

**EXISTENCE, COMMUNICATION, VIOLENCE AND A MAINLY
KIERKEGAARDIAN EXISTENTIAL APPROACH TO COMMUNICATION
ON HIV/AIDS**

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ABSTRACT

From an existential perspective, it is observed that communication is expressive of the embodiment of the individual in the world. Communication is above all else expressive of people's modes of existence. The dimensions of the seer and seen are acknowledged as they relate to the embodied individual. They permit an understanding of how the individual fails to contend with the Thou; how it is that the individual is always doomed to live a life that has the structure of bad faith, where one hides the truth from oneself. With reference to all of the above, it is noted that communication is violent. But in this violent character of communication, the eternal source of art is observed. From and in response to these observations an existential approach to HIV/Aids is enunciated in which special attention is given to some ideas of Søren Kierkegaard. The idea is to illustrate that people have the possibility to apply a tactful art of communication to overcome the limiting violence of communication.

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INTRODUCTION

This article follows a mainly Kierkegaardian existential approach to communication on HIV/Aids. In this approach communication is regarded as violent in a way that demands tactful existential expression of the arts of communication.

It is argued that communication is expressive of the embodiment of the individual in the world. Communication is above all else expressive of people's modes of existence.

The dimensions of the seer and seen are acknowledged as they relate to the embodied individual. They permit an understanding of how the individual fails to contend with the *Thou*; how it is that the individual is always doomed to live a life that has the structure of bad faith, where one hides the truth from oneself.

The idea in the article is to illustrate that people have the possibility to apply a tactful art of communication to overcome the limiting violence of communication.

AN EXISTENTIAL APPROACH TO COMMUNICATION

Focusing on the individual in an attempt to understand communication is justifiable when it is given that the individual embodies possibilities and limitations. The possibilities and limitations of the individual are identified as the basis for the limitations and possibilities of communication when, as for Søren Kierkegaard, communication is recognised as *not merely an exercise in persuasion or manipulation, but first and foremost, a mode of existence* (Jansen & Steinberg 1991: 20; Van Schoor 1980: 33). This is also to say that communication expresses "the way in which humans experience reality and it is an ontological concept of man's being, ideal-typically aimed at achieving existential meaning or well-being" (Roelofse 1980: 44).

Communication understood as an expression of the individual's mode of existence cannot be understood without recognising the choice and freedom of the individual, based on which meaning is given to the reality which is met or (as phenomenologists say) intended.

Existential approaches to communication can take in the notion of the "object meant" (cf. Spiegelberg 1965: 105) which is recognised in an empty intention that "targets something that is not there, something absent, something not present to the one who intends" (Sokolowski 2000: 33).

One form of "object meant" is intended in the idea of the Untruth.

[Kierkegaard has said] My own Untruth is something I can discover only by myself, since it is only when I have discovered it that it is discovered, even if the whole world knew it before.' But when it is discovered, my Untruth becomes, at least in the immediate, my Truth (Sartre 1972: 145).

For the individual, the world exists within what a phenomenological analysis can reveal as possibilities of his or her intending. In each instance of giving meaning to the world, a truth is established by the individual, even if that truth is an untruth. This observation

reminds the reader of a warning to be born in mind by all existential-phenomenological approaches, in terms of which the “one who wants to attain the truth must be willing to make the necessary effort, and, reversely, where there no serious effort is made, there is no question of seeking the truth but only self-seeking” (Strasser 1963: 296). This warning does not detract, however, from the point that the truths, including Untruths, which speak of the intending of people need to be taken seriously. For example, and accordingly, the experiences of the people need to be taken into consideration in developing a meaningful approach to HIV/Aids.

The intersubjective possibilities of language cannot overcome the fact that the individual to whom a message on HIV/Aids is communicated must nevertheless still, through an act of choice and in freedom, give that message his or her own meaning. To the extent that one holds to an existential view of communication, the role of the communicator who aims at stemming the HIV/Aids pandemic can at best be that of facilitating that the choices of the embedded individual be made in a way that expresses authentic being.

The authentic person, in Sartrean terms (see Gordon 1995: 19), recognises him or herself as embedded being. He or she recognises the uniqueness of his or her own perspective from a standpoint in the world. An authentic individual recognises that his or her unique perspective can be seen from other perspectives are also in the world.

The three dimensions of embodiment speak of the possibilities and limitations of the individual who communicates. These dimensions are sometimes referred to as dimensions of the seer and of the seen (see Gordon 1995: 19) in that they permit insight into how one individual can experience or be experienced by another (cf. Heron 1970). Given the great importance placed on visual imagery in the Western tradition of thought and expression (see R. Poole 1997: 114; McLuhan 1994: 42), reference by Western thinkers’ to the seer and the seen can be regarded metaphorical of how human embodiment in the world is expressive of communication.

The dimensions of the seer and the seen illustrate how individuals are always alienated in and through the fact of the objectivity of the self, which must be accepted if the other is to be recognised. “Other can exist for us in two forms: if I experience him with evidence, I fail to know him; if I know him, if I act upon him, I only reach his being-as-object and his probable existence in the midst of the world” (Sartre 1956: 400). In other words, “The *It* is the eternal chrysalis, the *Thou* the eternal butterfly — except that situations do not always follow one another in clear succession” (Buber 1987: 17-18).

The dimensions of the seer and of the seen are therefore important instruments in gaining understanding of how the individual fails to grasp the *Thou*. The individual is always doomed to live a life which has the structure of bad faith in appearance, where one hides the truth from oneself (Sartre 1956: 89). Schutz (1971) has shown that to live the practical life, it is necessary for the individual to somehow forsake the subjective for the objective. Practical necessity demands that the individual hide from the self the implications of knowing that in objectifying reality, the *Thou* is crushed into the *It*. Yet even so, in all real living the *I* exists in meeting the *Thou* (cf. Buber 1987: 11).

Reframing the three perspectives of embodiment in the sequential order in which they are noted by Gordon (1995: 19), the following can be said:

- (1) The individual whose embodiment is expressed in communication, as seer, must consider the limitations and possibilities of existing from a standpoint in the world.
- (2) The individual whose embodiment is expressed in communication, as seer, must consider the limitations and possibilities of being seen from other standpoints in the world.
- (3) And, the individual whose embodiment is expressed in communication, as seer, must consider the limitations and possibilities of always being aware of being seen by others.

The seer needs to consider the violence of objectively denying him or herself through taking up the identity of “communicator”. Similarly, the seen must acknowledge the violence of objectively denying him or herself by adopting the identity of “the communicated to”. The ongoing discussion focuses on the idea of communication as violent, with selected reference to the three dimensions of embodiment.

COMMUNICATION IS VIOLENT

Communication is violent and being human is expressed in communication. Communication is of the embodied individual who can only exist in meeting. The embodied individual exists in both seeing and being seen. This characterisation of embodied being is an affirmation of the social character of human being (cf. Adler 1949). The claims of those who would make the human being a law unto him or herself, and the claims of those who would make the human being a variable in the stream of life events are cast aside. In this there is violence. “Regardless of the perceived justice or injustice of the matter, regardless of the place of power in the matter, as long as someone is losing something that he currently has and wants to keep, there is violence” (Gordon 1996: 304-5).

That communication is violent and that human being is expressed in communication does not make human existence inherently fatalistic. This is because existential conceptualisation of communication as violent is tantamount to a rejection of approaches which hold onto the Manichaeian misanthropy of a “communicator” and a “communicated to”. This is significantly because “the other is indispensable to my own existence, as well as my knowledge about myself” (Sartre 1985: 38). Human experience is in the intersubjective realm of meeting which constitutes an essence to which the individual can appeal for a universal condition of being human. Another way of saying this is that the existence of the human individual is inherently social, it speaks of an underlying commonness that can be described as objective but its configuration has no conception outside of the subjective or lived experience of the individual (cf. Sartre 1985: 38).

The various social techniques available for communication can be discussed as intended for manipulation (Roelofse 1983: 6). Persuasion constitutes violence to the extent that it involves taking away the choice and freedom of the individual. The point to be made is that to communicate, to be intersubjectively related, suggests the need to deny the self's and the other's unique biographically determined situations in a way that makes a set of common abstractions or standardisations possible (Schutz 1971: 316, 323).

In terms of the human being who is embodied as seer and seen, the violence of communication can also be discussed with reference to the ideas of sadism and masochism.

“Sadism is the effort to evade the sight of others” (Gordon 1995: 19). In other words, sadism is the effort to evade recognising the other as a communicating being. To evade being aware of the self being seen from other perspectives in the world, or to deny that one is a perspective which is seen from other standpoints in the world, which sadism entails, is also to deny the self as a perspective from a standpoint in the world. Gordon (1995: 20) notes that this denial of the possibilities and limitations of others is an effort by the sadist to claim a mastery that can only be of God. In this way the sadist is once again in self-denial. The misanthropy of the sadist is such that the form of communication he or she seeks is between an *I* and an *It*. The sadist is not involved in real living to the extent that he or she is thus unable to be in relationship with the *Thou*.

The masochist attempts to become a “being-for-the-sight-of-Others” (Gordon 1995: 20). The masochist attempts to become the-communicated-to who does not simultaneously communicate. This, then, is another form of self-denial. The masochist attempts to make others gods who situationally condition him or her. This is to say that the masochist attempts to limit his or her possibilities to what conditions supposedly dictate. But for human beings, meaning can only be granted when the person chooses in freedom how to situationally interpret a context and its options.

Even, and especially, in the desperate situation of HIV/Aids, where the need to communicate about the dangers of not engaging in safe sex are apparent, the individual who refuses to acknowledge his or her own perspective is a masochist. Again, even and especially in this time of HIV/Aids, the one who denies the perspectives of others as relevant is a sadist. Both exhibit forms of inauthentic, misanthropic existence.

Both sadism and masochism evidence an attack on sociality. The social becomes possible when the individual with a perspective meets the perspective of others through the intersubjective medium of language. Recognition of the intersubjective possibilities and limitations of the individual is crucial for theorising about communication in a way that takes the existential being into account. Theorising on communication becomes an occasion to see how we can affirm or deny the self and the other.

One does not avoid speaking about the essential because communication is violent. Olivier (2004: 79) reflects upon how the “aporia that confronts the reader of *Ulysses*, namely that a counter-signature to the text is possible as a novel event and is

simultaneously not possible as such, faces participants in communication: communication is and is not possible". Ironically success is garnered to the extent that there is failure in the effort to violently grab hold of meaning and informationally transfer it, one to another.

In many ways, the limitations and possibilities of communication are the source of majesty, beauty and power accorded to communication. They are for Buber (1987: 9-10) "the eternal source of art" in that "A man (sic) is faced by a form which desires to be made through him (sic) into a work... if he (sic) speaks the primary word out of his (sic) being to the form which appears, then the effective power streams out, and the work arises..."

In the above, two main considerations have been noted. First, communication is expressive of the embodiment of the individual in the world. It is a mode of existence (Jansen & Steinberg 1991: 20; Van Schoor 1980: 33). Second, it has been noted that communication is violent. In this violent character of communication, "the eternal source of art" was observed (Buber 1987: 9-10). The next section advances a mainly Kierkegaardian expression of the tactful art of communication on the existential question of HIV/Aids.

ARTS OF COMMUNICATION ON THE EXISTENTIAL QUESTION OF HIV/AIDS

One ought not to avoid speaking about HIV/Aids because communication has been found to be violent. HIV/Aids appears to the individual. It needs to be communicated about. Seeking ways to communicate tactfully on HIV/Aids speaks of seeking arts of communication even as one realises one's limitations and possibilities to communicate about the existential questions concerned.

For much the same reasons that no lover, for example, is justified by the banality of words to not tell the beloved that he or she is so loved, the communicator on HIV/Aids seeks to speak without betraying the intention of setting the other free to choose in freedom to avoid high risk HIV/Aids behaviour (cf. Smith 1998: 369.)

Kierkegaard argued that existential tact is required to communicate on existential concerns which are *essential* to the human being's existence (see Cummings 1955: 84). HIV/Aids is an existential issue in the way it presents questions concerning life, death and how to live. Existential tact is therefore required on the occasion of communication concerning HIV/Aids. The inward or subjective experience of HIV/Aids is the meaningful starting point in the search for truth as it concerns how people should live and die in the time of HIV/Aids.

The challenge is to begin with the subjectivity of the embedded individual while at the same time and dialectically raising the question of truth objectively (cf. Merleau-Ponty 1962: 57). This article does not delve in much depth into the ethical questions that may emerge, but it is noted that behaviour choices of the individual are no longer morally justifiable with reference to the material fact of one's living conditions. One's

behaviour, or communication, becomes the expression of one's radical self. The individual is recognised as choosing a way of life. The individual's choices are recognised as choices for all (cf. Sartre 1985: 17). In this, the individual's choice of a way of life, with its ensemble of acts, speaks of a universal way in which life should be lived. In other words, it speaks of a universal ethics.

Tact, as the basis for establishing modes of how people should live, allows trust or ontological security to be sustained in relationships (Giddens 1986: 75). What the communicator on the existential can offer is a relationship within which the *Thou* can be authentic.

To arrive, through choice and freedom, at a stage of freedom where one is as one communicates; to facilitate one to become authentic, that was Kierkegaard's goal in communication. This goal is much the same as Rogers' (1967: 56) goal in the existentially conceived clinical relationship, where one may find "the essential core of a process by which we might facilitate the production of, through our educational system, of persons who will be adaptive and creative, able to make responsible choices, open to the kaleidoscopic changes in their world, worthy citizens of a fantastically expanding universe". Such citizens would arguably have been facilitated to deal with the choice situations presented by HIV/Aids in creative and responsible ways.

As at all other times, in the time of HIV/Aids, authenticity requires that the individual communicates in a manner which is not reliant on denying the consequences of one's actions. Wishing to communicate that which is truth and which cannot yet be communicated, the communicator in a process of replication (as with Kierkegaard and Socrates denying their roles as teachers) has to withdraw his/her authority and present the communication as a puzzle (Van Schoor 1980: 34-5; Kierkegaard 1978: 32-3). Accepting this and still being willing to invest oneself in trying to engage an other in conversation about existential matters demands a leap of faith. The "communicator" is forced to recognise and respect the other and that other's radical (rooted) reality.

Because existential tact can be learnt, it can be considered an art. This relationship between art and learning can be observed in Plato's (1956) *Meno*, where Socrates was forced to acknowledge that there is a discernible relationship between art and learning. But it does remain, as Socrates realised, that the only real teacher of existence is existence itself. To teach suggests to be on the side of finality and to thence have results to communicate (Manheimer 1977: 170). The teacher cannot lead individuals to some existential wisdom known only to the teacher, unless the teacher is God (cf. Buber 1987: 136). Socrates teaches that the role of the teacher is to facilitate that the student can know the truth regarding his or her life, this entails demanding that the student learn to question.

Kierkegaard developed Socrates' meiotic method into the indirect method for communication concerning existential matter (D. Poole 1993). In terms of this method, the communicator in a process of replication has to withdraw and present the communication as a puzzle (Kierkegaard 1978: 32-3). The indirect approach to

communication is an art, as Kierkegaard's pseudonym Climacus says, to give "a piece of information to the effect that everything... is so to be understood that it is to be revoked" (Kern 1970: 93). Communication thus conceptualised occurs in the irony of non-communication.

The listener must now act upon the communication (Sjursen 1974: 164). The communicator has served the role of midwife to enable the would-be student to take the responsibility of reading and acting in the world. Kierkegaard describes the use of metaphorical language in which the speaker or helper "not only conveys a meaning but conveys speaker and recipient to a meeting or event" where truth is disclosed in a way that "reveals the nature of the power in which the helper takes his stand... between the *I* and the *Thou*" (Manheimer 1977: 185).

Reading the world is not complete until it is acted upon (Freire & Marcedo 1987). Education on HIV/Aids can then be seen as a political activity that is not merely about regurgitation of learned ABCs. Education can only be achieved when the existential being is able to, in critical consciousness, act from the perspective of being liberated (Freire 1973).

By appealing to the individual, in a leap of faith, to read his or her reality and to act authentically, the statistical incident and the psychological drives that otherwise seem to determine the occurrence of high risk HIV/Aids behaviour lose their efficacy in the face of the encompassing possibilities of the individual. The bio-medical model which forecasts continued infections becomes redundant, unable to predict the individual's possibilities, in the face of individual freedom and choice.

To be sure, limits remain in the face of situations such as rape that limit one's options. Each day, each moment of time requires that the individual choose in freedom and in a new leap of faith. The Kierkegaardian concept of time, critically complimented by Heidegger's concept of *Augenblick*, exposes the individual as existing and communicating or behaving in a moment unlike the Aristotelian model of time as consisting of objective instances which come to pass (Sjursen 1974: 85-6). In the *Augenblick*, the living moment of time, the individual can be seen most clearly as "open to whatever possibilities are met in the situation".

OBSERVATIONS WITH REFERENCE TO SARTRE ON KIERKEGAARD

Sartre (1972) has brilliantly regarded "Kierkegaard: The Singular Universal" in a way that lends itself to fashioning a set of almost summative observations before concluding this article. Kierkegaard encounters the problem of how to get to know Christianity. In the instance of HIV/Aids, the problem is how to get to know HIV/Aids. To the extent that that which is addressed is an existential matter as both questions of Christianity and HIV/Aids are, the search for this knowledge raises the question of history: "Can History act as the point of departure for an eternal certitude?" (cf. Sartre 1972: 142).

Kierkegaard proposed a start that is in flux, that is conditioned and is conditioning, whose foundation approximates to what Merleau-Ponty called *envelopment*. We are enveloped: being is behind us and in front of us. He-who-sees is visible, and sees

only by virtue of his visibility. 'My body', said Merleau-Ponty, 'is caught in the fabric of the world, but the world is made from the stuff of my body' (Sartre 1972: 154).

Addressing the aporia differently, one can say that each living moment is characterised by a vertical intentionality that builds its own continuous identity and a transverse intentionality that makes its objects to be given over time (Sokolowski 2000: 139). Over time, the human being's encounter with knowledge of the existential, such as of HIV/Aids, entails both building its own identity and making the objects given. Starting with the individual is starting with the possibility of possibility.

One can only know that which one meets. There is no possibility of knowing what one does not know. Yet, in meeting that which one can know, one has the possibility to relate to it in different ways that are expressed in the manner that one behaves to the phenomenon one meets. For the individual who has come upon knowledge relating to HIV/Aids this knowledge has meaning only to the extent that the individual gives it meaning.

Human beings display, to themselves and to others, the way things are. There are no "mere" appearances even as one recognises that this rigour-demanding approach to human choice and freedom demands acknowledgment that being is in a manifold. "Each manifold is different, each is proper to its identity, and the identities are different in kind. 'Manifold of appearance' and 'identity' are analogous terms" (Sokolowski 2000: 31). The significance of starting with the human being is that it is the perspective of the individual which preserves the intentionally encountered and uniqueness of each manifold.

To start with the individual is to start with an affirmation of the fact that people are makers and destroyers of worlds (cf. Christians 1997: 13). It is, for example, to start with affirmation that people express an embodied agency according to which they can change how life is lived in this time of HIV/Aids. If one is to hope for ameliorating the negative consequences of HIV/Aids, one has to accept both violent and at once also emancipatory possibilities of human beings as makers and destroyers of worlds.

Human existence is anchored to time but this situation does not have meaning except the meaning that the individual chooses. "Kierkegaard testified to a double universality. The revolution consisted in the fact that historical man, by his anchorage, turned this universality into a particular situation and this common necessity into an irreducible contingency" (Sartre 1972: 156). In this way, the individual is a maker of worlds. People choose, for example, to live as though this is the time of HIV/Aids or they choose not to do so.

For human beings, truth only exists subjectively, as something other than knowledge.

So subjective truth exists. It is not knowledge (*savoir*) but self-determination; it can be defined neither as an extrinsic relation of knowledge (*connaissance*) to being; nor as the internal imprint of the correspondence, nor as the indissoluble unity of a system. 'Truth' [Kierkegaard] said, 'is the act of freedom.' I would not know how to

be my own Truth even if its premises were given to me in advance: to reveal it means to produce it or to produce myself as I am; to be for myself what I have to be.

What Kierkegaard highlighted was the fact that the opposition between non-knowledge and knowledge is an opposition between two ontological structures (Sartre 1972:147).

The challenge of communicating knowledge of HIV/Aids must recognise the need for a leap of faith that violates the dominance of the object in recognising that the choice and freedom of the self and of the other, the subjectivity of the other is the only meaningful starting point.

In fact — and Kierkegaard was aware of this — the experience which turns back upon itself, after the leap, comprehends itself more than it knows itself. In other words, it sustains itself in the milieu of the presuppositions that are its foundation, without succeeding in elucidating them. Hence a beginning that is a dogma (Sartre 1972: 155).

In the instance of HIV/Aids the arguments of this article cannot deny being birthed in the dogma of human choice and freedom. The aim is not to suggest that the content of knowledge (in this case of HIV/Aids) is illegitimate but to point to the impossibility for human beings of direct knowledge of this content (cf. Sartre 1972: 144).

Faced with the need to communicate about that which cannot be communicated about, Kierkegaard has shown that through the art of tactful use of irony, humour, myth and non-signifying sentences indirect communication can enable the other to encounter the intended object of the “communicator”. Continued work on the relevance of Kierkegaard’s indirect communication for HIV/Aids communication is planned for discussion in ongoing work (see also Chasi & De Wet 2002). For now, a brief conclusion to the current article is presented.

CONCLUSION

It has been argued that communication is expressive of the existential being. It speaks of the being’s embodiment in the world. But communication is violent. It is not possible to communicate to another about existential issues as they relate to the embedded individual.

From speaking of communication as violence, a tactful art of communication has been identified which announces the possibility for real living, in which the *I* and *Thou* meet. This possibility heralds the possibility for tactful communication, especially on the existential, that facilitates the emergence of people who can take responsibility for their actions and who can act therefore with creativity to ameliorate and to also produce future conditions of interaction that enable growth. Giddens (1986: 64) has offered that this tact is what is required to re-establish productive interaction.

This article can be read as a reminder to communication theorists and practitioners not to forget to begin with possibilities and limitations of the individual when initiating necessary communication programmes. In occasions such as HIV/Aids, theorising and acting in which the existential underpinnings of communication are not recognised, begs grave questions from the critically conscious reader.

Further studies are encouraged to critically focus on aspects of how language, meaning, sensemaking (cf. Weick 1995), the indirect communication of Kierkegaard, etc. can be theorised in a way that allows for communication on HIV/Aids that recognises the individual to greater extents than has otherwise been possible.

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