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### **Revisiting Martin Buber's I-It: A Rhetorical Strategy**

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### **Abstract**

Communicative failure can manifest in many ways throughout our daily exchanges with other communicators. This essay offers a rhetorical strategy to change a communicative failure to an affirming concept that offers hope, courage, and transformation for human communicators. By reconsidering axiological implications of Martin Buber's I-It communicative exchanges as a starting place toward overcoming communicative failure, a hermeneutical entrance into a dynamic communicative arena is opened. I-It exchanges help to negotiate this new communicative space. Through engagement of I-It encounters one can transform a monologic vacuous space into a home for dialogic exchanges.

**Key words:** Culture shock, communicative failure, dialogic, distanciation, existential homelessness, I-It, I-Thou, Martin Buber, monologic vacuum, phatic communication, rhetorical strategy, temporal courage.

In an ideal setting genuine dialogue would engulf all human communicative engagement. In reality genuine dialogue comes and goes in a dynamic and despondent fashion. Martin Buber (1967) describes three types of communication; genuine dialogue, technical dialogue, and monologue. Genuine dialogue is spoken or silent communication that “has in mind the other or others . . . and turns to them with the intention of establishing a mutual relation between himself [herself] and them” (Buber, 1967, p.19). Technical dialogue is a direct response to a functional need and monologue is described as being “disguised as dialogue, in which two or more men [women], meeting in space, speak each with himself [herself] in strangely tortuous and circuitous ways” (p. 19). Genuine dialogue is often privileged over the two seemingly subordinate forms of communicative exchange. Martin Buber describes communicative moments as either I-It moments that remain a form of functional communication or I-Thou moments where we find deeply genuine and connective communication encounters. This essay elevates those I-It moments from being a subordinate form of communication to a communicative space that can offer hope, courage, and transformation for the communicator who seeks communicative interplay and a communicative home.

I-It moments are functional encounters that can help one to negotiate from point A to point B. While some phatic communication can degenerate into gossip or hurtful communication, positive I-It moments are not relegated to gossip or to those other forms of hurtful communication, rather they are phatic-laden functional communicative exchanges that help one to existentially negotiate through everyday encounters. I-It encounters can feel empty and flat, often causing human beings to feel a sense of homelessness, loneliness, or emptiness. For example, the transition from doctoral student to assistant professor; moving from the west coast to the east coast; or changing one’s career from a real estate agent to an entry-level customer service position can be challenging. The obvious connection that these situations have in common is the potential to experience culture shock, to feel out of place in a monologic vacuous new environment, leading one to question the decision that created the situation in the first place. It is in these introspective praxial life moments that one can feel a sense of failure in decision-making and create uncertainty in making future decisions. Failure is not an end but it opens a hermeneutical starting place that invites introspection and interspection of human relationships and communicative exchanges. It is here where I-It encounters can offer hope, courage, and transformation for the communicator facing a monologic vacuum.

Before moving forward with this argument it is important to acknowledge that this essay does not approach succeeding communicative failure from a psychological perspective, which is often the norm when one reflects on the decision-making process or outcome (Ward, Bochner, and Furnham, p. 2001). Instead, this essay seeks an alternative to the psychological perspective by rhetorically strategizing through the historical context which invites one to overcome perceptions of communicative failure. Understanding a communicative failure from a rhetorical perspective guides one on the pathway toward turning a monologic vacuous environment into a responsive and rhetorical engagement. This rhetorical strategy emerges through Martin Buber’s I-It encounters.

Buber’s I-It communication moments are often overlooked in scholarship on dialogue because the ideal dialogic experience comes through I-Thou encounters (Buber, 1971) and therefore scholarship focuses on the dialogic experience. This essay argues the

I-It is just as significant to human communication studies because it provides “temporal courage” (Arnett, 2006, p. 3) during times of uncertainty; hope in times of existential hopelessness; and transform communicative space from being a monologic vacuum into a dialogic space I-It and I-Thou compliment each other. According to Martin Buber (1971), I-It and I-Thou moments are very different yet both are primary in the interplay of human communicative exchanges. This essay first considers the notion of a communicative failure through consideration of culture shock, rootlessness, and the monologic vacuum. Second, this essay explores I-It and I-Thou communicative moments through Martin Buber’s dialogic philosophy. Third, this essay reveals how I-It moments can recuperate a monologic vacuum within communicative environments. Finally, this essay advances the idea that resituating Buber’s I-It moments as a rhetorical strategy can enhance dialogic potentialities and texture the study of the philosophy of communication.

### Communicative Failure

Philosophical life springs from the darkness in which the individual finds himself [herself], from his [her] sense of forlornness when he [she] stares without love in the void, from his [her] self-forgetfulness when he [she] feels that he [she] is being consumed by the busy-ness of the world, when he suddenly wakes up in terror and asks himself: What am I, what am I failing to do, what should I do? (Jaspers, 1954, p. 121).

This quote from Karl Jaspers identifies how the conception of failure can be considered negative. How does one feel as a communicative failure? Failure is seen differently by different people. We can develop a textured understanding of failure from the Latin language. Latin has several senses of the word failure, which include: *defectio*, and from the verb, to fail, *deficere* (to grow short), *deese* (to be short) *concidere*, *cadere*, or *offendere* (each referencing the idea ‘not to succeed’)<sup>1</sup>. Other connotations associated with these Latin forms of the English word, failure or to fail, include; defection, rebellion, to do less than one might, to revolt, to desert, to settle, to sink, to subside, to fall down, to drop, to be destroyed, to strike, to dash against, and even to commit suicide (*cadere*). Through this textured consideration of the Latin use of the word ‘failure’, we can develop an open sense of what failure implicates.

Failure implies a ‘should’ or ‘ought’ that is not reached or the idea that the wrong ‘thing’ is reached. Considering failure as a result or consequence invites the notion of an empirical measurement. For something as abstract as the notion of ‘failure’ we often observe a chain of events and interpret them. In this sense, failure can be either a negative or a neutral concept. However, I would argue that failure is not simply a result or consequence of something else but rather it is a phenomenological location or potentially an aesthetic position. A phenomenological location is a situatedness where one might find him or herself, physically or metaphysically. Failure as an aesthetic position refers to the idea that the aesthetic is not merely a matter of taste but rather a social relationship (Dewey, 1959). This social relationship is often considered through one’s success or failure in an action or communicative encounter. Failure is offered as a binary opposite to one’s ability to succeed, which posits a failure in a negative fashion (Mullin, 2004). Failure is also presented as a loss, such as the argument that failing to communicate resulted in Israel’s lost opportunity to gain posture, land, and respect when Ariel Sharon did not meet with an equal Palestinian leader (Gopin, 2006, p. 8). In this

<sup>1</sup> Latin references come from Simpson, D.P. (1968). Cassell’s Latin Dictionary: Latin-English English-Latin. New York: Wiley Publishing.

sense, a person's action or lack of action resulted in a perceived failed communicative event and a failed political agenda. Also, in Jared Diamond's (2005) book, *Collapse*, he positions the binary opposites, "fail" and "succeed". This represents the mutually inherent relationship between the concepts of 'to fail' and 'to succeed'. We see, interpret, and understand concepts, events, and decisions, through these lenses. As a result of this relationship we assign value to each, resulting in a value of 'good' with success and 'bad' with failure. Martin Heidegger referred to failure as a missed opportunity that often has negative consequences, "What is it that so radically deprives Dasein of the possibility of the misunderstanding itself by any sort of alibi and failing to recognize itself, if not for the forsakenness with which it has been abandoned to itself?" (p. 322). This represents Heidegger's pessimistic view on falling short of something that then causes negative consequences. Kant would argue that failure is a result of this falling shortness because he suggests the cause of failure is in "our idea itself" because we assume that "there is an actual object corresponding to the idea" (p. 434) when in fact the "object is only in our brain, and cannot be given outside it" (p. 435). Because of the disconnect between the actual and the idea in our mind, we often fail or fall short of reaching what we think.

Philosophically, failure has been examined through the notion of how we think. Dietrich Dörner argues people make mistakes and then follow blind alleys and detours in their thinking that lead to more despair from the consequences of their actions (1989). In our thinking we can be shortsighted or have an incomplete understanding which can potentially lead us to a failure in the most negative sense. Our thinking is an interplay of emotion and calculation, among other attributes, which often is in contrast with reality (Dörner, 1989). Nevertheless, our reality is complex, so we muddle through and do the best that we can.

Failure doesn't strike like a bolt of lightning but it more often develops over time after a pattern of complex decision-making actions (Dörner, 1989). But mostly, failure is a private feeling that one experiences in response to his or her interpretation of a particular situation. We can potentially fail when we select one job from multiple job offers; we can potentially fail when we take action to change careers; we can potentially fail when we fail to read a situation appropriately and say the wrong thing or take erroneous action. There are many areas in our lives in which failure can manifest at any time. Nevertheless, failure is not an end but it is the beginning of negotiation through new communicative space that has new potentialities.

Making decisions that can lead to the experience of culture shock can be perceived as a cognitive or a communicative failure. This essay considers overcoming this sense of failure through a rhetorical alternative rather than a psychological reflection. To constructively approach failure rhetorically one must make sense of one's shifting historical context through rhetorically strategizing your messages in your new communicative environment. Rhetorical understanding of your decision-making allows one to acknowledge the decision in question (i.e. accepting a particular employment position) was the best decision within the particular historical context. However, once the historical context changes one must begin to adjust to the new environment by rhetorically strategizing messages in the new communicative arena. Without a rhetorical strategy one's perspective may become subsumed by a sense of failure. Failure in this sense can create uncertainty, hopelessness, and inadequate dialogic encounters, but it is

actually an invitation to new possibilities. Considering the experience as a failure can be part of the experience of culture shock.

Uncertainty is often experienced in culture shock (Deal and Kennedy 2000). Culture shock describes how a person feels when one changes an environment or when one experiences change within a familiar environment (Ward, Bochner, and Furnham, 2001). Culture shock has 5 levels:

1. Honeymoon Phase – where one feels happy about a new environment and often overlooks emerging disappointment and flaws in the new environment.
2. Comparison Phase – where one compares and contrasts experiences in both the old and the new environments. One considers how it is to how it was. In this phase one might feel frustration with those differences which might be exaggerated.
3. Negotiation Phase – where one begins to negotiate through differences. The focus of attention shifts from the self as an outsider to the tasks that need to be done in the new environment.
4. Clarity Phase – where one begins to see differences between environments clearer and one is able to determine what is an advantage and what is a disadvantage. This phase marks one's adjustment to the new environment.
5. New Perspective Phase – where one returns to the old environment and begins to see the old environment in a different way. One realizes that one cannot turn back time and therefore comes to see the old and the new environments in a new way. (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001)

In the middle of experiencing culture shock one often only encounters I-It exchanges. If one finds no value in these exchanges one may begin to avoid them at all cost. Failure to embrace I-Its may actually be an obstacle that limits the potentiality of I-Thou moments to emerge through the thickness of one's experience. In the case of experiencing culture shock one might be better able to negotiate uncertainty in the communicative space through embracing I-It encounters instead of avoiding them. Embracing I-It exchanges can offer temporal courage that one needs to sustain a given situation and does not allow the self to simply give up. Culture shock can lead to hopelessness as one becomes aware of her or his lack of rootedness in a particular community.

Rootlessness begets hopelessness. In hopelessness we recognize our state of rootlessness (Arnett and Arneson, 1999). Rootlessness is “driven by a lack of moral stories” to which one can make a personal connection (Arnett and Arneson, 1999, p.6). When one has no guiding story from which one can find comfort or a sense of home the feeling of security and connection is lost. In this essay, “home” is used in the sense that Michael Hyde (2005) describes it as a place where one is known and where one can feel comfortable enough to be one's self – it is a place or a feeling that offers “an unconditional form of positive acknowledgement” (p. 98). Without a guiding story or a place to call home a sense of rootlessness can pervade one's life. The need for roots that sustain lives of human beings through a sense of connectedness is essential for all human beings (Weil, 1952). Without roots human beings suffer a disconfirmation from other human beings.

Hopelessness signifies disconfirmation, which recognizes the lack of acknowledgement of one human being to another (Cissna and Anderson, 1994, p. 23). Disconfirmation or lack of acknowledgment invites a “social death” (Hyde, 2005, p. 190). A social death happens when people are marginalized, slighted, ignored, cast out, or when one's spirit is defaced by another (Hyde, 2005). Failure to acknowledge another creates consequences that create or cause a social death. Acknowledgment does not have to be all positive. In general, acknowledgment confirms one's existence as a human

being (Hyde, 2005). Acknowledgement might create negative feelings within oneself but nevertheless, acknowledgement is the confirming of one's existence among other human beings. Without acknowledgement we may fall as prey into the realm of a social death, where invisibility and hopelessness pervade all of human emotion. In social death one finds her or his roots have been severed or she or he may come to the realization that one has never had roots at all, which reveals an existential disconnection from otherness.

Rootlessness fuels "existential homelessness" (Arnett, 1994, p. 229). In feeling a sense of existential homelessness one feels embedded in existential mistrust of others and of the world. In the communicative space of existential homelessness one feels in between, disrupted, or like an existential stranger trying to negotiate though a era of "parenthesis" (Arnett, 1994, p. 230). In this experience uncertainty manifests feelings of homelessness, physically and emotionally. In this state of existential homelessness one might feel stagnant or motionless, meandering about without arriving anywhere. It is in this experience that one feels a sense of failure permeating one's existential existence. From experiences of both uncertainty and hopelessness one might describe her or his communicative exchanges occurring within a monologic vacuum.

A monologic vacuum is without dialogic encounters. Martin Buber (1967) describes monologue as communication that "neither communicates something, teaches something, influences something, or makes a connexion with someone" (p. 19-20). Buber summarizes monologue as occurring in an "underworld of faceless spectres of dialogue" (p. 20). Empty talk held within a vacuum is doubly worse because there is the appearance of no way out as one gets pulled more and more into a dark and vacuous environment. To describe communication as a monologic vacuum is to suggest that flat, monologic encounters, where human beings fail to see the humanness of the other, is contained in a vicious cycle of communicative exchanges that keep recycling language without moving or developing from the original starting point. A monologic vacuum aids in one's social death and describes how one achieves a social death. A monologic vacuum is both a symptom and cause of feeling like a failure with a new job, a new home, or any type of situation where one has questioned her or his decision that led to a new or different environment. This sense of failure or "social death" (Hyde, 2005, p. 190) is not the end though, it can be a crossroad for change and a startling reminder that genuine dialogue cannot be forced or created.

A crossroad, in this sense, can also be considered through the decentered subject as Calvin Schrag (2003) describes in his philosophical consideration of communicative praxis. In this perspective a decentered subject is one who recognizes the illusion of a foundation in one's life or of roots that do not exist in one's life world. There is potential for distancing, either self-imposed or imposed by another to shift one's focus of attention away from what one knows. In this decentering, the subject questions understanding and explanation which is not always comfortable for the subject. However, this distance and decentering can lead to a new hermeneutical comprehension and a repositioning of the subject into a new communicative space. During the subject's negotiation of this decentering and repositioning, I-It exchanges can help to negotiate the pathway.

Dialogue emerges out of the betweenness when communicators turn toward the Other in a manner that recognizes each others Otherness. This turning often does not happen instantly. Instead, acknowledgment happens as human beings begin to encounter

the other in I-It fashion, otherwise I-Thou is forced. I-It encounters have the potential to evolve into I-Thou in a particular historical moment. Without I-It to initiate the journey, I-Thou often does not happen. I-It encounters assist human beings in negotiation through social death.

### **I-It and I-Thou**

Maurice Friedman (1955/1960) stated that Martin Buber's I-It "is not evil in itself, but only when it is allowed to have mastery and to shut out all relation" (p. 62). Martin Buber (1971) described an alternation between I-It and I-Thou encounters as he recognized, as consistent with the notion of a unity of contraries, that I-Thou needs I-It to exist as a reciprocity of sorts. This existence distinguished them from other forms of communication. Buber (1967) described his first I-Thou experience which occurred when he was eleven years old while visiting his grandparents who had a horse. Buber stated he would often go to the stable to "gently stroke the neck of [. . . his] darling, a broad dapple-grey horse . . . a deeply stirring happening" (p. 22-23). Buber continued to explain the reflexion of his encounter:

If I am to explain it now, beginning from the still very fresh memory of my hand, I must say that what I experienced in touch with the animal was the Other, the immense otherness of the Other, which, however, did not remain strange like the otherness of the ox and the ram, but rather let me draw near and touch it. When I stroked the mighty mane, sometimes marvelously smooth-combed, at other times just as astonishingly wild, and felt the life beneath my hand, it was as though the element of vitality itself bordered on my skin, something that was not I, was certainly not akin to me, palpably the other, not just another, really the Other itself; and yet it let me approach, confided itself to me, placed itself elementally in the relation of the *Thou* and *Thou* with me. (1967, p. 23)

In this account of Buber's first recognized I-Thou moment he is one with the otherness of the Other. Buber warned that once he acknowledged that he became consciously aware of the *Thou*, the moment had passed, returning to an I-It encounter. In this sense, I-Thou moments shift our consciousness from this world toward others in a dialogic space fully aware of otherness. I-Thou moments are distinctly different than I-It moments and they occur less than I-It moments. Buber suggested I-Thou moments are experienced in the "between" (1971, p. 63), and he situated I-It moments within the everyday "mud" (Buber, 1947/1975, p. 277) of human existence.

Martin Buber (1971) described I-It encounters outside the between as they are encountered in the world or through self-experience, not in the world in the between of human beings (p. 56). Buber argued that the I-It encounter "contributes nothing, and nothing happens to it" (p. 56). This means that I-It encounters serve a functional purpose that enables human beings to negotiate the daily world for and within each individual self. This negotiation contributes nothing to the otherness of the Other. Understanding the I-It encounter in this way should not negate or dismiss the value of I-It exchanges. Instead, the I-It serving a functional purpose, addresses an existential need that remains outside the between. Addressing this need is what helps human beings negotiate otherness and potentially move toward a genuine dialogic encounter. I-It experiences occur within a human being outside the betweenness of I and Other. The I-It is never spoken with one's whole being because it is situated within the self. Full situatedness within the self fails to acknowledge metaphysical otherness. Even though I-Its dwell outside this betweenness the I-It remains a primary component of interhuman communication (Buber, 1971). Ronald C. Arnett (2005) considers I-It encounters very valuable to the development of acknowledging otherness in that they can provide; 1) a

space of “temporal courage” (Arnett, 2006, p. 3) for those living within times of uncertainty; 2) a temporal home for those who have a sense of existential homelessness and who feel without a sense of roots; and 3) cultivation of the derivative “I” (Arnett, 2003, p. 39) that can help in providing a response and perhaps a remedy to the monologic vacuum that created the uncertainty and homelessness in the first place. Arnett’s ideas regarding the potential of Buber’s I-It has also been espoused as a remedy to the communicative problem of phaticity (Holba, 2008) that pervades the communicative condition as well. It is in the spirit of this recuperative application that the I-It can be seen as a rhetorical strategy for perceived communicative failures.

### **Rhetorical Strategy Reconceptualizes Communicative Failure**

Hope, courage, and transformation can overcome communicative failure. As stated earlier, I-It encounters provide temporal courage to endure messy or questionable situations. I-It encounters create a temporal home for those who feel hopelessness from existential homelessness that emerges as one acknowledges rootlessness and the lack of any resemblance of a narrative from which to situate one’s life. I-It encounters can remedy the monologic vacuum and cultivate the derivative “I” that might organically emerge as a result of the authentic I-It encounter. All these responses suggest that Martin Buber’s I-It can be considered one way that can succeed failure.

### **Temporal Courage**

At a time when one questions her or his decision in a given historical moment, I-It encounters provide “temporal courage” (Arnett, 2006, p. 3). Questioning of this type can lead to one feeling a sense of failure with a particular choice of job, career change, geographical change, and in other major life decisions. At the time one questions her or his choices one might also begin to define her or his life through success and failure. For example, if one decides to move to another part of the country for very pragmatic reasons but after the move (or honeymoon phase of culture shock) one questions the move in the first place because of the loss for potential dialogic acknowledgement, one might be inclined to see the decision as a failure.

Another example may include making the transition from doctoral student to assistant professor. As a doctoral student one had been embedded in multiple areas of her or his graduate program but as a new assistant professor one may feel lost as a human agent outside any narrative structure or one may feel like an existential stranger within an unfamiliar narrative. This sense of isolation, separateness, strangeness, outsideness or decenteredness can cause one to question whether her or his decision was a good decision. Asking this question and pondering the answer can lead one to see her or his decision as a failure. In this case, the I-It provides a pathway for one to question and negotiate through the muddied waters of her or his perceived failure. It also provides opportunity for one to see new horizons that emerge in the distance. As stated earlier in this essay, culture shock moves through phases. It is important to keep moving otherwise one may become stuck like an anachronism and end up with a self-fulfilling prophecy of being a failure in her or his new job or new geographical dwelling place.

I-It exchanges allow a questioning individual to test the waters of her or his new experience and negotiate through that experience. Through this testing and negotiation the notion of I-It can cultivate dialogic potential by focusing the negotiation through I-It engagement. In other words, focus on the I-It so that one can come to know one’s new environment rather than to try to force I-Thou encounters, which are not authentic in the

long run. The idea of the authentic I-Thou brings to light Martin Heidegger's (1962) notion of authenticity in which the potentiality of being calls forth authenticity or an authentic possibility. The authentic I-Thou encounter comes-into-being between the theyness of the encounter. I-It encounters do not have theyness as characterized by I-Thou encounters.

I-It encounters can be authentic or inauthentic. In an authentic I-It encounter there is potentiality of transformation into I-Thou. Inauthentic I-It encounters are dangerous to fair communication play and offer no hope in ending the vicious cycle of a monologic vacuum. Gossip is a form of inauthentic I-It encounters – in this sense, gossip does not add to the human conversation and in fact, gossip has great potential for hurting the Other and misdirect communicative events for a negative purpose.

False or forced I-Thou attempts only serve to increase existential mistrust (Arnett and Arneson, 1999). Embracing the I-It affords a sense of temporal courage to the communicator who is aware of her or his dilemma and, as a by product, builds the stage for potential I-Thou moments. Uncertainty comes and goes. I-It provides temporal courage for individuals to keep moving forward at a time that calls them to give up. The I-It offers a place of hope, for those who are aware of their human plight. Temporal courage is not the only potential contribution of I-It encounters. I-It can also point toward a temporal home for those who feel existentially homeless.

### **Temporal Home**

Michael J. Hyde (2005) states that “one’s home is both a place of origin *and* a destination that is longed for after a busy day, a weary journey, or even an enjoyable vacation. It is satisfying to be able to say and *really* mean that “it’s good to be back home”” (p. 99). Home as a “dwelling place” is “*the* metaphysical symbol” for a state of being that provides comfort, a sense of coming back to something known and familiar, and a place where one would want to go upon their death (Hyde, 2005, p. 100). In the dwelling place or metaphysical state of home one finds acknowledgment, trust, familiarity, comfort, and the opportunity to be oneself and not worry about it. While this seems simple enough, home is not often easy to find or feel. This is especially the case if one has moved from a familiar geographical location or into a new job or career. The desire to find a sense of home, like most human beings desire, is often difficult when negotiating through the new challenges of the particular situation. When one is in this situation, it is often easier to question your decision and feel like perhaps you made the wrong decision (a perceived failure) rather than to move through the existential doubt through functional means that can seem unbearable at times. I-It encounters help to resituate those experiencing these uncertain conditions which can help restore a sense of home to the seeker. The engagement of I-It encounters help to create a temporal home that provides a space to rest within as the movement toward I-Thou is cultivated and realized.

If we negate the I-It because we feel it is subordinate to the ideal communicative situation, then we risk missing opportunity for I-Thou to emerge. Negation of I-It can end the opportunity for repair of a perceived communicative failure. It is the play between I-It and I-Thou that allows one to see failure as a new opening or a new beginning. We need I-It distinguished from I-Thou to show us the way moving from our perceived abysmal failure to a place that is welcoming – home that invites one to feel like a success in an often uncertain tumultuous existence. If one can find temporal courage

and a temporal home through the negotiation of I-It, one might also see the I-It as a response and a remedy to a monologic vacuum that is often perceived as part of the failing nature of the human condition.

### **Responsive “I” as Remedy to the Monologic Vacuum**

A monologic vacuum is a descriptive metaphor that refers to a flat and forced communicative environment that fails to provide for participation or a meeting between human beings (Holba, 2008). In the monologic vacuum ideas are not shared between human persons which can leave individuals alone and dialogically starving for a connection with otherness. This creates a sense of futility as one feels there is no hope for dialogic encounters and this increases a sense of uncertainty and hopelessness that propels the problem of communicative failures.

A monologic vacuum emerges when an environment is imbued with uncertainty and hopelessness perceived by an individual. Uncertainty creates interpersonal mistrust (Arnett, 1994) that keeps the movement of hermeneutic suspicion in a vicious cycle. Uncertainty feeds the sense of hopelessness in which one feels the lack of or loss of a home to which one can connect. There seems no end as people lose more and more a sense of connectedness or rootedness to otherness. A monologic vacuum conceptualizes and breeds the continuance of this vicious communicative cycle.

I-It encounters provide opportunity to cultivate the derivative “I” (Arnett, 2003, p. 39). This cultivation can aid in the nourishment of the communicative space that permits an I-Thou to emerge or for a decentered subject to transform. The derivative “I” finds identity in response to the Other (Arnett, 2003).

From our ethical action responsive to the Other, the “I” finds identity in response to the Other, the historical situation, and reconnection to the ethical *a priori*- “I am my brother’s keeper.” The “I” finds identity as a derivative invention. (Arnett, 2003, p. 41)

A derivative “I” is a “phenomenological alternative” to the problem of “agency” as one engages life through “self-generated volition” (Arnett, 2003, p. 39). The phenomenological shift toward the Other is responsive to the call of the Other which fashions the identity of the “I” and this makes the “I” derivative of the Other (Arnett, 2003). To succeed failure by way of Martin Buber’s “I-It” one embraces the phenomenological shift of responsiveness to the Other. Recognizing this shift as necessary and life-giving can be the beginning of one’s path to succeeding failure. To embrace the shift in one’s phenomenological focus of attention announces that one denies the notion of psychologism that means human beings imagine everything as happening through herself or himself (Buber, 1969). Instead, a shift like this suggests meaning is found in the “unfolding sphere of ‘the between’ ... which happens within the souls of each ... found in neither one nor the other ...[but] in their interchange” (Friedman, 1965). Thus, meaning is rhetorical not psychological.

In experiencing or perceiving failure one might focus on the negative existential suspicion inherent to communicative encounters among human beings. Acknowledging one is derivative of the Other shifts phenomenological focus of attention from a perspective of failure toward a perspective of hope and rebirth through the responsive “I” – this shift invites one to succeed failure. I-It encounters can be “rhetorical interruptions” (Hyde, 2005, p. 129) to the vicious cycle of the monologic vacuum and illuminate the path for succeeding failure.

The key to reconceptualizing or overcoming failure is to not focus on the desired outcome but to shift one’s phenomenological focus of attention to the authentic I-It and

not expect to gain a dialogic response. If one attends to the I-It rather than the desired outcome success is more likely to occur. Attempting to force success or force an outcome from one's own conceptualization of a situation or relationship creates the emergent danger of being driven by agency rather than by the interhuman relationship.

While we might not see the social relationship behind our fears, it does not mean we ought to create one that is not natural. A forced dialogic relationship is an impostor that requires maintenance that ultimately leads to genuine failure because it never had the chance to develop organically. I-It allows for the natural development of communicative exchanges and shifts one's attention away from what one believes ought to be the case. Recognizing I-It encounters as rhetorical strategies allows one to succeed failure by understanding the failure rhetorically, not psychologically. A rhetorical understanding allows one to turn away from the failure and focus on the psychologically of it. In turning away from the failure one is less likely to force a response. In turning away from the failure one is likely to focus on something else so actions are not driven by agency. Authentic I-It encounters are one way of cultivating potentiality of these encounters. Inauthentic I-It encounters are just that – inauthentic in the sense that the potential to bring an Other into being is not present (Heidegger, 1962). The notion that I-It ought to be embraced as a tool to recuperate one's sense of failure is helpful to the scholarly discussion on dialogue and humanity.

### **Implications for the Communication Discipline**

Reconceptualizing failure through the pragmatic engagement of I-It encounters offers hope to individuals who feel a sense of failure from perceived family decisions, a run of bad fortune in business, or any situation where one feels imbued in a sense of failure. I-It moments can aid in cultivation of one's interiority that enables full potentiality for the reemergence of I-Thou moments.

Maurice Friedman (1965) described Martin Buber as a “philosophical anthropologist” (11) because Buber situates dialogue in “between” human beings. While the I-It and the I-Thou are not the same, they both invite the “I of man [woman] into being in the act of speaking one or the other of these primary words.” (Friedman, 1965, p. 12). The beauty of the I-It is eternal. I-It sometimes becomes I-Thou and the I-Thou becomes I-It. I-It does not necessarily become I-Thou but there is an infinite potentiality that points toward the possibility (Buber, 1971). The I-It is a starting place for succeeding failure in that it can propel the transformation of failure into success. In this regard, I-It is part of a practical philosophy that can enhance communicative understanding and invite reinvestigation of these sometimes phatic exchanges.

Recognizing the significance of the primariness of I-It reminds one of the importance of the pragmatic “practical philosophy” (Arnett, 1990, p. 208) of I-It – to keep going even when one does not feel like going on. All communicative encounters cannot be I-Thou moments. This reminds one that I-It moments fill a void that has potential to move toward and perhaps return to an I-Thou moment. At least there is a movement toward a transformation of the subject of some sort. Like the adage, “when the going gets tough the tough get going,” the I-It offers hope, courage and the potential for transformation that keeps a human being going during times of perceived failure.

Revisiting Martin Buber's I-It encounters as a rhetorical strategy to succeed failure is particularly noteworthy because it invites communication scholarship to also reconsider the value of phatic communication to human communicative exchanges.

Communication scholarship has engaged both proponents and opponents of phatic communication (Holba, 2005). Phaticity in human communication is still relegated to a subordinate role in human communicative possibilities. Restrategizing phatic communication as an alternative way to transform problematic communicative exchanges resituates the sometimes phatic I-It in its rightful primary position. This perspective reminds communication scholarship that it is good to revisit concepts that have become fixed within a particular historical understanding because historical moments change and concepts should not be fixed within time, otherwise we risk becoming anachronistic. Holding the perspective of using I-It communication as a rhetorical strategy for succeeding failure enriches communication scholarship and invites discipline wide renewed philosophical investigation of the interplay between I-It and I-Thou.

### **Conclusion**

This essay seeks to provide a rhetorical alternative for succeeding communicative failure. Grounded in the notion of recognizing and meeting one's historical context that shifts and changes dynamically, the rhetorical strategy of I-It communication can be helpful in negotiating the journey between failure and success. Reestablishing I-It as valuable phatic communication necessary for the negotiation of one's existential world is a rhetorical alternative that can lead to dialogic communicative exchanges.

This essay has explored four aspects that lead to an understanding of the I-It as a rhetorical alternative to succeeding failure. First, this essay identified this author's perspective on what succeeding failure means. Contextually, this essay argues one perspective that suggests failure can manifest through the experience of culture shock, the sense of rootlessness, and the solipsistic monologic vacuum. Second, this essay revisited Martin Buber's dialogic philosophy and explored his work with I-It communicative moments. Third, this essay constructed how attending to I-It encounters can be a rhetorical approach to succeeding the sense of failure identified in the first section of this essay. Failure is often interpreted as an ending but this essay advances failure as an opening toward a new beginning. Fourth, and finally, this essay suggests that the rhetorical approach to succeeding failure contributes to communication scholarship because it asks readers to rethink the utility and value of I-It moments. To consider I-It moments as a pathway toward dialogic communication or a pathway that provides hope, temporal courage, and potential transformation invites communication scholarship to revisit the value of phatic communication or I-It moments. This essay also invites a revisiting of the idea of phatic communication and its potential value to the human communicative experience.

Communication endeavors often fail to meet our desired outcomes. Even when everything is 'right' one can experience a sense of failure and defeat which subsumes individual potentiality. Martin Buber's I-It moment can be considered a rhetorical alternative that should be embraced and elevated to a more significant place in dialogic theory. I-It should not be dismissed as flat, empty, or phatic communication. Instead, the I-It encounter should be embraced as it has the potential to cultivate temporal courage, reveal a temporal home, and understand the responsive derivative "I"—all which can lead to a rhetorical shift that enables human potential and provides opportunity for the transformation we seek in our contingent and creative negotiation in the world.

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