the process of cultivating an "enlarged mentality," stressing the communicative labor done in the mud of everyday life; it is "never an act of passive contemplation but

demands the unsettling encounter with the other, whose otherness compels us to turn inward and to reflect upon the stranger in ourselves" (32). Such an enlarged mentality allows moral reflection and transformation.

In *Situating the Self* (1992), Benhabib defends a model of communicative ethics that protects an understanding of moral autonomy having developed through an interconnected web of interdependencies as well as an ability of the self to distance itself from any meanings that come out of the web of narratives. She calls this latter position "reflexive role-distance" (73). In fact, Benhabib wants to preserve the "*modern* achievement" of the ordinary person's right to criticize and question (74, emphasis original). She explains that questioning and reflection, which was once a privilege and virtue of heroes, prophets, and moral sages, is now available as an everyday practice to protect the person from an uncritical recognition of any roles and duties imposed on them. In other words, "communicative ethics develops a view of the person which makes the insight central and attributes to individuals the *ability* and *willingness* to assume reflexive role-distance and the *ability* and *willingness* to take and reason from their point of view" (Benhabib 1992, 74). Benhabib depicts a situated self who is capable of navigating dialectical tension by virtue of being attentive to one's ground and simultaneously reflective about it. It is appropriate to end the discussion of moral judgment and autonomy with Arnett and Holba's (2012) concluding remark on Benhabib's philosophy of communication: "Benhabib seeks to liberate the human being within contexts responsive to people, environments, multiple generations, institutions, and ideas that situate us within embedded contexts, within an unending conversation alert to shifting historical demands" (237).

Implications of the "Mud" within the Context of Identity Formation

While approaching the questions of our current historical moment of rationality, agency, and ethics, Benhabib engages in a thoughtful dialogue with modernity and competing intellectual discourses of the present and measures their claims against each other. Arnett would usually refer to Benhabib as a scholar who works incrementally for change, stressing the significance of her respectful contention with modernity.[2] Benhabib is an engaged scholar working conscientiously with what is in front of her. She attends to the current historical moment and its questions with ethical discernment and due diligence, being mindful not to strengthen the already dominant tendencies and discourses of our era that are divisive, cynical, and relativistic. Her prominent and well-known work *Situating the Self* (1992) puts forward a communicative understanding of the process of identity formation that acknowledges the narrative grounds, inescapability of bias, and lastly the intimate relation between opposing elements of being an

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[2] From the lecture notes of Ronald C. Arnett's course COMM 659: Philosophy of Communication, Spring 2020.

embedded and embodied human being. This communicative model of autonomy contrasts with the Enlightenment conceptions of an autonomous, atomistic, ahistorical, and originative self, integrating practical philosophy and ethics with the discourse surrounding the notion of agency. What Benhabib essentially asserts about the situated self in her book can be summarized best in her own words: "[T]he moral self is not a moral geometrician but an embodied, finite, suffering and emotive being. We are not born rational but we acquire rationality through contingent processes of socialization and identity formation" (50). The communicatively capable self is shaped in response, not in its autonomy.

Reading Benhabib's *Situating the Self* (1992) from the framework of an Arnett metaphor, "the mud of everyday life," offers us significant insights into doing philosophy of communication and communication ethics in era of narrative and virtue contention. An understanding of a situated self in an age of difference dwells in the tradition of practical philosophy. Therefore, Arnett's insistence on using the metaphor of "the mud of everyday life" within the contexts of doing philosophy of communication and communication ethics reminds us of the practicality-oriented mode of consciousness and insight in these realms. Practical wisdom, *phronesis*, has no predefinitions of what a wise act shall be in a given encounter. The discernment of what is good is always oriented to a particular situation. Even situatedness does not offer the moon, but the earth reminding the self of the walk in the mud of everyday life. A philosophy of communication ethics that guides the situated self, Arnett suggests, rests within these coordinates:

> 1. the appreciation of engaging in a conversation that is well underway, as a first step;
>
> 2. the acknowledgement of the bias we all bring into the conversation, as a first lesson;
>
> 3. the humbleness of listening attentively to learning, not to tell, as a first philosophy;
>
> 4. the unavoidability of unities of contraries on this path, as a first norm;
>
> 5. the necessity of continuous reflection on one's situatedness, thus solitude and contemplation, as a first principle;
>
> 6. the temporality of clarity and answers, as a first teaching; and
>
> 7. the responsibility of keeping the conversation going, as a first and yet unending task of the situated self.

The discussion of situating the self in the mud of everyday life within the context of communication ethics moves us from the question of "how" to "why," opening new and various philosophies of communication. For Arnett, this a celebratory moment that invites learning; the same holds true for Benhabib. This essay ends with Benhabib's (1992) rhetorical call that misses neither the catastrophe nor the hope:

> I regard neither the plurality and variety of goodnesses with which we have to live in a disenchanted universe nor the loss of certainty in moral theory to be a cause of distress. Under conditions of value differentiation, we have to conceive of the unity of reason not in the image of a homogeneous, transparent glass sphere into which we can fit all our cognitive and value commitments, but more as bits and pieces of dispersed crystals whose contours shine out from under the rubble. (75–76)

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