# Panel Presentations

**“The Metaphorical Significance of Dialogic Civility in the Arnettian Narrative”**

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**Rev. John Amankwah, Ph.D.**

**This work seeks to praise and exhort the prophetic role that Dr. Ronald C. Arnett has played in the landscape of the Philosophy of Communication**

Ronald C. Arnett’s academic explorations sought to examine dialogic civility that permeates the narrative of interpersonal relationships, social interactions, and human relations within organizations and business corporations. He explicates the notion of dialogic civility in many different facets as he utilizes metaphors to succinctly clarify, engage, and elucidate the significance of the concept. The metaphorical significance of the notion of dialogic civility spans many of Arnett’s academic works culminating in a book he co-authored with Dr. Pat Arneson, *Dialogic Civility in a Cynical Age: Community, Hope, and Interpersonal Relationships* in 1999, a book widely acclaimed as one of the best in the field of philosophy of communication.

Expounding the narrative of dialogic civility from various dialogic perspectives, Arnett takes up the metaphor of communication ethics to Olympian heights, pointing us to the notion of the right to speak, communicate with society, and dialogue across the various disciplines. Employing the idea of metaphor, Arnett expounds an intricate and intriguing communicative narrative of freedom to speak, praxis rationality as opposed to reasoning irrationality, privileges rhetorical humility over rhetorical objectification, privileges praxis over theoretical pontification, and communicative civility as opposed to rhetorical incivility. The Arnettian narrative of dialogic civility addresses the notion of communicative goodness that calls us to recognize the other with respect and grace. One cannot pass over his immeasurable respect for the ethical commitment that fosters communicative civility between and betwixt individuals and groups.

In genuine dialogue, one does not engage in the informational gathering but struggles with a sense of tenacity to engage and explore the dialogic ground in the hope of finding a common purpose within the historical moment. In the process of seeking common ground, the Arnettian perspective of engagement between those in communication reveals the struggle inherent in the search for authenticity in dialogue. In his article, “Interpersonal Praxis: (The Interplay of Religious Narrative, Historicality, and Metaphor,”) Arnett explains that proper communication that guides our dialogic engagements has been displaced with self and *agency*. Agency, he explains “is one’s ability to control, shape, and mold reality consistent with a given vision,” **[[1]](#footnote-1)** and thus is called into question.

**The Displacement of the Self in Communication Ethics**

From a communication perspective, the displacement of the self has given rise to disorientation of our dialogic narrative while privileging self and agency. Christopher Lasch (1979)[[2]](#footnote-2) called this culture a *Haven in a Heartless World* and we have fallen into “existential homelessness” (Arnett, *Reach of Dialogue*, p. 229-246). [[3]](#footnote-3) Tapping into the wisdom of Alasdair Macintyre, Arnett explains that the different configurative narratives of our time make it impossible to live the Athenian virtue of communication.

The Arnettian perspectives on dialogic narrative as problematic are highlighted by the author’s belief that the lack of agreement on narratives and metanarratives means that we are in a time of competing virtue systems. As a prophet of philosophy of communication, Arnett in “Interpersonal Praxis (The Interplay of Religious Narrative, Historicality, and Metaphor”) expressed his view that in a time of competing virtue systems, the Prophet Isaiah was right when he wrote that voices from competing factions were likely to state that the other calls

 . . . evil good, and good evil, who substitute darkness for

 light and light for darkness, who substitute bitter for sweet

 and sweet for bitter. (Isaiah 5:20) – The Jerusalem Bible

Like the prophet himself, Arnett proclaims that in our historical moment, communication has been turned into “Tik-Tok jargons full of miscommunication, disinformation and where everything about the self is a caricature of the person. In an era where one’s communication is called a “hoax” and the self is objectified; it points us to the direction of the dislocation of communication. Arnett gives us hope in his recent publication, “Communication Ethics as Tenacious Hope” in which he calls our attention to hope in the future.

**The Historicality of Dialogic Civility in Communication Ethics**

As Robert Bellah (1975/1961) in *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial*, our narratives are not perfect but undergo construction, and need maintenance and support to effectively uphold their various mechanisms for them to work. In the same fashion, society needs to be maintained and supported in its narrative to make society healthy. Dialogic civility which supports and maintains a community’s narrative is necessary for a community to tell its story.

The historicality of the emerging and invigorating narrative points to the importance of developing a dialogic self capable of engaging the other without fear or favor. Arnett wants us to know that dialogic civility is a necessary implementer in developing a sound communicative response to our hope for the future while avoiding cynicism that engulfs our present communication. Understanding that our communication is shaped by our historical moment, Arnett takes us on a journey in “Self-Fulfillment and Interpersonal Communication,” and points us to the notion of the *self* in fulfilling itself through the metaphor of “self-actualization.” [[4]](#footnote-4) Recounting how Maslow’s self-actualization process has become narcissistic in postmodernity, he takes his audience through some of the works of the Enlightenment scholars (Jean Jacque Rousseau, John Dewey, Voltaire, etc.) pointing us, especially to the work of Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Democracy on Trial,[[5]](#footnote-5)* that warns us of a moral decay because wants have become rights in the historical moment.

**The Metaphorical Significance of Tenacious Hope in our Age of Cynicism**

Searching for the optimum channel for self-actualization, Arnett speculates on the World War II era when work displaced the other. Work was given more attention than the other. Arnett writes: “Self-esteem enhancement was a dialectical necessity and had been short-changed in the historical moment.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Rather than working diligently through the displacement of the self-actualization process, more emphasis was then placed on self-esteem and was taken too far that “we overdid the dialectical corrective.”[[7]](#footnote-7) The over-doing of emphasizing self-actualization culminated in self-centeredness and attention was on the self, a practice that de Tocqueville called “individualism” that is, an excessive concern for the self or the individual rather than the other. In an age of cynicism, that is, where outward expressions of self are privileged over inward reflection, cynicism in our historical moment has engulfed our narrative background implications shifting our focus of attention to unreflected self-appraisal that also epitomizes narcissism. In his article, “Technicians of Goodness: Ignoring the Narrative Life of Dialogue,” Arnett notes that if one followed a narrative of individualism, . . . then following a self-oriented communicative agenda was congruent with such a narrative structure” [[8]](#footnote-8) that is, a narrative that no longer offers guidance. Christopher Lasch called this narrative of individualism a *Culture of Narcissism.*[[9]](#footnote-9)Rochelle Gurstein (1996) in *Repeal of Reticence* called for a re-examination of the notion of limits, noting that sometimes we need to stop to put a restraint on emotive outbursts and expression.[[10]](#footnote-10) In the same vein, Arnett exemplifies Gurstein’s idea stating that “too much of everything, even self-esteem or unrestrained self-expression, can turn a social good into indulgence and eventual narcissism.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

Presently, our notion of Dialogic Civility is driven by the self that seeks attention for itself. It has given rise to the emergence of all kinds of different socio-economic and religious factions culminating in incivility in the public sphere. From the pulpit to the political arena, from our global economic relationships to our academic settings, the background to our narrative has been supplanted by a metanarrative that seeks to disorient and objectify the Other. As Arnett explains again in the “Interpersonal Praxis: (The Interplay of Religious Narrative, Historicality, and Metaphor,”) “Indeed. as the historical moment shifted, the metaphorical significance of a term such as “self-actualization” was altered as the focus of self-fulfillment continued without the accompanying dialectical companion . . . Therefore, we moved to a battle cry for the world to adapt to “my needs and wishes. It became tied to what MacIntyre calls “emotivism” (16-35), decision-making by personal preference. This situation has engulfed our communities’ civic discourse and paralyzed our dialogic civility while creating a disordered and disoriented *self.*

The rise of nationalism, tribalism, Christian nationalism, “Wokeism,” etc. in our various communities here at home and abroad are examples of a disordered and disoriented self that seeks self-fulfillment through emotivism and narcissism. It also points us to the loss of the *self* amid a chaotic metanarrative that hangs on loose and shifting sand without any proper grounding.

**Conclusio**n

I like therefore to conclude this paper on the metaphorical significance of Dialogic Civility by first proclaiming that the Arnettian perspectives on narrative, metanarrative, dialogue, civility, and the interplay of these elements reveal to us to be tenacious in our hope for a better tomorrow amid all the concatenating forces against dialogic civility in our cynical age. The various elements also reveal to us Dr. Ronald C. Arnett is indeed a *Prophet* of the philosophy of Communication who has indeed opened the doors for us to “walk the Humanities into the MarketPlace. It is our job then not to allow our dialogic voices to be lost in the cacophony of the marketplace but to

1. Form a think tank to deliberate
2. Find ways of influencing the manifold voices in the marketplace
3. Bring in some influential people who can impact national policies through civic discourse guided by civility
4. Assist our students through service-learning programs to be agents of the pursuit of virtue in the marketplace discourse, and
5. Find ways of channeling our beautiful ideas into the marketplace to persuade and influence.

And with that, I end my presentation. Thank you.

1. R, C, Arnett, (September 1998). “Interpersonal Praxis: The Interplay of Religious Narrative, Historicality, and

 Metaphor. *Journal of Communication Review*, 21, p. 145. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Cristopher Lasch (1979). *Haven in a Heartless world.* New York: Basic Books. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ronald C. Arnett, (1994). *The Reach of Dialogue.* Hampton Press: NJ. p229-246 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ronald C. Arnett (1978). “Self-Fulfillment and Interpersonal Communication.” *Religious Communication Today.* 1.1, 23-28 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Jean Bethke Elstain (1995). *Democracy on Trial.* New York: Basic Books, p. 16; Also “Interpersonal Praxis: The Interplay Of Religious Narrative, Historicality o, see R. C. Arnett: and Metaphor.” *Journal of Communication and Religion.* 21 (1998), p 150. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid. p. 149. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid. p. 149. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ronald C. Arnett (1996). “Technicians of Dialogue: Ignoring the Narrative Life of Dialogue.” *Responsible Communication: Ethical Issues in Business, Industry, and the Professions.* Eds. James A.Jaksa and Michael S. Pritchard. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, p. 339 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Christopher Lasch (1979). *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectation.* New York: Norton, [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Rochelle Gurstein (1996). *The Repeal of Reticence.* New York: Hill and Wang. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. R. C. Arnett (1998). “Interpersonal Praxis: The Interplay Of Religious Narrative, Historicality and

 Metaphor. *Journal of Communication Review,* 21, p. 151. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)