

Instrumental dialogue and the ethics of expressing solicitude for each other's existence

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Abstract

Dialogue is about forgoing control and possession when interacting with the Other. In comparison, the notion of instrumentality appears contrary to the very notion of dialogue. This paper suggests, however, that mutual instrumentalization is necessary for dialogue to be a space where participants express solicitude for each other and promote each other's voice, action, and existence. Building on the work of French philosopher Étienne Souriau, we argue that promoting another's existence requires taking their actions and speech into our own. This enables them to also exist through us, as we allow them to instrumentalize us. Such a view better accounts for what goes on in tangible dialogue situations, as we show by revisiting an empirical case. Our proposal extends current research on the conditions of productive dialogue, invites being careful about who or what populates the dialogical scene, and turns our attention to what they may need to pursue their existence.

Keywords: dialogue, solicitude, existence, Étienne Souriau, ethics, instrumentalization.

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1. Introduction

The history of ethical thought could be caricatured as a search for a source from which proper conduct stems, whether rationality (Kant [1785] 2002), virtue (MacIntyre 1981), social contract (Rawls 1971), or authenticity (Taylor 1992). The realization that these so-called sources cannot be reconciled has led ethics scholars to turn their attention away from discovering what people should do and observing instead how people interact with these sources as they deal with ethical pluralism (Hennion 2017; ten Bos 2002; van Oosterhout, Wempe, and Willigenburg 2004).

As an alternative, research has suggested that dialogue is productive of ethical decisions rather than conveying the dictates of a source or merely serving as a vehicle for interaction (e.g., Arnett and Arneson 2016; Buber 1958). More precisely, dialogue can be understood as a form of practical ethics and be seen as “*a co-elaboration of meaning on practical issues that requires the participation of the involved public*” (Létourneau 2012, 18). Much research has been concerned with finding the conditions that would sustain dialogue and be conducive to ethical decisions (Johannesen 1971; Krippendorff 1989; Stückelberger 2009). Many of these criteria boil down to the principle of avoiding controlling, possessing, or instrumentalizing the Other (Arnett 2016a).

Hence, dialogue also consists in welcoming the Other, tending to their needs, and seeking mutual understanding (Derrida 2000; Levinas 1987). However, a contradiction may exist in the heart of dialogue. While, for the philosopher Martin Buber, dialogue requires “*an awareness that others are unique and whole persons*” (Cissna and Anderson 1998, 65), others stress that dialogue demands attention to the fragile effort through which others maintain their personhood (Cooren and Sandler 2014; Stam 2010). What is at stake, then, is how “whole” people are presumed to be when they engage in dialogue. Rather than a contradiction, though, one can suggest that any person's – or thing's – individuality comes with the risk of disindividuating, which may clarify the ethics at stake in dialogue.

The realization entails that dialogue is also a space where people express their solicitude for each other and support each other's pursuit of individuation (Arnett 2001; see also Bencherki and Iliadis 2021). In other words, dialogue is not only about reciprocity between already-

constituted individuals (Weigand 2010) but also about the very ability of those individuals to exist as such. Even situations where participants engage in persuasion entail some degree of solicitude for others, if only to the extent that one cares about the ideas they wish to convey and other people's opinions towards them.

Solicitude, as we suggest, amounts to jointly *cultivating* others in dialogue: tending to them by ensuring that we do and say what they need to thrive (Bencherki et al. 2020). Building on Cooren's (2010) ventriloquist principle – we carry the voices of others when we talk – the notion of cultivation suggests that whenever someone *makes* something or someone else act or speaks, they are also *made* to act or speak by that thing or person. Speaking about an organization, a value, or a colleague, for instance, then also means allowing those different “figures” (as Cooren 2010 refers to them) to animate or move us to speak on their behalf and to be their ventriloquist's dummy – or their instrument (Cooren 2020).

The ventriloquial approach points out that people can extend solicitude to fellow human interlocutors and other non-human beings that populate the dialogical scene. This includes the principles they hold dear, the values they share, or the projects they pursue together (Cooren 2016; Matte and Bencherki 2019). No matter their nature, all beings are thus relationally constituted through dialogue (Cooren 2018). As people speak in different ways, they promote the existence of some ideas or values, possibly at the expense of others. Failing to do so, ideas fade away, values are trampled, and people are excluded. Such a view means that *ethical* dialogue is even more critical, as it may impact the very existence of its participants.

In this paper, we clarify that ethics does not pre-exist the productive power of dialogue. We do so by showing that dialogue generates ethical decisions and actions precisely as people tend to and show concern for realities that do not yet exist and that they bring about, including the very participants to dialogue. In other words, the figures on whose behalf we act – whether justice, passion or a colleague – are not “upstream” entities that act on people the way social structures have been described to constrain action and decisions (e.g., Giddens 1984). Instead, people interact to create and nurture projects, ways of thinking, works of art, identities, values, and organizations that become increasingly demanding as they gain existence and require them to act in one way or another. This also applies to people themselves, who must also find a place to exist in dialogue through their contributions.

Such an understanding of dialogue, we argue, requires researchers to review the conditions of ethical dialogue. Scholarship so far has supposed that welcoming the Other in dialogue is a moral obligation, for instance, by following the deontological tradition (Kant [1785] 2002), or that it stems from the realization of one's relationship to others that emerges from rethinking the self *as* another (Ricoeur 1991). Instead, we suggest that the normative expectation that people engage in dialogue ethically results from the project shared among all parties, which dictates whose existence must be nurtured. Conversely, conflict may correspond to diverging projects being pursued.

People need each other to be and act in the world: each of us plays a part in collective action because we mutually *solicit* each other and share in each other's actions – for instance, I can teach because I appropriate the work of my colleague who taught the introductory class – but also because we know, relative to others, what we *have* to do, i.e., our place in the project that we hold in common – if *we* want students to learn, then I teach *my* class at that particular time, on that particular topic, in that particular room, and my colleague has her part to play (Latour 2011).

Latour's (2011) comparison with an orchestra is best to understand the relevance of such reciprocal "solicitude" for dialogue: a symphony only exists as each musician has, in turn, their moment on the stage, where they must exercise their talent and show the mastery of their instrument. Each musician has the *duty* to play as well as they can when their turn comes, but not in a moral sense. Failing to do their best would deprive others of their turn and, eventually, compromise the collective work, thus also reflexively devaluing their own contribution. In that sense, a musician's performance is also the instrument through which others can play and jointly create a collective work.

Adopting this view, therefore, also supposes revisiting the idea that dialogue should not be instrumental. Following the idea of reciprocal solicitude, concern for each other supposes some degree of mutual instrumentalization so that each voice is called upon, in turn, to participate in a collective work that reflexively provides meaning and value to each of our contributions. As playing one's part at the wrong moment can deprive another musician of their turn, mutual instrumentalization also supposes ensuring that we support each other's right to exist and act, especially since some of us may not be able to act and speak on their own.

Dialogue thus becomes a space where one's being continues through that of others and where participants value and promote each other's existence and contribution.

Dialogue can therefore be understood as fostering the affirmation of one's existence through that of others, which, according to the French philosopher Étienne Souriau ([1943] 2015), allows it to exist and persist. To make this argument, we will borrow from Souriau's notion of *modes of existence*. For him, some beings – such as fictional characters – only exist to the extent that we express our solicitude towards them: Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson continue existing to the extent that, for example, we read their stories, talk about them, draw them in cartoons, and represent them in movies and plays. Their seemingly immaterial existence is substantiated through our many material actions. If we stopped caring about them, they would vanish, as was presumably the fate of many characters we have forgotten. However, solicitude is not only about fictional beings; any being's existence rests at least in part on others' solicitude, especially since any being exists in many ways at once, including as a fiction, i.e., as someone (or something) we talk about, remember, depict in photographs and drawings, etc. In particular, we will refer to Souriau's ([1956] 2015) text “Of the mode of existence of the work to-be-made,” where he shows that the artist's activity is increasingly constrained by the requirements of the work of art that she is gradually bringing into existence. Like the work of art, any being, as it gains greater existence, also demands a particular kind of solicitude to pursue its existence. Recognizing that existence is a matter of degrees also entails that ethical voices can be more or less loudly and clearly heard. Therefore, people engaging in ethical dialogue must speak on behalf of those emerging existences. For our purpose, this means that the ethical dimension of action is intimately tied to figuring out how beings may continue to exist together and into each other and how, alternatively, they may prevent or divert others' existence.

While an instrumental view of dialogue may appear first and foremost as a theoretical proposal, we came to formulate it inductively throughout our various empirical observations. It is, therefore, very much attuned to what goes on tangibly in everyday dialogical situations. That is why we illustrate our theoretical discussion by offering a new analysis of a conversation excerpt we draw from an existing study (Matte and Cooren 2015). While not representing obvious ethical dilemmas, the case has the merit of presenting how two people express their

solicitude for each other, for their organization's norms and for other entities, which leads them to favor specific courses of action over others.

2. Dialogical ethics as the absence of control and instrumentalization

There is a rising tendency to resort to dialogue when studying ethics, which may be observed, for instance, in the field of business ethics and corporate social responsibility. Studies in that area increasingly turn to dialogue as a way of capturing the process through which practitioners are accomplish ethics in daily situations, rather than attempting to uncover external principles (Maclagan 1999). Dialogue, in that sense, would avoid merely "applying" an ethical theory to particular circumstances and instead engages all concerned parties in a conversation about how to guide their actions (Lozano and Sauquet 1999). Dialogue is often understood quite literally as a conversation among stakeholders, during which proper conduct is collectively decided after considering each party's perspective (Christensen, Morsing, and Thyssen 2011; Morsing and Schultz 2006). Dialogue then consists of "a 'co-creation' of shared understanding" and of working together towards a "mutually acceptable solution" (Golob and Podnar 2014, 250).

Researchers, then, have concerned themselves with finding the conditions under which such dialogue would lead to better decisions regarding how to act together. Most studies recommend that it consist of "collaboration or pluralistic deliberation" and that it must be open to the ideas expressed in the process (Illia et al. 2017). Dialogue must also be "free of internal and external pressure" because it is only "under equal participating conditions" that all people involved can tease out their assumptions and agree on a definition of what is valid or fair in terms of decisions and behaviors (García-Marzá 2005, 214). In that view, some suggest concrete techniques to improve dialogue (Morrell and Anderson 2006).

The trends observed in the field of business ethics resonate with the findings of dialogue specialists. Dialogue is inherently polyphonic and, as such, capable of handling tensions among the plurality of voices that express differing preferences (Bakhtin 1986; Cooren and Sandler 2014; Gurevitch 2000). This ability may be viewed either from a descriptive or a prescriptive stance. The descriptive stance views dialogue as the "irreducibly social, relational, or interactional character" of all human meaning-making (Stewart and Zediker 2000, 225). The

prescriptive stance considers that human beings are capable of both monologic and dialogic communication. Dialogue, in this perspective, is not only a conversation between two people but also the difference between the monologic narratives constituting worldviews (Arnett 2015). The philosopher's goal is not so much to advocate for dialogue as it is to warn against the instrumentalism that monologue may engender and to advocate for "a particular quality of relating" that dialogue, in all its forms, captures (Stewart and Zediker 2000, 227). While monologue can express passion, authenticity, and conviction, it may also express zeal, bigotry, and a dichotomic outlook on the world (Arnett 2015). Following Buber (1958), the monologic view may emphasize the "I-It" relationship between subject and object, while "I-Thou" corresponds to the encounter between subjects. Therefore, dialogical ethics must consider the conditions for such a dialogue encounter and avoid instrumentalizing either party.

A crucial element of the absence of instrumentality consists in refusing to think of dialogue as control (Krippendorff 1989) or possession of the other; dialogue is a "space of non-possession" (Arnett 2016b, 3). It is, in that sense, a radical acceptance of the Other without a desire to appropriate or change them (Levinas 1987), along with preserving people's freedom of choice (Johannesen 1971). Dialogue also implies paying attention to the Other's monologic narrative to learn "about what is of fundamental importance to another" (Arnett 2015, 2). Thus, it is "openness to possibility and happenstance" (Poulos 2008, 117).

Being ready to embrace the unexpected also concerns dialogue's own potential for surprise. Indeed, dialogue is creative (McNamee and Shotter 2004; Sanders 2012). Its creativity is precisely why dialogue is a space of non-possession: how could we possess what does not exist yet, what emerges from our encounter? (see also Derrida 1998). This creativity may be unsettling but is crucial to our ability to construct together the world we share by allowing novelty to emerge from the encounter of what already exists (Krippendorff 1989).

In what follows, we will show that instrumentalization becomes a necessary condition for genuine communication to take place, and dialogue can finally emerge when it is considered as a mutual concern with each other's existence and as its promotion through one's speech and action (what Latour 2011 refers to as reciprocal possession).

3. Ethics in dialogue: in defense of instrumentalization and cultivation

A better acknowledgment of communication's creative and pragmatic nature collapses the distinction between instrumental and dialogical views. This is the case because mutual instrumentalization provides us with a clear set of "felicity conditions" for an act of communication to successfully promote dialogue (Austin 1962) by calling for the promotion of each other's existence in our speech acts. Indeed, communication works because people contribute to it in a way that also ensures that others can contribute in their turn, thus allowing the creation of a collective work that makes each contribution meaningful. It means that an instrument not only expresses its voice – say, the musician plays his line on the bassoon – but also helps other voices to be expressed, thus becoming, to some extent, their instrument too.

We must allow each other's contribution to instrumentalize us and to speak and act through our speech and action, in order to pursue a collective work together – ideas, projects, and a plethora of other things we carry out through dialogue. This may mean voicing them ourselves, in the same way a musician can reprise a theme or offer a counterpoint, but at the very least, it means leaving them the necessary space and time to express themselves. When observing what people (and other beings) do when they talk, we realize that they act as each other's *organ* or instrument, if only by respecting the sequential structure of conversation and its timing (Cooren 2010). Said otherwise, in any conversation, the parties not only express their unique ideas but also use their speech to allow others to speak. They do so, for example, by quoting absent people, invoking rules, and mobilizing other people and things in their speech. They also refer to what their interlocutors have just said and manage the conversation with them, to ensure that each can exist and act within the dialogical space. In doing so, they can be the instruments of those *figures* that speak through them, which they also instrumentalize to lend weight to their actions. The same goes for the objects that surround us and that we use in our daily practices when we grant them a particular recognition or importance by referring to them or describing them in the ongoing dialogue. In a way, we give them a place in dialogue so they can exist more richly than through their materiality. Thus, instrumentalization is a way of including in dialogue and offering a fuller existence to the objects and subjects that make up our communicative world.

This mutual instrumentalization could be regretted if it were not the critical process through which communication is at all possible, whereby dialogue constitutes and organizes the

people and things that populate the communicative scene (Cooren 2000). It also allows agency – i.e., the capacity to act – to circulate and become collective, as each person and thing becomes a vehicle for the agency of others, repeating here and now what others have said and done elsewhere and at another time (Cooren 2004; Cooren et al. 2005). Dialogue, then, allows people to speak and act together, not only with one another but thanks to each other. In doing so, they also constitute their collective reality by configuring how the elements of speech and action that pass through them can be arranged relative to one another. In short, dialogue is constitutive of people and things, as well as of the social order in which they participate (as suggested by ethnomethodology; see Garfinkel 1967). As Latour (2011) explains, order is established when turns to talk and act are distributed between people, and such distribution occurs not in advance but through those very same words and actions. Thus, order does not result from the injunction of a higher power (as if the orchestra’s conductor was imposing their will on the musicians). Instead, the instruments spring to action when, by being attentive to others’ turn, they determine it is theirs – resulting in a harmonious melody (on order and disorder, see also Vásquez and Kuhn 2019).

Since dialogue has to do with the obligation of “countering the eclipse of the Other” (Arnett 2016a), then we must ask ourselves how dialogical practices help promote the existence of others, but also who (or what) those “others” are, precisely, that we want to promote. In an encounter with others, we must undertake an inventory of whose existence is at stake in that meeting and be mindful of what matters to others (Latour 2013). When understood this way, dialogical ethics may amount to mutual instrumentalization: letting ourselves be instrumentalized by others and ensuring their sustenance and existence – but also ensuring that we only instrumentalize others in a way that does not “eclipse” their voice, agency, or existence. The questions then become whether instrumentalization is mutual, whether all parties can instrumentalize others and be instrumentalized, and whose existence is promoted through these instrumentalizations.

These questions must be answered empirically by looking at how each contribution and its author are *cultivated* in dialogue (Bencherki et al. 2020). To cultivate, etymologically, comes from the Latin *cultus*, meaning “caring.” It refers to the farmer’s work of tending the soil and caring for plants. Interestingly, the word “cult,” in the religious sense, also has the same origin,

indicating that we may also express concern for gods, values, and other shared principles. Culture, then, refers to the way we tend to everything that matters to us, from the things we eat to ideology and children (as in puericulture). The cultivation metaphor thus reveals that things do not exist unless we care for them. Crops, ideas, and children die when we stop tending to them. Our relationship with fellow humans and other-than-humans attests to and perpetuates their existence as things or persons.

Thus, dialogue is a space where people cultivate their concern for things and others, including making an effort to leave them some space to be who or what they are. As an active effort, the work of cultivation is empirically observable. For instance, a law only exists to the extent that a judge speaks on its behalf (Cooren 2015) and a medical standard as long as healthcare professionals uphold it (Matte and Bencherki 2019). So, understood as the way people instrumentalize each other to talk and act thanks to each other, dialogue has existential implications: when we allow others to express themselves through us, we also *cultivate* them and allow them to continue their existence, at least in the current dialogical situation, but possibly beyond it. Tribunals and hospital wards are, in that sense, places where multiple entities of different ontologies express themselves and call for people's attention so that they tend to them to constitute social and biological bodies (Bencherki and Elmholtz 2022). They are sites where regulations, standards, traditions, resources, equipment, symptoms, and emotions all compete as they attempt to thrive and as people speak and act on their behalf more or less loudly and faithfully. Consequently, through dialogue, instrumentalization makes it possible to ensure an ethics of existence, thanks to which subjects and objects can take their rightful place in the world we hold in common.

Dialogue, then, combines ethical and ontological implications: it concerns our duty to help others exist. We must ask ourselves whether we deem some existences to be expendable, and what we believe to be a fair price to pay to save the ones we care about. Indeed, we may not be able to be an instrument for all existences, and some of them may be incompatible. To better understand this ethics of dialogical care, we turn to French philosopher Étienne Souriau ([1943] 2015), who wrote about the notion of *modes of existence* and stressed that beings need others to continue their existence. Said otherwise, no being exists by itself but always through others, which complements the notion that dialogical instrumentality is inevitable.

4. Étienne Souriau and the different modes of existence

Mostly known for his work on aesthetics, the French philosopher Étienne Souriau was recently rehabilitated to a broader audience with the publication of Bruno Latour's (2013) *An inquiry into modes of existence*, which finds inspiration in Souriau's ([1943] 2015; [1956] 2015) work. The latter suggests that things exist under different *modes*. This means not only that each thing exists under its own mode – an idea does not exist in the same way as a rock – but also that a same thing can exist in different ways at the same time – an idea can be written, sung, sculpted, or just reside in someone's head. As another example, it is tempting to think that I exist biologically, while Sherlock Holmes exists as a being of fiction; however, I also exist as the author of my work (see Foucault 1979), as a member of my family, and even possibly as a fictional character in a friend's creative writing piece, to name a few. To exist under more modes of existence is to obtain a fuller existence; indeed, existence is not a binary state, as “we can only respond to the question, ‘Does this exist?’, with More or Less, not Yes or No” (Souriau [1956] 2015, 221). To gain further existence, each being, or part thereof, “hopes for existence together; it hungers after a different mode; it wants to be transposed into that mode” (Souriau [1943] 2015, 188).

This transposition occurs when one being takes up and continues the action of another, existing under a different mode. These are *anaphoric* uptakes that repeat what came before but add something of their own, creating something new that continues the previous action. When I try a recipe from a cookbook, I provide it with greater existence. It is not merely a recipe forgotten in the printed pages of an obscure book, but a live recipe embodied in my movements in the kitchen and, soon, in the bodies of my guests who will taste it. The recipe exists in the words printed on the page, in its author's initial intent, in each reader's attempt to prepare it... It exists in each of these uptakes and all of them at once.

For Souriau, each uptake involves judgment to the extent that it corresponds to a decision regarding what must be taken up from the previous mode of existence. According to the author, “It is also to choose, to select, to discard. And each of these actions *entails a judgment*, which is at once the cause, the reason, and the experience of this anaphor, of each moment in the progressive coming together of two modes of existence” (Souriau [1943] 2015, 219). These judgments and the differentiation they operate are crucial, first, because they are the conditions

of creativity and, second, because they give meaning to action: what an action means is the difference it operates in its uptake (Bencherki and Iliadis 2021).

The ability to differ, however, is not absolute. It also depends on the degree of existence already achieved. Souriau ([1956] 2015) uses the sculptor metaphor to explain that, as long as the future work of art is a block of granite, the artist can continue its existence in a variety of manners. However, as it takes shape and becomes lines, volumes, and textures, the work of art becomes increasingly demanding, and there are only so many ways in which its existence can be further promoted. It seems to ask the artist, “And what are you going to do now? With what actions are you going to promote or deteriorate me?” (Souriau [1956] 2015, 232). Souriau clarifies that this demand does not come from a projected or future state of the work of art, as if the artist knew what it would end up looking like ahead of time. It comes from the present existence of the work – even a sketch or a blueprint is not a future state, but rather a current resource for action (Suchman 1987) – and what it seems to permit or not, with the inherent risk of erring...

Souriau’s philosophy can therefore be understood as having ethical overtones, although the term is absent from his writing. He draws attention to the fragile character of each mode of existence, which needs others to sustain it. It poses several questions: whether we are ready to take up others’ actions in our own to allow them to continue; what aspects of them we deem worthy or relevant to be taken up; and whether we are willing to take the risk of deteriorating them. All these questions would be moot points if each existence were self-sufficient, and dialogue was merely an exchange of information. It is precisely because each being needs to exist more and in more diverse ways that we are solicited to make these existences happen and that we are faced with an ethical dilemma.

While Souriau’s writing relies heavily on parallels with language, his modes of existence are not limited to what exists through language. Even in a representational conception of language, which assumes the independent existence of the objects that language designates, talking or writing about these objects still provides them with an additional existence in dialogue, where they also gain further meaning *as participants to dialogue*. For instance, when referring to “my cat,” the speaker also designates the animal as worthy of her and her interlocutor’s dialogical attention; it gains status as a pet and is embedded in relational and affective networks.

Souriau's philosophy is also highly relevant to the study of dialogue, not the least because it extends the notion of hospitality and radical openness to the Other (Derrida 2000; Levinas 1987). Souriau specifies that hospitality is not merely welcoming someone into your home but being willing to take up their actions and promote their existence – i.e., *care* for them – and allowing them to instrumentalize you so that their existence can continue as you take up their speech and their action.

In suggesting that existence is scattered across several modes of existence, Souriau's work lies at the intersection of dialogue studies and recent proposals that communication is also an embodied and material phenomenon (Ashcraft, Kuhn, and Cooren 2009; Cooren 2018). Through the materiality of communication, people tend to the things that matter to them, even though they may be as seemingly immaterial as an idea (Bencherki et al. 2021). This suggests that we need to expand our understanding of the hospitality inherent to dialogue (or that we want to see in dialogue if we adopt a prescriptive view) to include different modalities of dialogue (on multimodality, see e.g., Mondada 2018).

5. The everyday ethics of solving a problem in a work context

So far, we have described such a view of the relationship between dialogue and the ethics of promoting others' existence, mostly in theoretical terms. However, its relevance has appeared to us as we conducted our various empirical work. In that sense, an instrumental view of dialogue is well-equipped to account for what goes on tangibly in dialogical situations and to expand the notion of ethics to everyday situations. Too often, ethics is limited to moments of “undecidability,” where decisions are impossible to make (see Derrida 1994). However, as evidenced in medical contexts, ethical decisions are everyday issues, which is particularly obvious once mistakes are made (see e.g., Barnes 2020). To illustrate this quotidian character, we revisit a brief dialogue segment from a study by Frédéric Matte and François Cooren (2015). It consists of a conversation between two men supervising the construction of a building that is part of a health center for *Médecins sans frontières / Doctors without borders* (MSF) in Bunia, in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The excerpt below is our transcription and translation from French of the original data, which the authors kindly made available to us.

For Matte and Cooren (2015), the excerpt illustrates how men can “read” their situation and tell what it requires. The authors show that Fred completes Luc’s reading about how posts might collapse with details on why construction norms were not respected. He thus shifts the reading from Luc’s apparent assumption that Fred did not know the norms for health centers, suggesting that local workers made a mistake. Matte and Cooren’s analysis tells how tensions can be understood as alternative readings of the same situation, and dialogue is thus the space where those readings are shared.



Figure 1: Fred (left) and Luc look at the posts they talk about (anonymized video still).

We offer a new interpretation of the same data, showing that as they note a problem with the way posts were planted into the ground, the two men also display concern for various beings whose existence is at stake. Rather than supposing that the protagonists’ orient to an abstract situation, our analysis lists the different elements that can be said to matter to them and that they seem to promote in their talk. As we will see, in addition to expressing concern for each other, Luc and Fred also show that they care for the building they are constructing, for construction norms, MSF procedures, and for construction workers.

Excerpt 1: Luc and Fred figure out why the posts were not concreted (from Matte and Cooren 2015)

1 Luc And the posts over there, did you guys concrete them or not?

- 2
 3 Fred No, they're not concreted, uh.
 4
 5 Luc Yeah, that's it. Because, you see, there it- it won't last, a weight like that.
 6 At some point pffft ((gesturing with hand and imitating the noise of a post
 7 falling)), it will still collapse for the— [for the
 8
 9 Fred [Yep
 10
 11 (0.5 second pause)
 12
 13 Luc For the- (0.5) Oh, yes, but for the health centers- ((answering to
 14 himself)). But you don't do the same thing for the health centers, you
 15 do a=
 16
 17 Fred =But they are concreted for the health centers. Here, it's
 18 not been done and it's too late.
 19
 20 Luc Uh
 21
 22 Fred This has been planned normally, [budgeted
 23
 24 Luc [Is this true?
 25
 26 Fred Yeah, yeah, we were supposed to put them uh in cement
 27
 28 Luc But why didn't you guys do it then?
 29
 30 Fred Uh, because the- the- this wasn't understood, you see, when I arrived, it
 31 was- it was almost all planted, y'know.
 32
 33 Luc Hmm, hmm.

Several people, contributions, and things are at play in this excerpt, and participants show concern for many of them. First, Luc may appear to show concern for the “posts over there” by wondering how they were planted into the ground (line 1). For Matte and Cooren (2015), his reference to “you guys” can be read as blaming Fred and his team. It is, then, perhaps out of solicitude for Fred, whom Luc does not want to offend, that he explains in lines 5 to 7 the reasons behind his question: it is out of concern for the building and, therefore, for their joint project – erecting the health center – that he asked about the posts. Luc, therefore, first seemingly expresses concern for the posts, then perceives that his concern may offend Fred, and as a result, clarifies that his concern has to do, in fact, with the joint project that preoccupies them.



Figure 2: Luc explains that the posts might fall (lines 5-7).

Fred's only answer is a "Yep" (on line 9), followed by a pause. Possibly feeling that his attempt to clarify that he cares for the project failed, Luc then starts explaining the MSF rules concerning the construction of a health center, which require posts to be concreted. However, even before Luc can explain this, Fred interrupts him to finish the sentence and remarks that it is now too late (line 17=18). In doing so, Fred thus expresses that he is knowledgeable about MSF procedures and his disappointment at the fact that they have been overlooked. In other words, he shows that he does share Luc's solicitude for the health center construction norms. This seems to surprise Luc, who answers with only an "Uh" (line 20), triggering Fred's further elaboration that "This has been planned normally, budgeted" (line 22), confirming that he did, respect the procedures, again leading to surprise from Luc and yet more elaboration from Fred: the posts were supposed to be cast in cement (line 26). Fred and Luc thus discover that they share the same concern for the health center being built correctly and for respecting MSF's procedures and the same disappointment at noticing that both of those concerns were breached.

On line 28, Luc reiterates his surprise, asking Fred why he and his team did not put the posts in cement if he knows and cares about the procedures. Fred's answer on line 30 starts with some hesitation. He seems to be about to designate someone or something – "the- the-" – before

switching to a passive construction (which is also the case in the French original) to say that “this wasn’t understood” and that “it was almost all planted” before he had arrived, which stops short of identifying who exactly failed to understand and who did the planting wrong. Fred postfaces his turn of talk with “y’know,” which could be simply a language tic, but paired with Luc’s apparent approval on line 33 – “Hmm, hmm” – may indicate that both men, in fact, implicitly know who is to blame. The way Fred structured his last intervention may thus appear to display some concern for saving the face of the people in question, presumably construction workers.

This brief analysis shows that dialogue can be understood as a space where different beings and things, both concrete and abstract, pursue their existence thanks to each other’s solicitude. We saw that Luc worried about sparing Fred’s feelings and that both men discovered they shared a concern for the health center and MSF’s procedures. Fred, in the end, also seemed to be concerned with saving the face of the construction workers who presumably made the blunder. Luc and Fred do not only *talk about* those beings – in fact, in the case of the construction workers, they intently avoid talking about them. They also let their concern for those beings shape how they act and talk.

As we can see in Figure 1, the two men orient their bodies toward the posts (and the construction site; off-camera to our left), and Luc gestures to materialize his concern for the solidity of the future building (Figure 2). Our analysis shows that what Luc and Fred say, but most importantly *how* they say it, is shaped by their desire to promote the existence of some beings. They thus lend their voices to them. However, in agreement with what Souriau ([1956] 2015) suggested, they must also make a judgment and choose which beings matter the most to them, given their joint project. For instance, while Luc may appear at first to care for the posts and raise his question to Fred accusingly, he then seems to realize that his relationship with his colleague matters too and to recast his question in light of their shared concern for the health center. However, both men realize that “it is too late,” consistent with Souriau’s idea that the work can be promoted once it reaches a certain degree of existence but also risks being deteriorated. In the case of the health center, they might have to start over.

6. Instrumental dialogue's ethics of care

Understanding dialogue as a form of mutual instrumentalization – i.e., acting and speaking through others while letting them act and speak through our own body and voice – may appear counter-intuitive. Current research looking to define the conditions under which dialogue can operate to lead to ethical decisions advocates against instrumentality. However, as we have shown in our illustrative analysis, participants in dialogue must consider, in shaping their contributions, others' need to pursue their existence. In doing so, they intuitively recognize reciprocity in using each other's instruments, namely their actions and voices and the space granted to them. Without dialogue's instrumental aspect, some existences would never see the light of day, and some voices would not express themselves. In particular, some beings only exist to the extent that others speak for them, such as procedures, principles, values, or allegories; these are "solicitudinary" beings for Souriau ([1943] 2015), meaning that they depend on others' solicitude. In that sense, if dialogical ethics consist of a concern for the Other, such concern cannot be equated with total autonomy. Expecting the Other's autonomy may amount to holding them responsible for their failure to pursue their existence and hiding the fact that some beings, need our help to act and exist. This is well understood, for instance, in medical ethics, when it comes to patient autonomy vis-à-vis the expectation of letting them make their own choices instead of accompanying them to make the best decision for themselves (Levy 2014). Caring for the Other may mean instrumentalizing them and letting them instrumentalize us so that they can pursue their existence through our voice and action, as autonomy always involves a part of heteronomy (see also Cooren 2010).

Such a view of dialogue also entails opening up the dialogue scene by not reducing it to an encounter between a handful of people (thus extending Cooren 2008). Indeed, dialogue is more than just the expression of privately held perspectives among a group of human beings seeking to share understanding (e.g., Golob and Podnar 2014). First, more beings and things can participate in dialogue than the people who are sitting around the table: abstractions such as procedures and building norms, objects such as posts, and projects and things that do not yet exist, such as a health center, absent people such as the construction workers ... all participate too, at least to the extent that they make human beings say and do things to promote their existence. In applied situations – for instance, in business ethics and corporate social

responsibility – this may mean that so-called stakeholders may be more numerous and of a different kind than those usually presumed (thus extending current views of stakeholders participating in dialogue, e.g., Morsing and Schultz 2006). From a different theoretical perspective, namely actor-network theory, the fact that non-humans may have a stake in controversies has already been empirically documented (Callon, Lascoumes, and Barthe 2009). Second, even human participants need each other. In our case, we saw that Luc adjusted his talk to spare Fred’s feelings. Other studies have shown, for instance, that people ensured that others could participate in the conversation (Bencherki and Snack 2016), helped each other formulate their ideas in a different language (Bencherki, Matte, and Pelletier 2016), and offered substantiation for each other’s suggestions (Bencherki et al. 2021). Therefore, we need to recognize that dialogue is not only about passive hospitality but also about active solicitude: people must concretely do and say things to help each other out.

Viewing dialogue as instrumental and oriented towards solicitude also reconnects it with theorizing on agency and authority. Studies on agency have shown that it does not stem from a single individual; it is “without agents” (Bencherki, Brummans, and Vézy 2020; Choukah and Theophanidis 2016). Instead, it should be understood as a “chain of agency,” where individuals can present their actions as motivated or constrained by a prior link. Moreover, they can also present their actions as motivating or constraining the following link downstream to act in a certain way (Castor and Cooren 2006; see also Brummans 2018). Agency, then, is always hybrid (Callon and Law 1995; Meunier and Vásquez 2008). When agency is recognized as hybrid, authority is not something one person possesses. It stems from the way each situation configures agency, where some people and things are positioned as motivating and constraining collective action (see Benoit-Barné and Cooren 2009).

An instrumental view of dialogue, thus, acknowledges that if dialogue is the site where collective action is decided, then it must also ensure that all participating agencies are considered. Observing how people configure the situations where they act and that, in return, guide their actions provides us with a normative standard that is more secure and empirically verifiable than the presumption that some abstract norm *should* guide the way dialogue unfolds and the way we behave towards each other. In our view, as collective action is jointly authored, some beings and things will be positioned as authoritative and authorizing others, while others

may be less central. Disagreements over who or what matters and should be cared for may thus correspond to diverging understandings about what collective action should be or how best to compose it. Dialogue, therefore, is not about escaping authority but rather ensuring that it is not *authority over* the other, but rather *authority with* the other (see also Follett 1926).

More generally, viewing dialogue as supporting the Other's existence through mutual instrumentalization means we must reconsider current research on the condition of productive and ethical dialogue. This line of research could also explore how dialogue may support all the beings and voices involved in it without making assumptions about what each of them needs to pursue its existence. Much of the literature has suggested that genuine dialogue would avoid control and possession; it would also involve respecting each other's freedom of choice (Arnett 2016b; Johannesen 1971; Krippendorff 1989). These are undoubtedly essential considerations as general rules. However, specific situations may include different beings with different needs: as we have seen, some may need that we intervene and speak on their behalf as they are not able to speak for themselves. This may be the case of those people who are invisibilized and who cannot speak on their own behalf due to lack of credibility or insufficient legitimacy (Fricker 2007); talking *about* them and *for* them is thus essential, as Spivak (1988) did in her work concerning subalterns, so that, through the speech of others, they may gain some existence and visibility. Such dialogue may even offer them the space to speak for themselves, albeit through others. Therefore, we may need to reorient current research on the conditions of dialogue, move away from a moral imperative to care for others, and consider how we promote others' contributions and existence through how we relate to each other.

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