

Interview

INTERVIEW WITH RONALD C. ARNETT: PHILOSOPHY OF COMMUNICATION AS A FORM OF LITERATURE

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What does the expression “philosophy of communication” mean to you? Could you describe this field of study in your own terms?

I engage philosophy of communication as a humanities scholar. For me, it is closely connected to the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer. Philosophy of communication carries information, meaning, and standpoint—pointing in a given direction within existence. My study of philosophy of communication rests within postmodernity/hypertextuality. I understand postmodernity as a juncture in which all historical periods are co-present; I reject the term as referring to an epoch in a linear sequence after modernity. Umberto Eco’s phrasing of hypertextuality is helpful in understanding my engagement with postmodernity, indicating the co-presence of multiple texts and historical periods. The hypertextual nature of philosophy of communication leads not to analytic truth, but to stories that matter. I study philosophy of communication as a form of literature in which the stories frame an understanding of existence, with no one story capturing a universal truth.

In your thought-provoking study *An Overture to Philosophy of Communication: The Carrier of Meaning* (Peter Lang, 2012) with Annette M. Holba, you have pointed out that “philosophy of communication attentive to meaning is judged by its ability to help us dance, to love life, to assist us in attending to relationships... a thanks for existence itself” and you considered Kazantzaki’s *Zorba* as a character who repeatedly says “yes” to life. Zorba’s “love of life” was a unique way of how to live the life. How can the theory of philosophy of communication be adapted to the practice of everyday life?

My understanding of philosophy of communication is closer to the impulses of Immanuel Kant than to a person claiming to be a modern expert. Kant wanted human beings to engage in self-legislation. He did not mystify the philosophical/pragmatic decision-making process. For me, philosophy of communication is not mystical. It is the bias, prejudice, and assumptions that order and direct a human being onto a particular path. Philosophy of communication is an expression of everyday engagement. There are multiple philosophies of communication. I subscribe to the work of Calvin Schrag, such as *Communicative Praxis and the Space of Subjectivity*, as he moves from philosophy to rhetoric. Rhetoric enters conversation with philosophy of communication as we attempt to sort between and among different philosophies of communication, and as we seek discernment that will offer direction in a given context and in a temporal moment. I

consider philosophy of communication essential to everyday existence, and I cannot work with philosophy of communication without the engagement of rhetoric, which reminds us about what matters.

Literature has been used as a reference to comprehend philosophical issues, especially in contemporary philosophy. Can “literature” also give nuances to philosophy of communication in terms of differentiating itself as a field of study in communication studies?

I love your question about literature. I am not a fan of case studies; they are more akin to still photos. Literature, on the other hand, takes us into the human drama, providing us with textured insights that reveal the confounding nature of the human condition. Whenever possible, the linkage of literature and philosophy of communication is comprehensively helpful. Perhaps it is my understanding of philosophy of communication as story that makes the notion of literature so attractive as a form of explication.

Professor Arnett, since you are the former Executive Director of the Eastern Communication Association, do you see any differences between academia in the East and academia in the West on studying and/or considering philosophy of communication?

My term as the Executive Director of the Eastern Communication Association consisted of six years from 2010 to 2016. That experience was consistent with much of my understanding of communication within the West. My interest in Jewish philosophy walks toward a communication engagement not principally centered on the self. The Occidental prejudice uplifts the importance of a self disconnected from social restraints, such as family, friendship, work, culture, society, etc. Within the West, in my judgment, we embrace a social disease: individualism. Alexis de Tocqueville in *Democracy in America* warned about this fore-coming problem. He contended that selfishness was not only more natural, but much more helpful than individualism, which attempts to stand above the fray of human existence. The construct of modernity, as I describe in my book *Communication Ethics in Dark Times: Hannah Arendt’s Rhetoric of Warning and Hope*, embraces a secular trinity of efficiency, progress, and individual autonomy. Modernity is self-centric and unresponsive to words such as “tradition,” “past,” and “ground under our feet.” Many of these assumptions are closer to the East, with writers such as Arendt,

Buber, and Levinas reminding us of the limitations of basic presuppositions that continue driving the West in problematic directions.

In rhetorical studies, meaning lies in this expression: How you say something seems much more important than what you say. Rhetoric is also a well-known source of reference when it comes to mentioning the effects of communication in communication studies. Besides rhetoric, is there a way of considering communication philosophically?

For me, I do not equate rhetoric with expression. Perhaps I need to connect this question to the previous one. If one understands rhetoric as something that the world does to us, persuading us, in the words of Charles Taylor, we are products of the “sources of the self.” Rhetoric commences with attentiveness and listening, not expression. Such rhetoric garners our attention, reminding us of philosophies of communication that matter and carry meaning. In a postmodern age of hypertextuality, rhetoric reenters the conversation as we navigate our way through multiplicity and differences of perspective. The linkage of rhetoric and philosophy of communication begins with attentiveness and listening. This perspective is contrary to Levinas, who detested rhetoric. He equated it with the imposition of an individual’s ideas upon another. In my book *Levinas’s Rhetorical Demand: The Unending Obligation of Communication Ethics*, I contend that Levinas does indeed engage rhetoric; however, it is a rhetoric that is otherwise than convention. The rhetoric I am describing here calls us forth. The Other offers a reminder, reconnecting us to an immemorial ethic: *I am my brother’s keeper*. It is a rhetorical reminder of what matters, what should matter to us. One then reenters a conversation with an Other, with an unending responsibility to determine the appropriate and the helpful response. In such moments, one sorts through multiple possibilities, finding conviction, ever wary of undue certainty. I paraphrase Levinas as he stated that the most detested person is the self-righteous man. The arrogance of unquestioning confidence that is devoid of doubt is capable of inviting manifest destiny, colonialism, and totalitarianism. Such a person cloaks himself within the guise of universal certainty, accuracy, and truth. My reading of philosophy of communication and rhetoric seeks to avoid the character that Arendt, Buber, and Levinas recognize as the purveyor of evil, eclipsing the face of the Other.