Altered

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Abstract
Although entering only recently into communication scholarship, the problem of alterity is intrinsic to communication theory and philosophy. Alterity presents the challenge of resistance to communication and of the limit of communication. As such, it invites rethinking communication not simply as a question of knowledge and understanding but as a question of ethics and politics.

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Although entering only recently into communication scholarship, the problem of alterity is intrinsic to communication theory and philosophy. Its introduction is connected mainly with the rise of phenomenology and poststructuralism in the humanities. What these perspectives foreground are the conditions of possibility of being in the world, of experience, and of relating to others. In becoming more reflexive, communication theory has become concerned with the conditions of possibility of communication, its ontological status, and the presuppositions accompanying traditional conceptualizations. It is against this background that alterity emerges as a major concern for contemporary communication theory and philosophy. For what alterity ultimately signifies is the challenge of resistance to communication and of the limit of communication. As such, it invites rethinking communication not
simply as a question of knowledge and understanding but as a question of ethics and politics.

What is the definition of alterity? The question itself demonstrates the problematic at hand, for alterity is precisely that which resists definition and escapes the grasp of knowledge. Alterity is marked by the irreducible difference between self and other, between one’s way of being and the way of another. Alterity is the radical difference of the other who is often indicated by the capitalized Other. The Latin *alter*, from which alterity derives, designates the property of distinctness, which is suggested by cognates such as “alternative,” “altercation,” and “alternate.” Alterity is often used interchangeably with otherness, being the property of being other; hence, alterity as the Other’s otherness. Hannah Arendt attends to this issue in her discussion on human plurality: “Human distinctness is not the same as otherness—the curious quality of *alteritas* possessed by everything that is” (1958, p. 176). To Arendt, otherness is the general category of difference, covering both human and nonhuman. What is distinctive to the human is the ability to express its uniqueness, thereby producing a plurality among unique human beings. This distinction prefigures questions taken up later in contemporary Continental philosophy, namely, of the relation with the Other.

The philosopher who made otherness an essential part of his thought was G. W. F. Hegel. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (published in 1807) Hegel describes the fundamental structure of spirit (*Geist*) as the relation between self-consciousness and the otherness it encounters outside itself and, consequently, in itself:

Self-consciousness is faced by another self-consciousness; it has to come *out of itself*. This has a twofold significance: first, it has lost itself, for it finds itself as an *other* being; secondly, in doing so it has superseded the other, for it does not see the
other as an essential being, but in the other sees its own self. (Hegel, 1977, p. 111)

The process described here is of the interdependence of sameness and otherness from which greater unity arises. Differentiation and integration are elemental forces in the movement of spirit—and of the Hegelian dialectics of Aufhebung—which culminates in reconciliation of differences. The selfsame becomes conscious of itself only after encountering otherness, which it must supersede in order to return and rediscover itself—as other. Such is the dual process of recognition of self and other, and of the self through the other. This schema provided a conceptual framework for generations of thinkers. Note however the auxiliary status of the other and otherness, playing a supporting role in the drama of consciousness coming to its own.

The way by which alterity (including “Other” and “otherness”) is approached in communication theory and philosophy can be grouped under two problematics: the representation of the other, and the relation with the other.

**Altery and representation**

Stuart Hall’s account (1997) of the “spectacle of the Other” provides a paradigmatic case of the cultural signification of otherness. Presenting someone as Other, producing differences and marking out distinctions, are essential, according to Hall, to collective meaning-making. This process, however, is ideologically motivated, a manifestation of the power to organize and render meaningful cultural phenomena in a way that serves hegemonic order. Thus race, gender, and disability are forms of otherness produced through signifying processes of stereotyping, dichotomization, naturalization, and expulsion. Yet the signification process could be reversed to resignify differences so that they empower rather than incapacitate. Representation is a politically fraught process, for the result of marking someone as “Other” necessarily
robes their genuine otherness—the fact that one is always more than the labels one is forced to carry. For Hall otherness is the result of a repressive social coding. In this respect, alterity is what is being reduced in the production of “otherness.”

Jean Baudrillard presents an opposite view to Hall’s. To Baudrillard, what mass media produce is domesticated otherness which dialectically complements and reifies the system. Alterity, properly speaking, is that which resists symbolic circulation and hence can never be represented. “The fact is that there is radical alterity only in duality. Alterity cannot be grounded in a vague dialectic of the One and the Other, only in an irrevocable principle” (Baudrillard & Guillaume, 2008, p. 100). Baudrillard’s dualism stands against the Hegelian dialectics of difference, which finds its way to Hall’s discussion in the form of cultural differentiation. Alterity can only be radical, contrasting with communication and representation; otherwise it would be assimilated as a play of differences, as simulated otherness. On this view, alterity can appear only with the collapse of symbolic exchange, as the excess that challenges any form of exchange—most principally capitalism as the master exchange system. This notion of alterity nevertheless remains a negative abstraction: it is never encountered as such, for, once concrete, it is already cataclysmic.

A more complex approach arises in discussions by Roger Silverstone and Judith Butler, who both rely on Emmanuel Levinas (whose contribution will be elaborated on later). Silverstone develops the notion of “proper distance” as a way to negotiate the mediated representation of others as both distant and proximate. Preserving the tension is key to cultivating an ethical perspective toward mediated strangers: far enough to remain others but close enough to evoke concern.
We learn through this recognition of the irreducible otherness of the world to accept our responsibility for our place in the world, and for the other who occupies that world alongside us, and who we will never, ever, know quite entirely. (Silverstone, 2003, p. 472)

Similarly, Butler interrogates the conditions under which media representations of the Other can sustain the precariousness of life. These conditions are necessarily paradoxical: “for representation to convey the human, then, representation must not only fail but it must show its failure” (Butler, 2004, p. 144). Both accounts enact what is essential to an ethical relation with the Other: neither inclusion nor exclusion but rather acknowledgment and responsibility.

**Alterity and relation**

As a theoretical question, the relation with the Other follows from paradoxes such as presence that is also absence, proximity that is also distance, and concreteness that is ungraspable. Rather than negative abstraction, alterity is met with exigency, a demand that one cannot shy away from. Alterity invokes what is perhaps the greatest challenge of communication: how to communicate with that which demands and at the same time skirts communication.

A simple (or rather simplified) way to approach the question of the relation with the Other is in terms of “the problem of other minds.” The problem goes back to the Greek skeptics and develops in the works of Rene Descartes, John Locke, George Berkeley, Thomas Reid, and culminating with contemporary figures such as Donald Davidson and John Searle. In essence, the problem is the knowledge of another’s mind: How can I be sure of the existence of other minds? Are other minds like my
mind? Are another’s perceptions and feelings similar to my own? Can I gain access to another’s mind and share with my own mind? The problem has received renewed relevance with speculations on artificial intelligence, and is at the core of thought experiments like the Turing test and Searle’s Chinese room. Communication in this vein is an epistemological question: it is about sharing knowledge, exchanging the “mental content” of one mind with another. One can observe another’s behavior but not another’s mind; such access is possible only by the mediation of signs. Importantly, here relation is tantamount with sharing knowledge. Alterity has no place here, for it is either rendered accessible and thus denied or altogether disregarded.

Discourse ethics provides a more complicated approach, with Karl-Otto Apel and Jurgen Habermas being its principal proponents. At stake here is not knowledge of but cooperating with another, not accessibility but understanding. One may not know what another is thinking but by subscribing to some fundamental procedures—namely, rational, equal, and free discussion—mutual understanding might be reached. Here communication is understood pragmatically rather than epistemologically. Intersubjective contact transpires as a continuous interrogation of the validity claims made by communicators. On this view, language comes with a built in ability to produce understanding, so long as it is employed in the service of reason. This rationality grounded discourse is keyed to achieve understanding together with, rather than despite, another. And yet, notwithstanding the openness and equality this view espouses, it is also ultimately inhospitable to alterity. Reason is what mediates the relation with another, and rationality is the precondition for consensus-seeking communication. Thus, whatever resists such a framework is excluded from the outset. However expansive, the rationality standard is inimical to alterity insofar as it constitutes a challenge to reason.
Phenomenology as developed by Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger provides a different vocabulary to approach the question of alterity and of the Other. This method focuses on the relation between the subject and the phenomenon as it is given up intuitively for the subject. According to Husserl, consciousness is relational and intentional. Heidegger casts the human existence of Dasein (being-there) as social existence, what he calls Mitsein, being-with, always already together with and in the presence of others. On this view, relation with others is nonelective, and, moreover, nonepistemic: it precedes knowledge and reason. To communicate is already to share language and to share a world through language. But existence as such can never be shared. Jean-Paul Sartre further developed the idea in terms of alienation, where the gaze of the Other brings the self into social existence through the feeling of shame. Being with others is a continuous conflict between being a subject for oneself and an object for another. The Sartrean scenario leaves little hope for genuine communication.

A parallel view comes from the philosophy of dialogue, where communication is regarded as redemptive. The main figure here is Martin Buber, whose philosophy of dialogue brings together existentialism and Jewish mysticism. For Buber relation is fundamental, taking the twin form of I-It and I-Thou. In the I-It relation the other is encountered as an object, as a thing among other things to be used and manipulated. I-Thou relation is an encounter of spiritual dimensions where the other is revealed as a singular being in time and space. Dialogue insofar as I-Thou is an experience of transcendence, a flow of grace. One is approached and addressed face-to-face, serving no purpose other than the encounter itself. Buber is critical of any form of indirect contact, especially technical and mediated. I-Thou moments are rare and fleeting, and cannot be willed or produced, for then they turn into I-It. Nevertheless these moments
serve Buber in offering an ethics of interhuman connection anchored in the experience of alterity. Authentic communication is an encounter on a “narrow ridge” with inauthenticity lurking on both sides.

The most comprehensive, and indeed most challenging, engagement with alterity insofar as communication theory and philosophy are concerned is found in the works of Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida. Drawing critically on Husserl and Heidegger, Levinas and Derrida develop, each in his own way, an elaborate and original thought, both having important insights for communication. Levinas famously termed ethics as first philosophy, ethics understood specifically as the relation with the Other. That relation is of responsibility for and to the Other: One finds oneself responsible—that is, both obligated and answerable—before one becomes involved with oneself. Responsibility is the fundamental structure of subjectivity. To describe this relation Levinas resorts to concepts such as the face of the Other, approach, exposure, hospitality, proximity, and vulnerability. In so doing he redefines relation as nonassimilative, inserting separation within connection. Levinas charges Western philosophy—from Plato to Heidegger—with a systematic allergy to alterity. Although alterity is a scandal to thought and reason, it is also—and here lies Levinas’s import—the basis of communication.

Understood with regard to alterity, communication is irreducible to the exchange of knowledge, to the semantic content conveyed—what Levinas calls the said (le dit)—and proceeds by addressing and being addressed, being open to the Other’s call—what Levinas calls the saying (le dire). To be sure, both operative dimensions of language are essential: if the said is about thematizing and conceptualizing, the saying is about transcending such efforts vis-à-vis the Other being addressed. Thus communication as an ethical relation involves radical openness
to what resists reduction to the said yet still commands in the saying—contact without synthesis. Indeed, communication restricted only to the said is revealed as short-circuiting communication. Were communication to be perfect, it would eliminate difference and alterity, and finally, itself. Communication proceeds only insofar as its remains open to failure and shortcoming, and hence to an ethical encounter with alterity. It is in this sense that communication implies the interruption of any certainty attempted by communicating. “Communication is an adventure of subjectivity, different from that which is dominated by the concern to recover itself, different from that of coinciding in consciousness; it will involve uncertainty” (1996, p. 120). Alterity is constitutive of communication, and is the condition of ethical communication.

Jacques Derrida’s project of deconstruction can be described as a consistent displacement of foundational thinking, particularly of the Western philosophical kind. Among its key targets are the metaphysics of presence (the so-called immediate presence of the self to itself) and the discourse of logocentrism (which produces the traditional privilege of speech over writing) as the guarantor of truth. Deconstruction leaves nothing untouched, including any understanding of communication. First, it incriminates dialogue—the venerated philosophical ideal—as a coercive economy of exchange tied to principles of presence and to the present. Derrida effects a radical reversal by introducing an alternative system of exchange based on difference, absence, and delay—the system of writing. Doing deconstruction will thus proceed by showing how any discourse striving to secure meaning and certainty is underwritten by the indeterminacy of its own foundational concepts. “Writing” becomes a radical form of critique, one that willfully entertains paradox, uncertainty, and aporia.
Presence would then be underwritten by absence, semblance by difference, and sameness by alterity.

Like Levinas, for Derrida alterity is an operative force in communication. For a sign to operate as such it must be repeatable in the absence of both addresser and addressee. Thus all signs are iterable: they function independently of source and destination; hence the principle of iterability (iter derives from itara, other in Sanskrit): “the logic which links repetition to alterity” (Derrida, 1982, p. 315). This logic is one of differing and deferral, what Derrida coins as différance: a (non)concept that enacts the undoing of speech by writing and of presence by absence (and performed by the neologism, as the difference between e and a is evident textually but unnoticeable verbally). What cannot be carried into presence remains a trace: a past that was never presence—another way of approximating alterity. Derrida’s speculations reveal communication as a mise-en-abyme: not only is it impossible to determine what communication “is,” communication itself, now understood as the operative differing-deferring exchange, is productive of the general process of undoing, including of itself. Alterity is intrinsic to communication, for it is what allows signification to function, and thereby and concomitantly to disfunction. There can never be a final reconciliation or “fusion of horizons” (to use Hans-Georg Gadamer’s term) among communicators. What escapes communication is precisely what sustains communication. Alterity both stands between communicators and brings them together—brings them together because standing between.

In conclusion, the question of alterity poses a challenge to communication theory and philosophy. It is the challenge of rethinking communication as contact without merger, neither effacing nor assimilating alterity. Communication so conceived puts concern before comprehension and responsibility before reciprocity.
SEE ALSO: Derrida, Jacques; Dialogue Theory; Gadamer, Hans-Georg; Incommunicability; Ontology; Phenomenology; Philosophy; Poststructuralism; Turing, Alan M.

References and further readings


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