Ethics and Dialogue: Reflections on the Limits of Contemporary Communication

Communication between people has always been one of the basic structures of human existence—the simple co-presence of two people conversing face-to-face with each other. Yet, this elementary form of communication has already undergone profound changes in the 21st century, particularly as a result of the rise of the cellular phone, and specifically the smartphone, as an integral part of people's lives. This paper focuses on a current phenomenon that is, I believe, closest to what we might call digital dialogue—namely, the online chat.

In what follows, I take the online chat as a phenomenological case study, that its elaboration deepens our understanding of the complex structure of contemporary digital expression and dialogue. My aim is to think this phenomenon and its ethical implications through a consideration of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of expression and corporeality, and of Martin Buber's thought regarding the human capacity for true dialogue. Their works can shed light on the complex structure of digital dialogue, as well as on its repercussions for ethics in communication and, more generally, on our contemporary culture of communication and its relation to the current human condition.

By better understanding the structure of expression and the form of intersubjective relations constructed by the online chat—on its unique abilities and limitations—I will reflect on the increasing tendency to communicate via this relatively new medium. In other words, the paper offers a direction to philosophically (rather than sociologically or psychologically) understand why people are becoming more and more reluctant to converse over the phone, using their voices. Let us, then, begin by briefly introducing this phenomenon.

An online chat is a text-based communication that takes place live or in real time, unlike those of other text-based communication platforms such as e-mail or sms that are not necessarily real-time modes. Thus, the chat creates a feeling similar to that of a spoken conversation (which is, historically, the origin of the term "chat") since, in its original meaning, chat is an informal conversation—and, indeed, this mode of interaction is an *informal* dialogue in many ways. Online chat includes what happens in web-based applications that allow communication in a one-on-one or a one-to-many chat. My focus here, however, is one-on-one conversation, which I will think of in light of the primal form of a dialogue: that is, simply as communication between two people.

One-on-one online chat has become ever more common in our daily lives. There are many phone applications as well as computer software that provide the format of a chat (for example: Skype, Facebook, Gmail, WhatsApp). The structure of the online chat is phenomenologically interesting: it is a hybrid phenomenon which includes aspects that are structurally essential to a dialogue and elements that are at the foundation of textual expression. Still, I consider the online chat here as a new form of a *dialogue*, even if it remains, at least for now, a marginal or less conventional one. I'd characterize it this way especially because this type of communication contains one of the essential principles of a dialogue—the co-presence of the communicators in the same sphere. The sphere they share, however, is virtual. The interlocutors sustain their mutual presence in time and virtual space, as well as in their immediate response to each other. Thus, in a way similar to what happens during a phone conversation, there is still co-presence though no face-to-face interaction occurs. Yet, unlike a telephone call and, of course, unlike face-to face

dialogue, this form of conversation affords no physical presence of the communicators—no voice, tone, accent, or vocal gestures, and of course, no facial expressions, bodily gestures, and so on. The only expressive mechanism that remains is textual—a form of expression that belongs, in fact, to a different realm of communication, and, as we will see, goes through transformations when used within the hybrid phenomenon of online chat.

Hence, contemporary technology enables traditional structures of dialogic communication to be transcended. But what, we may ask, happens to the carnal presence in the use of such technology—that presence which seems so vital to a whole, authentic conversation? The fact that Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is intimately connected to the living body, and that, for him, corporeality stands as the foundation of expression are precisely why I find it especially interesting to think virtual communication vis-à-vis his thought. Is the body completely absent in this sort of communication? And if not, in what sense does it still manifest itself; how is this medium of expression capable of making room for the body? And what are the ethical repercussions of it? Let us begin by better understanding the unique linguistic structure of this sort of expression. To do so, I would first say a few introductory words regarding Merleau-Ponty's fundamental notions of the living body, language, and expression.

The body—which, for Merleau-Ponty, is always one's own lived body and not a theoretical one—is the key that opens the world as meaningful; without it, the world has no sense for us. It establishes the spectrum that is available for one at any given moment: here and there, near and far, the things one can and cannot perceive—everything is derived from this primal bond that links the surrounding world with one's body as its center of gravity. Yet, corporeality does not merely establish one's

spatiality but affects all forms of life. It gives one a place from which one can understand the world and oneself— each one's body is the (transcendental) anchor from which one can receive one's place in the world with regard to time, space meaning, and language.

The body is one's particular reference point around which the world is oriented, and, at the same time, it is what determines one's point of view upon the world (Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* 70). One of the fundamental aspects in which these two folded understandings take place is one's expression and language. The body is, in fact, the ground from which one begins to express oneself. Language has an existential sense and significance—it is the way that one situates and understand oneself within one's world of meaning (Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* 199), which is constantly in flux.

The nature of the linguistic act is rooted, according to Merleau-Ponty, in meaning that stems from movement and gesture—that is, from human expression. Expression stands at the heart of the linguistic act; it brings meaning into existence; it constitutes meaning rather than merely translating or representing it. Similar to the realization of art forms—the playing of a musical piece, or the execution of a dance performance that follows a certain choreography—the manner of expression is an integral part of the meaning. Thus, one cannot separate the meaning of a dialogue from its form of expression.

Following Merleau-Ponty, if expression brings meaning into existence, and if the very form of expression defines meaning no less than the words that are expressed, then, since this phenomenon brings with it a new form of expression, it also entangles with it *a new form of meaning*. Let me try to delineate in a preliminary manner a few

essential characteristics of this form of expression and, hence, of this form of meaning.

a. **The Online Chat as a Mediated Expression**

The online chat is composed of a textual expression of the sort—made up of written words and often all sorts of signs (emoji and emoticons)—whose combination creates, when applied within the unique form of expression that is online chat, a new meaning. It manifests a form of expression that is neither verbal communication nor textual communication in their traditional senses, but a hybrid construction of verbal and textual expression—a novel form of expression that is closer to what we can call "textual speech" or "talkative writing". This hybridity manifests itself, first, in the manner of writing—the expression is formed using mundane, ordinary language and slang—that is closer to a textual transcription of face-to-face or phone conversation than to the style of traditional forms of textual correspondence, such as letters and e-mails.

Second, the pace of this communication is that of a dialogue, which establishes and constructs its character in a profound manner. The fact that this form of communication is an *online* dialogue gives its writing a new rhythm, requiring a different pace for its textual expression—quick, immediate, and responsive. The need for quick replies explains the abundance of shortcuts, emoticons, and emojis so often found in that form of expression: these facilitate a shortened reply time. The necessary rapidity of online chat, affects also the writing's content—it limits the complexity of things discussed on this platform. Moreover, because there is no physical presence of the other interlocutor registered via actual presence or vocal "nodding", ensuring the sense of a dialogue and of co-presence, writing becomes a sort of a monologue that cannot be sure of its "audience". Due to all of these aspects, the possibility of

intimacy in this communicative setting becomes rare and thus forecloses in advance a significant aspect of genuine communication between people.

b. **The Absent Presence of the Body**

Another important character of this form of communication is the unusual presence of the body, or perhaps one should say—the presence of the body's absence in the online chat. In the past we had become accustomed to two forms of "online" dialogue: conversation that took place face to face and talk that unfolded over the phone. The technology of the telephone brought with it a few new degrees of freedom. At first, it presented the opportunity to connect with someone in real time without the need for the interlocutors to physically share the same space. The invention of the cell phone and the development of a vast, global wireless network infrastructure have added another degree of freedom: to be almost wherever we wish and to be able to communicate verbally with others somewhere else.

However, online chat brings with it a new level of liberation for the body—the freedom from what I wish to refer to as a "place" in a more metaphorical manner than we might usually employ the term. It is true that technology had already almost completely freed humans to engage in live communication from almost any physical place, yet by doing so via phone technology one's lived body, manifested through one's voice, remains present to the other interlocutor. The body provides an existential place from which one speaks. But in an online chat one can now, for the first time, be free to control the exposure of that place to the other.

The body signifies a different sort of "place" from which one speaks. The actual presence of the human body in a face-to-face talk manifests, tells of, and reveals one's complex existence in a general manner (is evidence of one's character), and does the same for one's current state—one's facial expressions, one's stride of

6

walking, tones of voice, laughter, gestures, and so on. In a similar manner, one's voice over the phone signifies and manifests in a complex manner one's "place" and its nuances, whether one is agitated, happy, contemplative, ironic, and so on.

The absence of any direct manifestation of the body in an online chat gives one the ability to choose the extent of exposure and control it. Moreover, the fact that one's immediate reactions and responses are not exposed, provide the interlocutors a more flexible range of communication. In verbal communications, once words are expressed, are out in the open, there is no way to take them back. Thus, even when the pace is that of verbal conversation, an online chat maintains within it some leverage for the correction of mistakes and the assertion of control not available in a face-to-face conversation. It provides the means for one to rethink one's words before sending, to erase, rewrite, and rephrase them within the chat's timeframe.

Nevertheless, this freedom also brings difficulties. The ability to communicate online without an immediate automatic manifestation of one's "place" indeed protects us and provides us with more control over the exposure of our physical, mental, and emotional presence. Yet, this precise freedom can also lead to miscommunications.

c. **Significance, Miscommunications, Emojis, and Emoticons**

The online chat is known for being an arena of malfunctioning interactions and miscommunications. In our daily interactions this happens especially when one tries to make jokes or to express empathy, irony or sarcasm, but it can also occur in more simple expressions. Why so? Let us return to the significance of the place from which we speak, and the absence of any direct manifestation of our corporeal existence. Take the phenomenon of joke. A joke can be expressed in the exact same words as a statement or simple comment, but only a fuller gamut of expression—encompassing intonation, facial gestures, perhaps bodily movement—is what "turns" it, so to speak,

into a "joke". Or consider, for instance, the complex phenomenon of irony, which can sometimes be missed even in phone or face-to-face conversations if one isn't fully concentrating. In irony, the statement's positive content is reversed by the use of mere nuances of intonation or facial expression. There is no indication in the words itself that the intent is ironic; the ironic meaning manifests itself only in the context of the conversation and from its full expression, which encompasses more than words.

One might find this to be another indication of the vital role of the body according to Merleau-Ponty, and hence, of the miscommunications caused by its partial absence. Yet if we view the online chat as a new form of expression, and hence a new form of meaning, then the meaning of a phrase within an online chat should be read and understood with sensitivity to *all* that is expressed in that form of communication, and not just for the words themselves. Thus we should ask what, beyond words, is, in fact, expressed in an online chat? What does this form of expression consist of?

I have very briefly touched on the fact that an online chat's expression is composed of text and signs—the latter being emojis or emoticons. I won't elaborate here on the historical development of both kinds of sign; suffice it to say in our context that emoticons are very simple signs to signify emotion that are made up of punctuation marks, and that emojis are image-signs that present emotions but also present bodily gestures, facial expressions of sorts, and all kinds of other symbols and images.

Hence, what do emojis and emoticons phenomenologically *do* in expression? A friend writes us that he is sad and we reply by saying something and sending a heart or a sad face; in doing so we actually express empathy, we indirectly say that we are with you. On another occasion, we write something that is supposed to make the other

person laugh and add a smiley face, which is to say: What I just wrote you is something funny, I meant this as a joke.

Thus, first, emoticons give a sense of location—they presume to indicate to the other converser the "place" from which I am interacting with her. Emoticons and emoji's attempt to bridge the absence of one's existential position that is manifested through facial expressions, body language, intonation and expressions of the voice. They situate one in a "place" vis-à-vis one's converser. In that way I'm conveying to my sad friend my empathy toward her or signaling to my interlocutor that the things I wrote were said with the intention of making him or her laugh; thus, I again situate my place in the conversation. Nevertheless, these examples suggest that emoticons have yet another role, one connected to the aforementioned miscommunications.

The smiley face at the end of my text also defines the text, gives it a name. The emoji used in a joke, an expression of sarcasm or irony, or even more simple communications in which the writer wants to take no chances of being misunderstood, actually frames one's expression. The particular emoticon indirectly indicates something to the reader, in a way telling her to please read this remark as an expression of empathy, please read this text as an ironic remark and don't take it literally. This ability indeed elucidates and facilitates communication, preventing different sorts of miscommunications along the way. And indeed, following Merleau-Ponty, when one is sensitive to the totality of what is expressed, one can avoid miscommunications of that sort. It is, in a way, as if one were carrying a booklet of instructions that can guide her during the conversation.

However, even if we put aside discussion of the accuracy of the emoticons and emojis and the difficulty, or perhaps inherent impossibility, of expanding them so that they could represent any nuance of feeling; even if we did have an emoticon for any

possible gesture or emotion—doesn't the use of emoticons nevertheless presuppose an expectation that the other's thoughts and feelings will be conveyed in the form of a statement?

The ability of the emoji to situate the other's "place" affects, in a potentially damaging way, the richness of one's expression. —which genuinely, as Merleau-Ponty writes, is "like a step taken in a fog. No one can say where, if anywhere, it will lead."(Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Nonsense* 3) The online chat's structure of expression (text+emoticons or/and emojis) narrows the multifaceted potential of expression too quickly into flattened positive statements, hence diminishes the ability for the other to genuinely express herself in a complex manner. Thus, for instance, one can tell a joke over the phone even as his voice manifests sadness or pain. This multifaceted manifestation can create empathy that cannot be triggered in an online chat conversation, and thus, cannot be developed into a genuine dialogue.

This ambiguity, as well as, the inherent potential openness of one's expression, makes the interaction with the other fragile and often unexpected, but this is also what makes it wonderful and interesting, always leaving something to be revealed. Hence, the aid provided by emoticons and emojis to prevent miscommunications has the downside of flattening the complexity of one's expression, framing it too quickly as a positive statement. And yet, though, and perhaps because it precludes complex and rich expression, the online chat's dominance in communication is remarkable.

What intersubjective and ethical implications can be learned from the social prevalence of the online chat? What can be implied and learned from the structure of the online chat's expression—from its privileges and limitations? Can we better understand the ever-growing tendency to engage with the other in this way in light of this phenomenological exploration? The reasons are not necessarily merely social or

cultural, I claim, but also ontological or existential in essence. For that, I would like to turn to Martin Buber's thought.

To live, to exist, means for Martin Buber to be addressed ceaselessly by the world. The calling comes from everywhere around us and by everything that occurs to us. The presence of the other in mutually shared space is, thus, always already an addressing, a calling that requires response and responsibility, though these demands are often ignored. The necessary responsibility stems from a response to the other's call; it is a responsibility that does not belong to the realm of what ought to be—to ethics as an academic realm of thought—but requires a genuine attentiveness and continual response to one's surroundings:

"Genuine responsibility exists only where there is real responding.

Responding to what?

To what happens to one, to what is to be seen and heard and felt" (Buber 16).

The things that address one are not extraordinary, Buber emphasizes, but are the simple, personal events of day-to-day, mundane life (16). Being aware does not necessarily guarantee a response: "we can wrap silence about us--a reply characteristic of a significant type of the age—or we can step aside into the accustomed way (Buber 16)". One can ignore the calling, give some pseudo-response to an address via the customary clichés while seeing the concrete, particular "request" addressed to her or to him, or one can genuinely reply to the call--"A dog has looked at you, you answer for its glance, a child has clutched your hand, you answer for its touch, a host of men moves about you, you answer for their need" (Buber 17).

Yet awareness is difficult since the attentive human being loses by being responsive her accustomed mastering of the worldly situation. That is since responding to the calling leads to new dimensions where ordinary language does not

apply, and one is required to make an effort in the unfamiliar land of singularity. There is: "No knowledge and no technique, no system and no program; for now he would have to do with what cannot be classified, with concretion itself." (Buber 16) Nevertheless, choosing to ignore the address does not sweep away the wound—as Buber refers to an unanswered calling. It cannot be forgotten.

Whatever occurs to me already addresses me. But since being addressed is a frightening experience, we convince ourselves that we can distance ourselves from the world, believing that the world does not direct itself toward us—that the world is "there" as an object, moving and acting as it does, but nothing is required of us (Buber 10). We assure ourselves that the separation between the "subject" and the "object" or the subject and another subject is total—that one can go on experiencing the world without being addressed or being required to respond in any way, that we are aware and responsible but there is simply nothing we need to be responsible *for*. As Buber writes:

> Each of us is encased in an armour whose task is to ward off signs. Signs happen to us without respite, living means being addressed, we would need only to present ourselves and to perceive. But the risk is too dangerous for us, the soundless thunderings seem to threaten us with annihilation, and from generation to generation we perfect the defense apparatus. (12)

The risk of being exposed to the calling of the world is threatening to the extent that we wish to sterilize it so that the world's address to us is wholly drained. We seek to remove the seed of the world's address in order to be able to "take what occurs to me as a part of the world-happening which does not refer to me" (Buber 11). This attempt has spread in modernity (and now postmodernity) and, as Buber emphasizes, "Mankind has pressed speech too into the service of this work" (Buber

11). Buber does not elaborate this point; he merely writes that we perfect the defense apparatus from generation to generation. Yet I claim that the phenomenon of online chat can serve as a prototypical example of the way humankind perfects its defense mechanism and presses speech into that task. In what manner?

Encountering the other through the medium of online chat as described screens the other's actual presence and, thus, diminishes one's ability to receive the other's address. The medium frees one from the presence of the other, and this, in fact, is a relief, since one can therefore keep assuring oneself of the indifference of the world toward her, and thus maintain her own irresponsibility toward it—one's sustains a sense of exemption to being asked to respond to the call.

This, of course, does not mean that a true dialogue is completely impossible in this medium, but merely that the online chat's defense mechanism is exceedingly sophisticated, enabling "better" "protection", a thicker armor to separate us from the world and defend us from the world's calling. The address should be direct and simple and cannot be implied via the in-between space encompassing one's actions, tone, or gestures.

And, thus, as Buber wrote almost one hundred years ago, we indeed perfect our defense mechanism of signs from generation to generation. Our dread of the other's calling—of the face, the voice on the other end of the phone, drives us to the online chat, which allows us to keep telling ourselves that the person writing to us on that medium is not asking for anything from us, is in need of nothing from us—that our friend (like the world) is simply who she is (what it is) regardless of us. Thus, we can be sure that our friend merely wishes to tell a joke—the pain in her voice does not penetrate the medium's armor and falls short of our awareness. And, thus, if the "limits of the possibility of dialogue are the limits of awareness" (Buber 10), our

intersubjective relations are monitored and constricted in advance, which narrows and diminishes the possibility of genuine communication. Yet perhaps, we can only hope, there are also niches and cracks within that medium that can reawaken the wonder regarding the other—that allow for ambiguity that will once again lead to our openness toward the other and reignite the desire for mutual human connection.

Works Cited

Buber, Martin. "Dialogue" in *Between Man and Man*. Trans. and Introduction by Ronald G. Smith. London: Collins P, 1963. Print.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Trans. Collin Smith. London,Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962. Print.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Sense and Non-Sense*. Trans. Hubert and Patricia Dreyfus. Evanston, IL, Northwestern UP, 1964. Print.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. "The Philosopher and His Shadow" in *Signs*. Trans. Richard C. McCleary. Evanston, IL, Northwestern UP, 1964. Print.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *The Prose of the World*. ed. by Claude Lefort, trans. John O'Neil. Evanston, IL, Northwestern UP, 1973. Print.