

Beyond Dialogue: Communication Ethics between Interpersonal and Impersonal

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Abstract: This paper seeks to rethink communication ethics beyond dialogue by advancing the notion of thirdness as its basis. Taking Ronald C. Arnett's idea of dialogic civility as a starting point, the discussion proceeds to reveal the inseparability and interconnectedness of the interpersonal and the impersonal, the particular and the universal. It then considers Emmanuel Levinas's ethics as triadic rather than dialogic, as exposed to the call of the immediate Other while always haunted by the calls of the third party, of other Others. From this, a new understating of mediation arises—ethical mediation—one that does not culminate in transcending its elements but in attending, each time again, to their difference.

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Communication ethics seems to be poised between opposing poles: particular and universal, interpersonal and impersonal, immediate and distant, dialogic and systematic, private and public.¹ Such dualities both inform and haunt our thinking of communication ethics. What does the persistence of such dualities mean? For one thing, however we conceive of communication ethics, this persistence pushes us from one focal point to the other, from here to there to everywhere, from this time to any time, from this case to every case, and in reverse. It is as if one has to decide where to start the trajectory, and is then compelled to venture towards the other pole, whereupon the trajectory will finally find justification in the point where it began. What I would like to suggest to you today are some preliminary thoughts about this framing and its problems, and offer a different way of going about it. I suggest that such dual thinking is misguided and propose the notion of thirdness as a possible alternative.

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1.

I would like to begin with dialogue and specifically with the idea of dialogic civility, which Ron Arnett develops so insightfully in his work (1999, 2001). I bring this idea and the compound of dialogic civility as emblematic to the problem I have started to describe. Let's first linger a bit on the compound itself. Dialogue, of course, suggests interpersonal discourse, whether literally or metaphorically, whether between two sides or between changing parties. The interpersonal model implies the mutual recognition and willingness of the dialoging partners; indeed, they must already consider themselves on some level as partners before dialogue can commence. To be in dialogue requires that I already acknowledge you as interlocutor, as an Other with whom I am dialoging.

Now civility suggests something different. It derives from the Latin *civilis*, which denotes public life and social order, and is also related to *civis*, "townsman," which is the origin of *civitas*—citizenship. So civility stands for something quite different from the situation typically associated with dialogue. Civility implies impersonal fraternity, equal measure to all regardless of who they are. It is not about a specific Other, but about all others as others. In fact, civility presupposes certain arrangements that do not require—indeed preclude—interpersonal recognition or familiarity. Civility demands anonymity. It is for me as much as for you as much as for her and for them.

With dialogic civility Arnett attempts to square the circle, an attempt that I find inspiring. My intervention very much follows this motivation; however, I will suggest the notion of thirdness to do so and in fact will try to show that Arnett's discussion contains, even if inadvertently, tendencies toward thirdness. Like him, I am indebted in my thinking to Levinas, but in my reading, Levinas is not ultimately a dialogic thinker but, critically, a thinker of thirdness. But before proceeding, I would like to stay a bit more with Arnett's discussion, which, as said, is indispensable in unpacking the problematic.

Dialogic civility is proposed as a "public interpersonal metaphor" (Arnett 2001, 315), which is said to fit a postmodern communicative context. The use of metaphor here is instructive, for it works like an enthymeme, calling the audience to make sense of what is said. Note that this address is already dialogic in that it invites a plural "you" to partake in the address. Once others respond, they effectively make themselves into an audience, becoming part of the dialogic situation. Such public dialogue summons whoever is willing to respond each time, reaching out to all, provided the structure of response is dialogical—or more precisely, *as if* dialogical, for metaphor always works by a leap of the imagination, requiring the transfer of an idea from one context to another while carrying the original meaning.

The main motivation of dialogic civility is providing an alternative to self-centric discourse, which is tantamount not only to morally indifferent discourse but to a privatized, commercial public domain. At its core is acknowledging alterity and difference and their multiplicity. Right from the beginning it is clear that there is no one framework, basis or narrative according to which dialogic

civility could operate. Indeed, it requires a constant shifting of ground, a constant movement towards a blurry horizon while keeping the conversation going. Sustained by respect and responsibility, it is carried across multiple beginnings, interruptions, and resumptions.

Perhaps what is most striking about this idea is the humility it teaches, the kind of humility possible only in embodied situatedness. Note again the duality that inheres here: the concreteness of embodied situatedness but the demand for universal respect, dialogue being the operative metaphor for making this work. But dialogue owes its logic to the interpersonal, which is then sought metaphorically in the public domain. This transfer (literally: metaphor) relies on the precedence of the interpersonal in conferring its virtues onto the public. It is the ethical import of the interpersonal that informs civil—that is, impersonal—exchange.

Is it possible to conceive of an ethically informed public discourse without the precedence of the interpersonal? Or rather, why even try to do so? What's wrong with dialogue? Well, nothing is wrong, except that by subscribing to it we rehearse the dualism mentioned before, making the public derivative of or secondary to the dialogic. I would like to propose the concept of thirdness as an alternative and demonstrate its value for the discussion.

2.

What do I mean by thirdness? That which is outside the two, external to the I and Thou, beyond the here and now. It might seem that just as dualism is a retort to monism, so thirdness is to dualism. This is not my intention, and I would actually want to argue that secondness and thirdness, while distinct, are inseparable. But first some conceptual clarifications are in order.

There is nothing new in the idea of the third and of thirdness. Plato and Aristotle were preoccupied with what has since been called “the third-person argument,” which concerns the problem of regression (if there is one form of person, there must be another, and still another, and so infinitely). This, of course, contradicts Plato's understanding of knowledge, which is based on the precedence of pure forms. In essence, this gets to the dualism of the idea versus particulars, of which Aristotle said there will always be a third, setting off an infinite regression. In the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle speaks of the law of noncontradiction, according to which a substance cannot be of opposite qualities simultaneously (both be and not be, etc.). This law was known later in Latin as *tertium non datur*: no third (option) exists, or the law of the excluded third. It is curious that in another book, *On the Soul*, Aristotle is actually of the opinion of *tertium datur*—that the third very much exists. This in his discussion on the intermediate, that which is in-between, the Greek *metaxy*, which is the origin for the word *medium*.

If all this seems a bit anecdotal, this is because it is. A much more comprehensive account is in order to get a handle of the ways in which thirdness plays out in classical texts. But despite the obvious shortcomings, it is possible to glean from this brief note three (how else!) types of thirdness: (1) multiplication

and plurality—the many rather than the binary; (2) that which is excluded, indeed has to be excluded, for the existing state of affairs to take place; (3) that which is in-between, intermediate, between one and another. These three types do not necessarily coincide, although they might. What warrants placing them under the same category is that all three have to do with an externality that has to remain outside for the comings and goings between the participating parties to transpire. The condition of the two entails the functional exclusion of the third.

It is possible to review the entire history of philosophy, from ancient to modern to postmodern, in terms of thirdness. Of course, I am not going to do that here. I do, however, want to give a shout out to a couple thinkers—first, to Hegel, who is perhaps the thinker most invested in thirdness, whose version of it was famously developed in his form of dialectics. According to Hegel, once there is one, there are already two: the condition for consciousness and thought is opposition. One is one by virtue of not being the other. What takes the place of thirdness in Hegel is the process of mediation, as he writes in the *Science of Logic* (2015): “For mediation means to make a beginning and then to have proceeded to a second item, such that the second item is the way it is only insofar as one has arrived at it by starting with something that is an other over against it” (40). The movement from one to the other is third with respect to the two, and is what allows the differentiation as well the relation between the two. There is no immediacy other than mediated immediacy. Mediation is progressive, from negation to elevation, and is what spirit or thought is all about. Thirdness is therefore concomitant with the first and the second yet, at the same time, also carries them forward, away and beyond.

The thinker who probably contributed most to conceptualizing thirdness is C. S. Peirce. This forms part of his triadic thinking of firstness, secondness, and thirdness (in fact, all his philosophy is triadic, but that’s for another discussion). The three categories are not independent designations but interdependent aspects of phenomena. Firstness is the category of monadic qualia: the feeling or consciousness of things as such, prior to analysis. Secondness is relation, encounter with the outside, another something—hence contact, resistance, interruption. Thirdness is about making sense, knowledge, learning, habit, and as such, involves representation and mediation. “Thirdness is nothing but the character of an object which embodies Betweenness or Mediation in its simplest and most rudimentary form; and I use it as the name of that element of the phenomenon which is predominant wherever Mediation is predominant, and which reaches its fullness in Representation” (Peirce 1998, 183). Peirce was clearly influenced by Hegel, and his idea of mediation also names the linking of first and second. Yet, unlike Hegel’s notion, Peirce’s mediation does not call forth first and second while subsuming both; rather, all three categories remain coexistent in phenomena (cf. 164–77). What I find useful here for an ethical account is the different modalities of attending to alterity in terms of secondness (that is, encounter and relation) and thirdness (that is, meaning and discourse).

Ethics is coextensive with the social, however broadly we want to define it. It is not surprising, therefore, that thirdness has been a foundational question in thinking the social itself. Georg Simmel, one of the fathers of sociology, keenly

observed that society begins with the appearance of the third. While dyadic relations are unquestionably social, they become part of society only once they partake in something beyond the dyad. As Simmel puts it, "The sociological structure of the dyad is characterized by two phenomena that are absent from it. One is the intensification of relation by a third element, or by a social network that transcends both members of the dyad. The other is any disturbance and distraction of pure and immediate reciprocity" (1950 136). We may therefore say that the third both transcends and unsettles the two, both gives them meaning and upsets their unity. A key example for Simmel is marriage, but the same logic works for every socially contextualized dyad we can think of.

Clearly, with the appearance of the third, things get complicated: two is company, three is a crowd. Simmel goes on to detail various configurations of triadic relations, all of which involve some kind of imbalance and tension. There is the situation Simmel calls *tertius gaudens*, "the third who enjoys," in which the third draws advantage from the conflict between the two, as in "divide and rule." The opposite is *tertius miserabilis*, where the third suffers from the two being in cahoots against it. Simmel gives much attention to the third as mediator, a go-between, which might work out in its favor or at its expense. At any rate, being in between is a precarious position. Such is the situation, for instance, of the translator as exemplified in the saying *traduttore, traditore*: "translator is traitor." Since both sides depend on the intermediate, there is always suspicion as to its allegiance. The third might also be taken as what prevents the two from uniting, from becoming one, and as such, is doomed to expulsion—the third as the scapegoat, "everyone's 'other'" of which René Girard (1986, 86) wrote much. Alternatively, the third may be summoned to adjudicate or consecrate the relation between and over the two, as a judge or as a priest (see Kramer 2015).

3.

We can now sketch more generally the different figurations of the third: "standing over" (as in presiding); "standing between" (medium); "standing outside" (exteriority). (I leave for now the figuration of "standing under" as in underlying, like infrastructure, which could also be included but really exceeds the framework I'd like to develop here). We can also situate different models of communication ethics in terms of where they stand with respect to thirdness. Take Buber, for example: his idea of dialogue is fully committed to secondness (even his notion of *Zwischen*, the in-between), and when considering the social it is always under the privilege of the relation with the Thou. Conversely, Habermas conceives of communicative action purely in terms of thirdness, that is, as impersonal discourse, while nevertheless basing this discourse in the interpersonal. Still another example is Gadamer, whose idea of dialogue is of continuous progression towards fusion of horizons, which is emblematic of a transcending thirdness.

This brings me to Levinas, who offers what I find a compelling approach to thirdness and the third party. To be sure, Levinas's scattered thoughts on this issue are few and far between. They sometimes seem like afterthoughts, addenda to the

main discussion, conveying roughly the same point: the third party is not a later addition to the relation with the Other; rather, the third is already there from the start. As he puts it in *Totality and Infinity*, “the third party looks at me in the eyes of the Other” (1969, 213). How can the responsibility to and for the Other, the relation with the face, already involve relation with the third, with other Others? Levinas is admittedly sketchy on this question. But I think that when reading his work with this particular question in mind, it becomes clear that not only is thirdness implied throughout, but it is also in fact a key motivation in his entire philosophical enterprise.

Levinas’s critique of Buber’s idea of dialogue is instructive here. It concerns three problems: symmetry, reciprocity, and exclusivity. The relation with the Other, Levinas argues, is not symmetrical: the Other is met not on the same plane but comes from on high, a *Vous* rather than *Tu*. The relation is also nonreciprocal: I am responsible for the Other regardless of whether the Other responds in kind or responds at all. Ethics is not about mutuality. Finally, the problem of exclusivity: The I–Thou relation is content within itself, secluded from the world; it excludes all other Thous in favor of one particular Thou. This relation cannot support multiplicity: it can handle only one Thou at a time. I leave aside the question whether this is a fair assessment of Buber, but what is evident here is Levinas’s discontent with the dialogical structure, not least because of what he deemed as its forgetfulness of the outside. It is what lies beyond dialogue that concerns Levinas.

Indeed, it is possible to identify thirdness in how Levinas conceives of the encounter with the Other. For Levinas, one encounters the Other as a He rather than a Thou, as a third person rather than a second, and the term he uses for this is *Illeity*, “he-ness.” The Other is never fully present in the present but rather withdraws from presence, escaping grasp and representation. There is an absence typical to the third person, indirectness of relation already in the face-to-face. That absence, according to Levinas, is actually anarchical in the sense that it predates presence, approaching from an absolute past, a past that was never a present. The Other as encountered in the face is anarchically removed, which does not mean the elimination of proximity—to the contrary: remoteness is the condition of proximity. There is still more unpacking to do as to how this form of thirdness, already in the face of the Other, relates to thirdness in the sense of the relation with other Others. Yet here I want to emphasize one crucial point: Levinas argues that representation, reason, knowledge, justice—all that he includes under the category of the Said—are called upon only once the third party appears. If there were only the immediate Other, there would be no need for reason, comparison, or justice.

I will add in passing that Levinas’s ambiguity as to the relation between the Other and other Others, between alterity as second and alterity as third, might actually be read literally, as bleeding into each other. He warns against faceless discourse, a discourse that reduces the Saying to the Said, and insists that all others be heard as if each were a particular Other. There is a slippage here that might actually be instructive: alterity always escapes itself. Rather than being a weak point, this might be seen as opening a new avenue for thinking about non-bipolar ethics, always more than two but also always somehow less than three: the *bi-regnum* (double rule) of second and third.

Two conclusions here: First, the third predates the Said; indeed, the Said is summoned to address the problem of the third. Second, the discourse of the Said, the discourse of reason and judgment, is fundamentally rooted in an ethical conundrum: what to do with the third? Ontology and epistemology, let alone politics and economics, are all progenies of ethics. Ethics, in the sense of relation with alterity, is the bedrock of sociality, but that relation already bears a vector of thirdness, a vector that sends it from the absolute pastness of *illeity* towards the coexistence of social life. As one form of thirdness recedes, another form of thirdness emerges while carrying within it the trace of the first. As Levinas puts it, "There is betrayal with my anarchic relation of *illeity*, but also a new relationship with it" (1998, 158). This idea of thirdness is clearly different from Simmel's. While Simmel marks the beginning of society with the appearance of the third, for Levinas the pre-societal, as it were, is already social, poised towards sociality by virtue of the ethical relation through which all others look at me in the face of the Other. For both Hegel and Peirce, thirdness means a mediation process, putting together and making sense, relating between second and third. This is also the case with how Levinas sees the discourse of the Said—the discourse of representation and reason, which is the basis for justice. Yet the mediation intended by Levinas (although he would never use this term) might be described as nontranscendent mediation, mediation that contains within itself the traces of the very process of mediation, an imperfect mediation, always open to remediation.

Hence, mediation that forgets its roots in the face of the Other is unjust, even if carried out in the name of justice. Only mediation that is prone to the interruption of the original responsibility is a justified mediation. Attending to the third is to be informed by the face of the Other, yet at the same time, the face of the Other bespeaks the call for global justice. Therefore, the particular is universal and the universal is particular—not in the sense of equivalence or overlap but rather of irreconcilability. The two are necessarily linked but in constant tension, disrupting each other (cf. Pinchevski 2005). To use Arnett's terms, dialogue informs as it interrupts civility, and civility informs as it interrupts dialogue.

4.

What shape might this thirdness-inspired communication ethics take? A far more extended discussion would be needed to answer this question, but it is nevertheless possible to glimpse an example in the form of Levinas's own writing—that is, his actual style of writing, particularly in his later work. The reason why Levinas's writing is important is because, in his case, writing is not, and cannot be, simply a means of communication. The gist of his thought concerns the irreducibility of the Other to any idea or representation. While being addressed through language, the Other nevertheless escapes thematization by language. The relation expressed through language—the Saying—precedes and exceeds what is conceptualized and delivered by language—the Said. If this is Levinas's message, then the way he communicates this message must adhere to what it says. In other words, making the argument for the ungraspability of alterity must itself perform

what it argues, otherwise it would reduce itself to mere thematization, to the discourse of the Said. To be sure, the Said is indispensable, else there can be no sense or meaning, but if divorced from the Saying that animated it, representation takes precedence over relation, and ontology over ethics.

To recapitulate the entanglement so far: the teaching of ethics—of the irreducibility of alterity—must somehow enact that irreducibility so not to turn into the discourse it criticizes. This teaching must deliver what it teaches while undoing itself in order to be faithful to itself (Pinchevski 2014). A strange philosophy, really: it seeks to problematize what philosophy does best—namely, conceptualize—in the name of what escapes grasp—namely, alterity—and does so in a philosophical discourse, albeit otherwise realized. Arguably, this is why Levinas turns to philosophy in the first place: to rearticulate it as subjected to ethics, to found reason on the question of what to do with the third.

In his early essay on Levinas, Jacques Derrida likened Levinas's writing to "the infinite insistence of waves on a beach: return and repetition, always, of the same wave against the same shore, in which, however, as each return recapitulates itself, it also infinitely renews and enriches itself" (1978, 312). In a later essay, Derrida (1991) likens Levinas's later writing to a fabric or texture that contains its own threads and tears, as well the knots of broken threads, the resumption of weaving and rupturing. In his final essay on Levinas, Derrida (1999) focuses on the call of hospitality encapsulated in Levinas's use of *Adieu*, "to God," specifically the turning implied therein towards infinity. At the same time, he does not fail to notice the hyphen Levinas inserts between *A* and *dieu*, between "to" and "God," a hyphen that connects as it separates this call and its addressee. All three metaphors—the incessant waves, the tears and weaves, and turning towards the infinite despite and because of separation—attempt to describe gestures towards the beyond, which are nevertheless sought in the text, while repeatedly avoiding circumscription. This continuous movement, forward and back, towards and away, is inherently linked with the entanglement already mentioned, an entanglement of unrelenting restlessness.

Granted, metaphors provide little help in specific situations, and it is beyond this talk to provide rules for operation. Indeed, "beyond" for essential reasons: there will always be a beyond, for no model or solution will ever be definite. This might be a somewhat disappointing note to end with—no crescendo, rather a diminuendo. Yet I believe there is an important lesson here nevertheless. The problem is not how to connect second and third, nor how to render dialogue public, nor how to render impersonal discourse interpersonal. The problem is rather in regarding second and third, interpersonal and impersonal, as separate to begin with. Communication ethics is already in the midst of things, in *medias res*, in mediation. It is not a question whether mediation is in order; it is already at work. The question is what shape mediation should take.

Ethical mediation would serve no masters other than those it already finds itself involved with, and because it is so involved, it cannot simply follow existing rules and precedents. This is not to say that rules and precedents are expendable; rather, observing them should always be within earshot of the Other's address, which reminds us of the originary responsibility. To follow Derrida's cues on

Levinas's metaphors, mediation is never decisive but proceeds through return and repetition, constantly renewing itself through revisions and reiterations. In doing so, it does not seek to obliterate its doings but rather retains its own undoing, the weaves and ruptures that make and break its operation. Mediation connects while separating, connects because of separating. As such, it is indeterminable, attending to the beyond within, always turning towards the alterity both close-by inasmuch as far-off. "Peace, peace to the neighbor and the one far-off," Levinas cites the prophet Isaiah, and adds, "we now understand the point of this apparent rhetoric" (1998, 157). We can now also understand the point in Levinas's own rhetoric: peace, peace to the near and to the far through the repetition and repeatedly—the same peace again and again, yet every time differently.

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