

A PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE OF COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT

The study of communication suffers from two basic problems: It lacks a theoretical canon and philosophical rigor. In view of these limitations, this article explores the significance of continental philosophy for the growth of the field. Attention is given to the traditions of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and epistemology in an effort to grasp how such notions as *experience*, *interpretation*, and *power* explain communicative intents, acts, and processes. The paper concludes that the application of these philosophies is necessary for traversing the borders of arid positivism and technological determinism in communication and media theory, research, and practice.

Keywords: Communication, Experience, Interpretation, Power, Continental Philosophy

INTRODUCTION

Two basic problems confront the study of communication. It lacks a theoretical canon, and is less philosophical. A little over a decade ago, American theorist, Robert Craig, lamented that there is no such thing as a communication theory because the field is made up of varying theoretical commitments as a result of its incessant borrowing of and heavy dependence on other disciplines (Craig, 1999). According to him, as of 1996, the field had had 249 theories, each going in different directions. He described this development as leading to “sterile eclecticism” and “productive fragmentation”. Craig (1999) attempted to offer a seven-matrix typology for classifying communication

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'theories.' It is important to note that Craig is not the only one to have embarked on this journey. His classificatory system is, it is fair to admit, similar to the oeuvre of his colleagues like Littlejohn (1996). Therefore, it is becoming obvious by now that the root of the problem of theory in media studies lies in the very definition accorded the term 'communication'. To date, communication, following in the tradition of Shannon and Weaver (1948), is often conceived of as a linear, cybernetic transfer of a code from a sender to a receiver. Undoubtedly, this technological model has promoted, for many decades, a media-centric definition of communication. Belgian sociologist, Armand Mattelart, (1996) argues that the emphasis on a technocentric meaning of communication causes "historical amnesia" that tends to cause media and communication scholars to forget about the dense and thick layers in the study of media systems. Herein lies the problem: the definition of communication is usually stripped of its experiential, hermeneutic, and ideological essences. For instance, the questions American communication scholar and political scientist, Harold Lasswell, (1948) posed—who says what, in which channel, to whom, and what effects—as critical in arriving at a meaningful conceptualization of communication may hardly be answered in-depth if they are not entirely situated within their larger contexts. One way to solve this problem, I argue, is to turn to philosophy.

The object of this article, which is grounded in the humanistic tradition espoused by scholars like Hall (1973), Carey (1989), and Catt (2014), is to explore the significance of continental philosophy in enhancing understanding of communication. Two questions drive our inquiry: How do human agents experience and interpret communicative acts, and how are their communicative actions shaped by power? Compared to analytic philosophy, Continental philosophy, usually associated with the intellectual thought of Western Europe, particularly Germany and France, burgeoned in the 18th and 19th centuries.ⁱ It concerns itself with the nature of language, meaning, and thought as well as questions about how the mind relates to the world.ⁱⁱ Our overarching goal in this endeavor is to nuance our conceptualization of communication, and what it means to communicate in an intricately complex society. To do so, we shall pay special attention to the writings of German phenomenologists Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger and their French counterpart Maurice Merleau-Ponty to observe their claims on the question concerning experience. Next, we will embark on understanding the concept of hermeneutics and what it means to interpret a communicative act, and finally conclude with French scholar Michel

Foucault's epistemology of power. Our goal is to demonstrate that power is a capillary force underlying the production of discourse in a communicative act. Let us begin with phenomenology.

The Phenomenology of Communication

We have defined phenomenology as the study of lived experience and life worlds. Its leading exponent, Edmund Husserl, took it to be the new science of being (existence). Moving away from Cartesian dualisms and misguided rationalism, Husserl (1970) argues for a methodology that should be anchored on the disclosure of a realm which arises from our experiences and consciousness. For Husserl, Descartes's notion of *universal skepticism* ought to make way for *epoché* in understanding the world 'out there' because this world—*Weltanschauung*—is but a projection of our experiences. Minds and objects occur within experiences, he posits. We daresay that his work pays tribute to the science of experiential knowledge. This new focus is justified because, according to him, modern science is in crisis because it has failed to recognize the active role of consciousness in developing human understanding. In offering a nuanced version of Enlightenment, he adds that the *telos* of the human spirit is the embodiment of rationality. Central to Husserl's dialectic is that all objective philosophy and positive science are unreal because they depend on pre-givens that are subjective in nature. The business of a phenomenological inquiry is to capture these pre-givens, which for Husserl, are wrapped up in the everyday. Smith (2010) comments thus, "Science and logic can give us no help if the emotional temperament is missing, yet scientism is found today expressing its need for validation" (p. 1237). The importance of phenomenology, then, lies in its aperture to self-reflexivity as it allows the open-minded scientist to consider, while they can, all the pre-givens in the *Umwelt* of the phenomenon. Drawing on *Geist* (spirit), Husserl contends that the business of a truly natural science (as opposed to naturalistic science) is that it is committed to developing the intellect to the receptivity of all phenomena. It is that which focuses on the human spirit and signifies "a purposeful life accomplishing spiritual products: in the broadest sense, creating culture in the unity of a historical development" (p. 270). Husserl considers such a project meritorious because the human spirit is after all, grounded in *physis*, nature. In his view, it is inappropriate to separate Nature from Geist as though the two are dualistic rather than unitary. The crisis, then, is seen when the humanist and scientist focus on the afore-mentioned as disciplines that do not and need not address each other.

Thus, while Husserl emphasized *consciousness* as being, Heidegger, his student, disagrees by moving on to focus on *Dasein*, that is, the *mode of being*. Heideggerian phenomenology writ large is therefore the study of ‘the situated meaning of a human in the world’. In the hands of Heidegger (1927/1962), consciousness is not separate from the world, but is a formation of historically lived experience. He believes that understanding is a basic form of human existence in that understanding is not a way we know the world, but rather the way we are. In his introduction to *Being and Time* he lays the foundation of the question of *being*. According to Heidegger, Being is distinct from other entities: “Being’ is not something like a being”, but rather it is what “determines beings as beings, that in terms of which beings are already understood”. In this case, Heidegger identifies the conditions by which any specific entity can show up at all. For if we are able to understand the nature of Being, we will be able to clarify the meaning of being, that is the “sense” of being. This sense can be apprehended mostly by interpretation, which for Heidegger, is the essence of phenomenology.

First, Heidegger seeks to understand *Dasein* (the Human Being) in whose conception lies the phenomenological interpretation of everyday human existence. In the first chapter, he opens his argument with the claims that (a) *Dasein* is in each case mine (i.e., each one of us is a human being), and that (b) the ‘essence’ of *Dasein* lies in its *Existenz* (here taken to mean in a dynamic, active, future-oriented sense). These two characteristics, he writes, are unified in two modes of *Existenz*: authentic (*eigentliche*) and inauthentic (*uneigentliche*) existence. According to Heidegger, these two ways express how humans can ‘take up’ their existence: either they live as their own to the full extent of their imagination, or not as their own. His inquiry, then, delves into whether *Dasein* lives authentically or inauthentically, which for him can be determined in the empirical, ontic level of average everydayness. Heidegger says that to understand the rationality of our existence, we need to conceive of history as the embodiment of it. This means that, for Heidegger, rationality is not autonomous because any ability to do so is intrinsically grounded in history. Our understanding of a phenomenon is contingent on our *thrownness*ⁱⁱⁱ into the world. It is instructive to note that our being is always at stake, always open and not foreclosed. This is what makes us human as we are always open to new possibilities. In this case, it is not expedient to reduce the subjectivity of *Dasein* to a closure (as in the case of Foucault for whom the essence of Being is constrained by power structures, for Althusser (1977) it is ideology, etc.). Heidegger might argue that *Dasein*

transcends the world; the point, however, is that we need to confront our situatedness, and that this situatedness is not a limitation. It cannot be the case that Dasein can be situated in a communicative exchange bereft of any presuppositions. Total *epoché* is therefore a myth, says Heidegger. Being in the world means examining Dasein in the fullness of its existence. By taking the subject of Dasein as is common to Dasein, Heidegger argues that authenticity in life is a cause of anxiety which is also caused by our own 'choosing'. This is what, in his view, we try to flee from. He means to say that the project we engage in defines our own finitudes; they are the essential elements of our existence. Thus construed, he is concerned about the *whoness* of existence, not its *whatness*. In sum, being for Heidegger means that all of our lives lead to the finitude of life. Time is the meaning of being. That is why Dasein's being is characterized by being in the world.^{iv}

Language also plays a significant role in Heidegger's phenomenology. Language, in fact, is key to our understanding of the nature of communication because it is a frame of reference. In one of his later works, "Building, Dwelling, and Thinking" compiled in *Basic Writing*, a much more erudite Heidegger (1977/1993) asserts that the nature of language used in understanding phenomena needs to be evocative rather than "scientific". We agree that using evocative and expressive language is useful in the articulation of deep-seated sentiments and convictions which are often barricaded in the scientific enterprise. Pathocentric language, we may add, enables us to become one with the phenomenon we are describing.^v The significance of language in a communication chain cannot be overemphasized because language tells us about the essence of a thing, provided that we respect language's own essence, says Heidegger. Rather than thinking of being masters of language when we communicate, we should rather allow language to speak to us; we should allow ourselves to be fully hailed by it (see Althusser, 1977). This argument is further developed in "The Way to Language", in which Heidegger posits that language, spoken language for that matter, speaks. The emphasis on the primacy of speech, according to him, is needful because by saying something, language addresses people and things in the world; it points to them, as it were, showing them to be matters of concern. Two things come to the forefront: showing and pointing. These media of indexicality, it must be noted, are responsible for letting us come in their presence. In a Heideggerian sense, we cannot talk about communication processes as meaningful if we ignore questions of indexicality. In fact, work in applied linguistics explores issues of orders of

indexicality as part of meaning making (See Blommaert, 2010; Pennycook, 2010; 2012; Canagarajah, 2013). This is to say that what we communicate by pointing, showing, and emphasizing are not neutral; communication is simply indexical (Coker, 2014).

Heidegger also remarks that language is monological. Drawing on the work of Willhem von Humboldt, he argues that language speaks solely and solitarily with itself. We can thus dispense of its beckoning and biddings because we are within it. We are all the products of language given that we are *homo linguae*; we cannot exist in spite of language. For him, we need to understand the way to language as an effort to ‘bring language to language as language’; language has to be studied through language. Here, language is not only what shows (*sémeia*), or holds together (*symbola*), but is the very essence of *alethéia*, that is, that which is revealed. One other way is to understand that language is at its best when it is appropriated to its *rift design*. It is here also that we learn that “saying and speaking are not identical” (p. 408) for “one can speak, speak endlessly, and it may all say nothing” (ibid) and that silence, on the contrary, can *language* quite clearly.

These claims present useful thoughts for scholars in communication and mass media research. It urges us to reconsider three functions of communication: the instrumentalist, the semiotic/symbolic, and the logical. A Heideggerian instrumentalist view of communication will see language as a means to an end; it is a kind of *techné* for achieving specific tasks. In this case, communication becomes a rhetorical pursuit. It is a present-at-hand function of communication. On the other hand, when communication is viewed in a semiotic or symbolic plane, we take into account all the pragma-performative—overt or covert—manifestations of communicative modes. In this case, the Saussurean signifier/signified bifurcation may be of little importance because we will be focusing not only on the semantic and the pragmatic but also on the performative (See Pennycook, 2012; Canagarajah, 2013). Finally, when we consider the logical function of language, from the way Heidegger conceives of it, we will reckon that communication is not a mere transfer of signs or codes from an encoder to a decoder, but rather we will dutifully engage the soundness of the message. What is it that makes communication a logical and honest one? How is a message interpreted? What does the message mean? The answer, Merleau Ponty might say, lies in the embodied subject whereas for Gadamer it is a function of hermeneutics.

The Epistemology of Communication

Like his colleagues in Germany, French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty seeks to dislodge Manichean dualisms. In his magnum opus, *Phenomenology of Perception*, he develops arguably the most comprehensive theory of the field. According to him, any theory of phenomenology that does not take account of its psychological origin and its causal explanation is limited. He writes, “Phenomenology can be practiced and identified as a manner or style of thinking, that it existed as a movement before arriving at complete awareness of itself as a philosophy” (Merleau-Ponty, 1958/2002: p. viii). He argues that the existing literature has been less able to rightly demarcate the contours of the philosophy. In dealing with these limitations, he intimates that the Alter and Ego ought to be understood as an individualized ego which is separate in the world and yet finds itself within it. Arguing against Husserl’s reductionism, Merleau-Ponty leans towards Heidegger in agreeing that meaning arises out of our *thrownness* in the world, and, then, goes a step further to insist that meaning making is but a function of our embodiment. He rejects the notion of corporeality, and decries the claim that the body is a visible, physical manifestation of an individualized ego, thus contending that the human person cannot be reduced to a thing. He challenges this view thus:

All my knowledge of the world, even my scientific knowledge is gained from my own particular point of view, or from some experience of the world without which the symbols of science would be meaningless. The whole universe of science is built upon the world as directly experienced, and if we want to subject science itself to rigorous scrutiny and arrive at a precise assessment of its meaning and scope, we must begin by reawakening the basic experience of the world of which science is the second-order expression (p. viii).

Our understanding of Merleau-Ponty’s argument is that it is impossible to detach ourselves from the things we aim to investigate nor is it the case that we can conveniently isolate a phenomenon for study without actively involving ourselves in the phenomenon. This is due to the fact that “all cognitions are sustained by a ‘ground’ of postulates and finally by our communication with the world as primary embodiment of rationality” (p. xxi). It is his idea of a *phenomenal field*.

Four cardinal points are key to our understanding of Merleau-Ponty's oeuvre. The first is *pre-reflective experience*. The term has to do with what happens when we lose sight of our experiences prior to constructing a conceptual understanding of a phenomenon. For Merleau-Ponty pre-reflective experience (PRE) manifests itself when we detach ourselves—a certain epoché privileged in scientism in the spirit of achieving non-bias and objectivity— from our immediate experiences. In the work of the German hermeneuticist Hans-Georg Gadamer, PRE is a shorthand for *prejudice* (*praejudicium*). Rather Merleau-Ponty, through the instrumentality of PRE, encourages us to get the experiences of our actualities prior to our involvement in the world, as in wanting to know that we are making sense of a phenomenon itself. PRE is, in fact, a matter of our living, our essences, our existence. It is this mattering that creates a thingness by which we live through the worldhood of our existence. We have already seen that PRE is opposed to scientism in that the subject of science reduces perception to sensory datum, which it in turn tries to objectify and comprehend. If we choose to closely follow Merleau-Ponty's engagements, we will understand that PRE runs deeper than what is contained in the canon of empiricism in the sense that PRE troubles the notion of experiencing a phenomenon, say *x*, by fixing our gaze upon it or by comprehending it based upon our naïveté. Merleau-Ponty would argue that *x* cannot be a simple act of isolating *x* from the background from which *x* itself emanates. *X*, he may say, must be understood within the context of the phenomenal field. Failure to do so may cause a breakdown in our sensory apperception of *x* because *x* is first and foremost an interconnected phenomenon. In a word, Merleau-Ponty insists that it is false to hold that one can perceive *x* only and only when one focuses exclusively on the essence of *x*. Rather, it is the PRE that gives science its meaning. We cannot perceive *x qua x*.

What then is *perception*? Perception is not sensation as in the Aristotelian sense. Rather when Merleau-Ponty speaks of perception, he is invoking a greater sense of the word by referring to the abilities of beholding the world. In his phenomenology, to perceive is to dismantle the Cartesian divide between world and subject. Perception, for him, offers an open-ended access to the world, which he may explain as the function of our embodiment in the world. He holds that perception is not a science of the world neither is it an act nor a deliberate uptake of positions. It is, on the contrary, “the background from which all acts stand out, and is presupposed by them” (p. xi). Contrary to prior work that emphasized consciousness and the object/subject divide,

Merleau-Ponty advances that we are in no way distinguishable from our consciousness “since we are immediately in touch with the world and since the world is, by definition, unique, being in the system in which all truths cohere” (p. xi). For it is not the case that we could understand ourselves only through the instrumentality of the Cogito; we are not bounded by the limits of our consciousness. The Cogito must reveal us in a situation, and it is on this condition alone that transcendental subjectivity can, as Husserl puts it, be an intersubjectivity. “As a meditating Ego, I can clearly distinguish from myself the world and things, since *I certainly do not exist in the way in which things exist*” (emphasis added, p. xiii).

Perception thus is grounded in our *embodiment*. By embodiment, Merleau-Ponty means that we perceive x to the extent that this perception is unified in order to understand how the world unfolds to us. An embodied perception of a phenomenon is hard to reduce to an object/subject imperative, but instead explores the gamut of what makes life and living meaningful. Embodiment ought to yield *meaning*. If we understand him well, meaning is the product of pre-reflective experience, perception, and embodiment. Phenomena acquire meaning based on our levels of embodiment. Merleau-Ponty adds that perception is always veridical. As he puts it, “The world is not what I think, but I live through” (pp. xvi-xvii). In fact, this positioning of the subject in relation to the world is an attempt to rewrite the script against Descartes’s notion of *radical skepticism* or Husserl’s take on *teleological consciousness* for Merleau-Ponty believes that there can’t be consciousness *qua* consciousness. And so, when he posits that the world is not what we think of/about but rather what we live through, he is here resisting the idea of detaching the Ego from its material existence. We may gather from him that it is impossible to do so because the subject is already a veridical member of the world. We can only comprehend the world because we are in the world.

One other interesting claim is that an embodied subject is not limited in its phenomenal field. Suffice to say that, according to Merleau-Ponty, our bodies are habituated to acts of intentionality and motility. Here, he is resisting the view that we act on the basis of the accumulation of prior knowledge of the world. He insists that we exist in the world because we are constantly habituating acts of intentionality which are in themselves purposeful and knowledge-driven. Up to this point, it is important that we distinguish between two kinds of knowledge in relation to the afore-mentioned: (a) propositional knowledge e.g. We know that x ..., and (b) knowledge of habituation e.g. We know how

to x, in the sense that whereas the former derives from our appropriation of the material existence of the world or version of its reality (as in, we know that birds fly), the latter derives mainly from repeated acts that are not particularly based on some epistemic truth inherent within it (e.g., I know how to cook). In a Merleau-Pontyan sense, I know how to cook because when I intend to cook, I do so not because I put my mind to it, but because I have been cooking for years over and over again. To put it differently, acts in themselves are embodied thinking. I do not think of cooking as an act *in itself* before the act of cooking comes to me; instead, I do *cook for the sake of it*. Thus, for Merleau-Ponty, being in the world is based on our embodiment whereas for Heidegger being in the world is a function of our involvement in it. Merleau-Ponty would argue that we are Dasein insofar as we are embodied; this means that we take the perspective of the subject in the now (the ready-to-hand) even if there is a for-the-sake-of-which, while for Heidegger Dasein is futural: the body has its own *telos*. In using the exemplar of the phantom limb, Merleau-Ponty asserts that habituation is getting around the world through the body. “The body therefore is not one more among external objects, with the peculiarity of always being there” (p. 92). This is the result of adjustment or adaptability in the new body: it switches its intentionality. Here, we see Merleau-Ponty is rejecting the claim that our body is just an object. For him, we live meaningfully and make sense of the world through the body. We are not detached from the body nor do we make sense of it through an appeal to rationality, but rather we live in it, through it, and for it. The body simply apperceives its own body. Embodiment is the essence of being.

Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological speculations throw light on the study and conduct of communication and media theory, research, and practice. We gather from him that any theory of communication that proceeds by detaching the subject of inquiry from its embodied essences stands the risk of presenting a rather caricatured view of the phenomenon at hand. The Chicago School’s theory of propaganda popularized by Lasswell (1948) and his colleagues, for example, may offer us just too little about the workings of media propaganda on the populace because of its isolationist accounts of correlational variables. How does x affect y? Theories of the sort tend to neglect the phenomenal fields necessary for posing this question in the first place. In the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty thus lies the need for communication scholars to rethink the field in very progressive ways. Perhaps, one way to do this would be to study and apply phenomenology in

combination with hermeneutics. At this moment, we will take a critical look at the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer.

A Hermeneutic View of Communication

As a philosophy committed to the understanding and interpretation of texts broadly construed, hermeneutics can be viewed as a type of phenomenology. Gadamer says that it “must start from the position that a person seeking to understand something has a bond to the subject matter that comes into language through the traditional text and has, or acquires, a connection with the tradition from which it speaks” (1960/1998: p. 295). Following the writings of Husserl and Heidegger, Gadamer casts doubt on the methodological rigor of “science”. In *Truth and Method*, he exposes the problems associated with focusing on the scientization of methods as though they were sufficient in and of themselves to lead us to truth. His work is a corrective to the Enlightenment project and the massive influence of Descartes. In Gadamerian hermeneutics, truth, or rather Truthing, is an *event*.^{vi} This perspective enables us to distinguish what he means by truth vis-à-vis propositional truth as in that which is valuative, judgmental, or ideational. For Gadamer, truthing is far more complex than a true or false statement, as in the sense that the valuative index of truth is what has been for long thought to divide the world. Philosophers such as Descartes have theorized that it is the nature of truth that connects the world to us. In other words, the quality of language we use could be said to be directly proportional to the quality of worldhood we live in. Both Vygotsky (1978) and Levinas (1989) wrote that it is language which conditions rational thought. Truth has for a long time been conceived of as the relationship between language and the world. In contradistinction, Gadamer posits that Truth is an event because it is something that we experience. It does not exist independent of us. In Heideggerian terms, we would say that truth is our disclosure to the world, the manner of the revealing (*alètheia*) of the world to us which is not esoteric to our comprehension. In fact, it is what enhances our being.

Gadamer’s hermeneutics valorizes prejudice. His work rejects the Baconian value of *prejudice against prejudices*, which states that we cannot arrive at the truth by being prejudiced, and that belief systems, world-views, opinions, culture, and language have no place in the pursuit of objective truth. What, then, constitutes truth in hermeneutics? How is it pursued? Gadamer tells

us that to arrive at truth we must first understand that our knowledge of truth is based on events which are themselves open to interpretation. We understand it to mean that the meaning of a phenomenon is not univocal. The late cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1973), for instance, brilliantly demonstrated that there is no necessary correspondence between a text and its meaning, and that the meaning of a text is polyvalent, which is itself a tribute to Derrida's (1967: p. 158) controversial "There is nothing outside the text" claim. If this is the case, how, then, is it possible to arrive at a common, shared understanding of a phenomenon? Gadamer would insist that hermeneutics is not phenomenological relativism. Meaning resides in context, he would remark. Hence understanding, and the way to arrive at it, is attained by prejudice, says Gadamer. According to him, it is prejudice that opens the world to us. Rather than it being unintelligent, pathetic, and ungrounded, prejudice is desirable if and only if we think of it as pre-judgment. At this moment, we need to be careful not to misconstrue this position to mean that being prejudiced about a phenomenon exclusively means a closing off of the phenomenon: instead, it is the starting point because prejudices assist us in our very conceptualization of the phenomenon. A pure Gadamerian reading shows that prejudice is simply a prejudgment that we have prior to our convictions. Emphasis on prejudgment is emphasis on the view that there are no self-containments, no fixities, no finitudes (Coker, 2014). There can only exist lines of flight and rhizomes.

We arrive at meaning by the *fusion of horizons*. Akin to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenal field, Gadamer's fusion of horizon motivates us to come to terms with how understanding is reached between persons, or within a text. The term is used to explain the processes involved in merging up perspectives, and is an attempt to understand the worldhood of a text. What is for Merleau-Ponty situatedness is for Gadamer horizon. The fusion of horizons breeds the broadening and rising of perspectives. Being prejudiced is not a question of being limited in our perception of a thing; it is the case of our situatedness. This means that in order to understand anything at all, we have to be situated. In this case, Gadamer posits that we can be better positioned to understand the thingness of a thing if we draw on our *traditions* because we cannot pretend that we are not embodied by tradition. Truth, he may be telling us, is the embodiment of our pre-judgments with regard to what is important and what is not. Traditions, he says, should guide us to weigh our prejudgments. Traditions entail authority. Authority writ large is the *prima facie* of our convictions; it is what enables us to question our prejudices

and overturn them when they do not pass the litmus test of our convictions. Authority heretofore is valid insofar as it lends itself to application, Gadamer would note.

Then comes the role of language and communication. A hermeneutic perspective of language has it that language is our medium of situatedness and understanding. Everything takes place in language. We have said that Heidegger, for example, has noted that language speaks, and that is our mode of being. We exist in language. In fact, current contemplations of language in applied linguistics and literacy studies conceive of it in this manner (See Blommaert, 2010; Pennycook, 2010; 2012; Canagarajah, 2013). Gadamer writes, "...you understand a language by living it", and that it is "the medium in which substantive understanding and agreement take place between two people" (p. 386). This hermeneutic reading of language is important for reader-response theorists who often reduce meaning in texts without going the full extent here so described. To understand a text or arrive at the truth within it is to enter into a conversation, maintains Gadamer. In his view, a conversation begins in unity and ends in unity. But this can happen only on the grounds that we open ourselves up to the worldhood of the text. It does not, however, mean that valid conversations will always be considered as true. We say they are valid to the extent that there is a shared understanding of what is going on in the text. It is when we open ourselves up to the vagaries of interpretations that we can say that we have arrived at a true hermeneutic essence of a thing. In being open, we seek to be sincere and honest concerning the layers of interpretations there exist in the text. Semanticists and pragmatics such as Paul Grice (1975) have extensively developed this notion. In his theory of implicature, Grice maintains that cooperative conversation is characterized by four maxims: quantity, quality, relation, and manner. A major problem with Gadamer's work, we could say, is that it assumes *a priori* that every communicative act is always positive, cooperative, and neutral. He assumes that language users will cooperate in fusing their horizons for the sake of meaning, such that his work makes little room to contemplate acts of communicative obscurity, ambiguity, double-speak, equivocation, and the asymmetrical impulses of language in general, and communication, in particular. For instance, how do we account for occluded power dynamics in a text? This is why an archaeology into the study of the hermeneutics of power and its corollary ideology and hegemony is useful. We turn to Foucault's epistemology for such an inquiry.

A Critical Dimension of Communication

The essence of being is that humans act in and are constrained by power, says Foucault (1984), and that power operates in regimes.^{vii} *Truth and Power* is believed to be his most formidable articulation on the subject. According to Foucault, the study of power has been too narrow, and has exclusively focused on the juridical such that the everyday, invisible, capillary nature of power has been under-studied. He posits that such under-theorization is so because the concept of *power* has always been studied from structuralist and positivistic perspectives. Foucault says that power has been analyzed as a non-historical, universal, formalistic, and abstract structure and thought to be a factual, eventful, contingent, external phenomenon. In this case, prior work on the subject, he notes, has been overly concerned with the identification of forms and content of power. For Foucault, this orientation is limiting because it ignores the productive element of power. Positing that it is not possible to search for universal laws that apply to the manifestation of power, Foucault contends that we need to be open to concrete mechanisms. He remarks, “It is a question of what governs statements, and the way in which they govern each other so as to constitute a set of propositions which are scientifically acceptable, and hence capable of being verified or falsified by scientific procedures” (Foucault, 1984:54). The focus here is on what effects power has on the circulation of scientific statements, for example, and how and why at certain moments a regime undergoes “a global modification”.

This way of understanding power makes him shift attention from the center of dominant visible power structures to the periphery of power relations present at work in institutions. He does so by bringing our attention to what he terms “discursive regimes” which he explains to mean how power works within discourse. In fact, discursive regimes, in his estimation, control and condition orders of knowledge. Discursive regimes, he writes, are the effects of power peculiar to the play of statements. As orders of discourse, they are conditions necessary for the production of discourse (See also Elliot, 2009; Canagarajah, 2013). We need to understand that this view is novel as it appears to be rapturous.^{viii} True to his analysis, power is ontologically built-in structures, and that it does not sit outside of it. This means that any analysis of power that concentrates on the ‘veridical’ revelations of the phenomenon stands the risk of providing a narrow account of power as it unfolds in relations to meaning, force, strategies, and tactics. Besides such

an analysis need not, he says, be located at one level, but instead must be realized at “a whole order of levels of different types of events, differing in amplitude, chronological breadth, and capacity to produce effects” (p. 56). Here he means it does no good to look into the structure of a discourse without an eye on what the greater significations of that discourse serves in the lives of mortals. There ought to be a greater purpose for the choice of certain discourses, Foucault avers. “Neither the dialectic, as logic of contradictions, nor semiotics, as the structure of communication, can account for the intrinsic intelligibility of conflicts” he posits (p. 56). We are thus convinced in our earlier iteration of the problematic contemporary mass communication and media studies face. It seems to us that the field is fixated on the semiotic plane of communication, and pays little attention to the question of ‘order of levels’ Foucault warns us about. As we have pointed elsewhere, semiotic studies of communicative phenomena in and of themselves, however empirically robust, may not be necessarily theoretically thick and philosophically rigorous.

Foucault is also responsible for shifting attention from repressive power to capillary power. He argues that the latter is manifest in the way it produces things, induces pleasure, forms knowledge, and produces discourse. It thrives on the economy of power because it conditions, and constrains how power is circulated in a manner at once continuous, uninterrupted, adapted, and ‘individualized’ throughout the entire social body. Capillary power, he is sure about that, manifests in the way a whole series of power networks invest the body, sexuality, the family, kinship, knowledge, technology, etc. Foucault says that it is when we understand the workings of power in relation to his proposition that we can arrive at the meaning of “Truth”. In this political economy of discourse, Truth is seen as the form of discourse and the institutions which produce it. In fact, he adds that Truth is subject to economic and political incitement, and this should be understood as “a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation, and operation of statements” (p. 74). It is a circulation with systems of power which produce and sustain it. Systems of power, according to him, regulate, control, and surveil the masses. In ‘Panopticism’, Foucault (1975) posits that the State is an omnipresent, omnipotent inspector that seeks to punish and discipline its citizenry to maintain law and order. Drawing on Jeremy Bentham’s metaphor of the Panopticon, he tells us that the primary function of all institutions is based on a never-ending surveillance. For surveillance to thrive, there ought to be an uninterrupted nexus between the

center and the periphery, the latter solely dependent on, and accountable to, the former for subsistence. This conditioning, he explains, creates an asymmetry, disequilibrium, and difference in the order of things. In Foucault's words, it "constitutes a compact model of the disciplinary mechanism" (p. 180). It identifies all individuals and consequently determines their stations. By panopticism thus is meant the social system by which institutions create a laboratory of power as a way of defining power relations in terms of our lives.

For Foucault, the State employs two basic ways to constantly exercise power over us. It does so by controlling our relations, or by separating out the potentially dangerous elements amongst us. Segregation and differentiation are the main processes. By using the mechanism of hierarchy and surveillance, power can be gleaned unto for time indefinite, according to Foucault. One other means is through subtle coercion by which authorities, the school, the prison, the hospital, exercise control over the individual by creating what Foucault calls a "binary division and branding" (p. 181). According to this system, one is either brilliant or dull, as in the case of the school, mad/insane, if one happens to be incarcerated in the four walls of the prison, normal/abnormal so long as one happens to be a patient. Authorities reduce humans to atoms just so they could measure, supervise, and correct us in an effort to maintain conformity, law, and order. In this way, the panoptic machine constantly keeps its gaze on everyone. Foucault writes: "He is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication...The Panopticon is a machine for dissociating the see/being seen dyad" (p. 182).

And since this disciplinary mechanism operates so perfectly well, it becomes ingrained in the psyche. For this reason, we behave even when we are far away from the claws of the authorities. All of society has been programmed to so behave, and act accordingly. Discipline and order become a part of our schema. Using Marxian thought, he stresses that nobody escapes from the way society has been programmed. Disciplines, as Foucault sees them, are the repositories that exert power by diffusing power to the collective Other, as they deem fit. Power is a modality. One has to know how to position themselves by it. Foucault's writings present us with challenging ways of theorizing communicative acts in communication research, theory, and praxis. It needs to encapsulate the affordances above.

CONCLUSION

As we bring our discussion to a close, we need to remember what the valences of continental philosophy are to the enrichment of the field of communication broadly construed. The philosophies we have discussed so far provide us with the needed knowledges to move toward building the much-needed canon of communication theory. In this light, we may argue that a robust theory of communication can add to our understanding of what phenomenological complexities a given communicative process inheres, and how it can be hermeneutically complicated. More so, to the extent that no communication is neutral, analyses of acts of communication also have to account for constructs of power, ideology, and hegemony often occluded in communicative exchanges. We daresay that a return to the original texts of major thinkers in continental philosophy will take media and communication studies farther afield. Such a turn is urgent in view of the incessant borrowing of concepts from empirical psychology, sociology, and market sciences. The problems facing contemporary communication theory, certainly, are containable. For any theory bereft of philosophical luster cannot stand the test of time, nor is it capable of offering any sustained explanation of phenomena.

And although we may decry the idea of positing a return to the search for truth in our contemplation of communicative processes, we, nonetheless, cannot take it for granted that we need to be responsible in our communicative acts. The emphasis on the Other, which is the crux of Levinas's "Ethics as First Philosophy" teaches us one very important lesson: "We are responsible for everyone else—but I am more responsible than all the others" (cited in Hand, 1989: p. 1). So, whether we are drawing on phenomenology, hermeneutics, or epistemology in our search for answers to the question concerning communication, we need to remember that we owe others a duty to be responsible in our use of language and communication. Dasein, we may conclude, is no longer mine; it is our

ENDNOTES

i <https://www.britannica.com/topic/continental-philosophy>

ii <https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/philosophy/studywithus/undergraduate/what-is-philosophy/continentalvsanalytic/>

iii Indeed, this position is contrary to the claims of social constructionism, a theory which has gained too much currency in communication scholarship (cf. Goffmann, 1957; Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Butler, 1990; Sturken & Cartwright, 2009). Yet, we reckon that it is rather our history that constructs us; we interpret it because we are already part of the unfolding of history. What is more, the term 'construction' itself is problematic. It invokes the notions of instrumentation and mechanization. When we consider the claims of social constructionism in the lights of Husserl and Heidegger, we realize that these thinkers would be diametrically opposed to the pseudo-unethical sensitivity and reductivity ascribed to the human condition; it is as though proponents of the social construction theory are arguing that humans have a complete control over the spiritual and material conditions of their existence; we need not be perturbed by our situatedness and essences of life. Everything resides under our control; we construct it, they argue.

iv This world, it must be said, is the everyday, and that Dasein has its average everydayness. Focusing on the notion of space, Heidegger resists the objective notion of a three-dimensional space. For him, space is not dichotomized into objective/subjective chasms. We are already located in space, a space defiant of the present-at-hand and the ready-to-hand. Being in space means that we are already familiar with the entities ready-at-hand. In the words of Heidegger, familiarity brings openness to entities and phenomena, explicitly or implicitly. This means that in order to understand a phenomenon, we need to share in the space world of the phenomenon.

v In academic communication, rhetoric, and composition scholarship, this pathos is termed expressivism.

vi It is important that we do not associate Gadamer's understanding of event with structuralists' undertones of positivism. The two are, in no way, coterminous (see Foucault's Truth and Power for a detailed account).

vii In this paper, we represent the works of Michel Foucault as archaeological or better yet genealogical, although we are much aware of the problems associated with putting tags and labels on his scholarship. History has shown us that he himself was very sensitive to this concern, and has vociferously refused to be linked with neither the post-structuralist school nor cultural historicism. Our label, however, gains legitimacy because it is what he himself originally employed in the description of his methodical approach to the subject of power. He defined it as a form of history which accounts for the constitution of knowledges, discourses, domains of objects, without having to make reference to a subject which is either transcendental in relation to the field of events or runs in its empty sameness throughout the course of history (Foucault, 1975).

viii Structuralists and pioneers of German phenomenology, for example, have accused him of discontinuity.

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