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Manipulation in Communication: Missing the Target of Human Life

Abstract

Man possesses the ontological gift of being in communion with fellow human beings and with God. Communication places the human person on the path to salvation, leading to a permanent dwelling in God's redemptive love. The way we interact with others reflects our proximity to or distance from life's ultimate goal. Communication takes multiple forms, but each must be anchored in truth, as truth grants complete freedom, while its absence leads to sinful bondage, servitude, and failure to reach the goal. In a world where words spread rapidly, fueled by technology and massive information flows, any attempt to distort the truth through them is, in fact, a sinful act. Manipulation through words takes various forms, such as *argumentum ad antiquitatem* (appeal to tradition), *argumentum*



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ad ignorantiam (appeal to ignorance), *converse accident* (hasty generalization), *tu quoque* (you too), *equivocation*, and others. Manipulation has negative consequences not only for the manipulated person but also for the manipulator and society as a whole.

Keywords

person, communication, truth, salvation, manipulation, freedom

1 Introduction

The human person is the fruit of God's boundless love, a reflection of the communion among the Divine Persons, and a bearer of a mandate that both honors and holds them accountable before their Creator and fellow human beings: communion in love. Communion is born of love and is founded on the capacity to communicate, to engage in dialogue with beings who bear the imprint of the gift of drawing the essence of their existence from the Divine Persons.

Man is a dialogical being, endowed with the capacity to interact with those around him, to build bridges and establish solid relationships that bear the fruit of communion. To speak of man as God's creation means considering him together with those like him, seeing him develop on a human level after the model of intra-Trinitarian communion. Where such an approach to the purpose of human life is absent, failure ensues - an immersion into the most profound selfishness, into a soul-destroying alienation.

To be a human being, to bear the character of a person, means to access the bridge of dialogue, to enter into the state of communication that leads to communion in love: „There is no I in itself, but only the I from the fundamental word I-Thou, and the I from the fundamental word I-It. When a person utters I,

they refer to one of these two. When they say I, that I is present. Even when they say Thou or It, the I from one of the two fundamental words is present. To be I and to utter I are one and the same. To utter I or one of the fundamental words is the same. Whoever utters a fundamental word enters into that word and dwells there¹.

The goal of human life is the permanent dwelling in the redeeming love of God. Dialogue, communication, and communion form the foundation for man's proper placement within the plan of salvation. All these must be genuine, based on the best intentions, and rooted in a love relationship with God and fellow human beings, a relationship that must be continuously deepened.

Interpersonal relationships are the key to guiding one on the path of salvation, offering the human person the opportunity to fulfill themselves, to return to what they were ontologically meant to be: „Man does not come into the world fulfilled; he needs time and favorable circumstances to become what he is meant to be. And for his development, nothing is more important than the people around him”².

2 Forms of communication

From a scientific perspective, communication takes multiple forms, which can be classified as follows:

1. Based on the mode of transmitting information/messages, communication can be classified into direct communication and mediated communication:

¹ Martin BUBER, *Eu și Tu*, Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest, 2022, p. 40;

² Edith STEIN, *Les Trois Rois Mages*, Driekoningen, 1942, apud Eric DE RUS, *Persoana umană în orizontul întrebării. Pentru o antropologie a interiorității*, trad. rom. Paul MARINESCU, Spandugino Publishing House, Bucharest, 2016, p. 73.

- a. Direct communication occurs when interaction takes place face-to-face, without the assistance of any technological device.
- b. Mediated communication involves the use of specific channels or technologies (such as telephone, email, or social media) designed to facilitate message transmission between the sender and receiver, even when they are not in the same physical space.

2. Based on the number and type of participants, as well as the nature of their relationships, communication can be divided into:
 - a. Interpersonal communication: The exchange of information between two or more individuals in a direct relationship, usually informal.
 - b. Organizational communication: Communication that takes place within organizational structures and involves the transmission of information among members of an organization in a formal setting, considering hierarchy and established roles.
 - c. Mass communication: Communication that occurs between a sender and a large audience, utilizing mass media such as television, radio, or print media.³
3. Based on the vehicle of meaning, communication can be classified into:
 - a. Verbal communication: Involves the use of words, either in written or spoken form, to convey a message.

³ Jason S. WRENCH, Narissa M. PUNYANUNT-CARTER, Katherine S. THWEATT, *Interpersonal Communication: A Mindful Approach to Relationships*, pp. 18-20, see the web address: <https://milneopentextbooks.org/interpersonal-communication-a-mindful-approach-to-relationships/>, accessed on 04.10.2024.

- b. Non-verbal communication: Encompasses all forms of communication that do not use words, such as body language, facial expressions, gestures, and tone of voice.⁴
- 4. The above classification, found in numerous scientific studies on communication, must be complemented by a form that ennobles and gives meaning to human existence: *communication through prayer*. Prayer expresses the inner movement of man toward God: "*Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry, and He will say: Here I am!*" (Isaiah 58:9). Through prayer, one can communicate both with God and His saints, as well as with others. Prayer can take the form of *oral communication*, involving the verbalization of aspirations, the cry to the Creator, and to those participating in this sacred act. It can also take the form of *mental communication*, known as the *prayer of the mind*, which involves silence, stillness, few words, and an intensification of inner experience—perhaps even accompanied by tears.

The communication forms presented above highlight the complexity of this process, emphasizing the diversity of ways in which people can transmit and receive information. Each type of communication has its own particularities and challenges, and understanding these differences can help in better adapting the message according to the context and audience.

3 The Truth in the Act of Communication

Starting from the words spoken by Jesus Christ: "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life" (John 14:6), we can deduce that "truth" is not an abstract concept, nor a temporary convention based on

⁴ Cameron W. PIERCY, Michael Robert DENNIS, Maura D. CORDER, *Connecting and Relating: Why Interpersonal Communication Matters*, Ed. COMS244, University of Kansas, p. 106, see the web address: <https://opentext.ku.edu/interpersonal/>, accessed on 04.10.2024.

a certain ideology or various social interests, but rather, it is God Himself – the source of all love. "Christ, in His person, not only defines the truth but also shows the way to it: those who remain in His word will know the truth, and the truth will set them free (cf. John 8:32) from sin, lies, and death. In the person of the God-man Christ, God and man are indissolubly united. The understanding of man is not overturned but renewed, purified, and sanctified. It is deepened and divinized, giving it the possibility of comprehending the truths of life in the light of the God made man. In Christ, the absolute Truth was offered in its entirety in a personal and real manner. This is why only He, among all those born on earth, possesses the complete knowledge of the truth and can offer it further"⁵.

In communication, words must express the truth, for a communicative act that can lead to mutual understanding between people must be grounded in the honesty between the subjects. Words are the gift of God to humanity, given to help individuals understand one another, collaborate, and advance toward the path of communion: "The words that I speak to you I do not speak from Myself; but the Father who dwells in Me does the works" (John 14:10). As an expression of divine love, the truth testified through the communicative act has the power to free from any constraint, to strengthen relationships, and to guide those who are on the wrong path.

Truth is not merely a concept fabricated on demand or a relative notion, but a concrete expression of divine love. To the extent that human beings base their communication on truth, they become co-workers with God in realizing the state of communion that leads to salvation. This means that the truth expressed in words is not just an instrument of information, but an act of giving and love toward one's neighbor.

⁵ Părintele Iustin POPOVICI, *Credința Ortodoxă și viața în Hristos*, trad. rom. prof. Paul BĂLAN, Bunavestire Publishing House, Galați, 2003, pp. 52-53.

At the same time, truth provides the most valuable foundation for the trust that individuals must have in one another. When communication is based on truth, one of the consequences is the strengthening of trust between interlocutors. Without honesty, a trusting relationship cannot be built. Lies lead to relational breaks, deep misunderstandings, and even emotional trauma. In any type of relationship, whether personal or professional, truth is the foundation that makes it possible to build flawless bridges that play a decisive role in advancing toward the Good. The word itself is also an instrument of responsibility, as it can have a significant impact on those who receive it. The careful selection of words, their „weighing” is crucial in the communicative act. Words must reflect reality, not deceive, and must not manipulate.

Jesus Christ assures us: „The truth will set you free”. Truth offers the full state of liberty, for where it is not present, there is sinful bondage, slavery, and the failure of life's meaning. Truth is the force that can liberate us from sin, for where there is no truth, lies are present, and the latter forms a cycle of sin and bondage. One who is dominated by lies becomes, on both a spiritual and relational level, a prisoner of their own falsehoods and their consequences.

Truth brings light and clarity, allowing for liberation from the burden of mistakes and a life lived in spiritual purity: „But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God” (John 3:21). One's own fears and doubts can be overcome by choosing truth, by living authentically, embracing the values that Christianity has planted, which provide the path to a deep, meaningful life, with inner freedom and peace. The association of truth with light and of lies with darkness is rooted in individuals' worldview about life. „The light of truth” is what drives away the darkness of ignorance and sin, making room for a clear vision of life, one's own identity, and the path to follow. Without truth, a person lives in a form of spiritual blindness that keeps them captive in their own illusions.

4 Manipulation – A Deviation from the True Purpose

Starting from the words of the Savior: „Let your Yes be Yes, and your No be No; anything beyond this comes from the evil one” (Matthew 5:37), we can easily deduce that any attempt to divert from the truth through words is, in fact, a sinful act. Integrity can be demonstrated through the communicative act: it must be governed by moral rules, anchored in Truth. „Through our Yes and/or No, we can, however, be participants in or reject the Word of the all-creator, which we either accept or refuse. We can participate in the spiritually rich life of all existence, or we can lose ourselves in the illusions and fantasies filled with vanity of the enemy”⁶.

Through words, an act of manipulation can be undertaken, leading someone away from the right path, driven by certain interests or by a person’s failure to align with moral laws. The primary weapon of the manipulator is the lie. The world in which we live often appears cynical, and truth is spoken only when it is deemed convenient for the individual. Words seem to lack weight today, no longer measured or evaluated as carriers of meaning. We no longer relate to them as coming from the One who gave them to us with the clear purpose of dialoguing toward unity in love. To emphasize the importance of truth and the need not to dilute or clone it, the lie is condemned in the ninth commandment of the Law: „You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor!” (Exodus 20:16).

Arthur Schopenhauer stated, „At the origin of the lie lies cunning. To commit an injustice, there are two paths: violence and trickery. Just as through violence, I can kill a man, rob him, or force him to submit to me, I can achieve the same goal by

⁶ Pr. Prof. Dr. Vasile GRĂJDIAN, „Ceea ce este da, da, și ceea ce este nu, nu (Mt. 5, 37)”, articol apărut în Îndrumător Bisericesc 2013, Editura Andreiană, Sibiu, see the web address: <https://poruncaiubirii.agaton.ro/articol/491/ceea-ce-este-da-da-si-ceea-ce-este-nu-nu-mt-5-37>, accessed on 05.10.2024.

presenting deceptive motives to his mind, which will compel him to do what he otherwise would not. This is done through the lie⁷. The lie kills the truth! The deceitful person uses lies to degrade others. At the core of manipulation lies cunning, the petty interest of obtaining something through illicit means. The goal of manipulation is to convince the recipient through deceit, either by transmitting false information or by employing techniques such as those used today by the advertising industry.

According to Philippe Breton, manipulation is nothing more than „an organized lie”⁸, This identifies numerous techniques, which he classifies into two main categories: emotional manipulation and cognitive manipulation. Certain political organizations have often used these manipulation techniques for propaganda purposes and have been highly effective at influencing large masses of people. „In the act of manipulation, the message, in its cognitive dimension or in its emotional form, is designed to deceive, mislead, and make one believe something that does not exist. This message is, therefore, always a lie”⁹.

In today's world, there is an increasing emphasis on the importance of the communicative act, but on what foundations? A utopia can be born, fueled by social movements, that bypasses the values and inner richness of the human person, no longer adhering to moral laws, replacing them instead with mere obedience to specific rules set by those who represent „authority”.¹⁰

⁷ Constantin GEORGESCU, „*Studiu introductiv*” la Sfântul AUGUSTIN, *Despre minciună* (bilingual edition), trad. rom. Lucia WALD, Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest, 2016, p. 9.

⁸ Philippe BRETON, *Manipularea cuvântului*, trad. rom. Livia IACOB, Institutul European Publishing House, Iași, 2005, p. 23.

⁹ Ibidem, p. 24.

¹⁰ Philippe BRETON, *L'utopie de la communication : le mythe du „village planétaire”*, La Découverte Publishing House, Paris, 1997, p.6.

5 Methods of manipulation in communication¹¹

Argumentum ad antiquitatem (Appeal to tradition): This manipulation method is based on a logical fallacy that argues something is correct or good simply because it is old or because it has been done the same way countless times before.

Argumentum ad baculum (Appeal to force): This is used when the person making the argument resorts to force or the threat of force to gain acceptance of their conclusion.¹²

Argumentum ad hominem (Appeal to the person): This is abusively used when someone attacks the person instead of attacking their argument. In some cases, this argument is used when one person tries to convince another to accept a conclusion based on the opponent's circumstances.

Argumentum ad ignorantiam (Appeal to ignorance): This is a logical fallacy that argues something is true simply because it has not been proven false, or that something is false because it has not been proven true.¹³

Argumentum ad misericordiam (Appeal to pity): The manipulator appeals to arguments that evoke pity or guilt, while the conclusion should be based on reason rather than emotion.¹⁴

¹¹ Vezi Robert ARP, Steven BARBONE, Michael BRUCE (editori), *Bad Arguments: 100 of the Most Important Fallacies in Western Philosophy*, Ed. John Wiley & Sons Ltd., Oxford, 2019;

¹² Paul HERRICK, *Think with Socrates: An Introduction to Critical Thinking*, Oxford, England: Oxford University Press (2014), see the web address: https://global.oup.com/us/companion.websites/9780199331864/stu/_supplement/, accessed on 05.10.2024.

¹³ Douglas WALTON, „*The Appeal to Ignorance, or Argumentum Ad Ignorantiam*”, Rev. Argumentation, Nr. 13, Ed. Kluwer Academic Publishers, Olanda, 1999, p. 368.

¹⁴ Alan BRINTON, „*Pathos and the „Appeal to Emotion”: An Aristotelian Analysis*”, Rev. History of Philosophy Quarterly, Vol. 5, No. 3 (Jul., 1988), Ed. University of Illinois Press, p. 207.

Argumentum ad nauseam (Appeal to repetition): This is used with the idea that a statement becomes credible simply by being repeated multiple times.

Argumentum ad novitatem (Appeal to novelty): This argues that something is correct or better simply because it is new or newer than something else. This type of argument is the opposite of argumentum ad antiquitatem.

Argumentum ad numerum (Appeal to numbers): This is based on the belief that the more people who support or believe an idea/statement, the more likely it is that the idea/statement is correct.

Argumentum ad populum (Appeal to the People/Mob): This is the attempt to gain the majority's agreement for a conclusion by stirring the emotions and enthusiasm of the crowd, rather than appealing to relevant facts.¹⁵

Argumentum ad verecundiam (Appeal to authority): This refers to appealing to an authority outside of their area of expertise. In the 1960s, American psychologist Stanley Milgram demonstrated through a psychological experiment¹⁶ the manipulative role of authority in obedience¹⁷.

Converse Accident (Hasty Generalization): This involves drawing general rules from a few exceptional cases.

Dicto Simpliciter (Sweeping generalization): Excessive generalization occurs when a general rule is applied to a

¹⁵ Paul HERRICK, *Think with Socrates...*

¹⁶ In the psychological experiment conducted by S. MILGRAM, the targeted individuals („guinea pigs“) were put in a situation where they were instructed to administer increasingly stronger electric shocks to another person (in reality, an actor) by the command of the experiment leader (who represented authority). The results showed that 65% of participants continued to apply shocks, even when they believed the victim was suffering, simply because they were told to do so. The experiment demonstrated the power of authority (of the one who seemingly assumes responsibility) and the tendency of people to follow orders, even when they conflict with their moral conscience, relying on what M. Scott Peck referred to as the „psychology of lying“.

¹⁷ Philippe BRETON, *Manipularea cuvântului...*, p. 73.

particular situation where the characteristics of that situation make the rule inappropriate. Sweeping generalization is the opposite of a hasty generalization.

Ignoratio Elenchi (Irrelevant conclusion): This refers to an argument that should prove one proposition but only succeeds in establishing another.

Tu Quoque (You too): This method seeks to dismiss an opponent's argument by attacking their personal behavior and actions as inconsistent with their argument, thus making them appear hypocritical.

Equivocation: This involves using the same word with two different meanings during the course of the argumentation process.

In manipulation, seduction, appeal to emotions or affectivity, and distortion of words from their original meaning can also be used. Similarly to advertising, manipulation utilizes repetition to form conditioned reflexes, known as „pavlovian reflexes”¹⁸, after the name of the person who highlighted them, Ivan P. PAVLOV.

As mentioned above, some of the most commonly used methods of manipulation in communication have negative consequences for the manipulated person, the manipulator, and society as a whole. These methods are deceptive, destroy interpersonal trust, and promote injustice.

6 Combating manipulation in communication through reference to the Word

If there is no longer a reference to the Word, to God, we lose the criteria for discerning good from evil. Manipulation in communication can be countered when the receiver is anchored on the path of good and can distinguish between good and evil. Discernment is the result of continuous progress on the path of

¹⁸ Ibidem, p. 99.

detachment from passions; it is the light that makes visible any attempt to deviate from the truth. You are manipulated only if you accept being manipulated, just as you can fall into the traps of influence if you take that influence.

By remaining rooted in the Word, individuals develop the capacity to recognize when communication veers away from truth and justice. The Word, being the ultimate standard of truth, allows one to see through the falsehoods of manipulation, offering a clear distinction between the genuine and the deceptive. Therefore, the key to combating manipulation lies not in rejecting communication itself, but in ensuring that the light of divine truth and wisdom constantly guides one's communication.

You cannot accept a lie as truth unless you resign yourself to what might be favorable, easy, or unaccounted for. It is convenient to blame the manipulator rather than take responsibility when we are manipulated. „He who has ears to hear, let him hear” (Luke 8:8), Christ encourages us. To hear the word of God, you must show yourself willing to receive it, not remain indifferent, waiting passively. You must realize its importance for your life and for the lives of those around you. „It is not possible, truly not possible, for the soul to not listen to God and not do what He commands, if its ears are open. A man listens to the earthly king and his leaders, and does what they command. So, will the soul not listen to God, who speaks to it, if it has a good hearing? Of course, it will! With all eagerness and sweetness, it listens and responds: 'My heart is ready, O God, my heart is ready' (Psalm 107:1)”¹⁹.

We mentioned above, among the forms of communication, that through prayer. The humble person, that is, the one who knows his limits and understands that only in connection with God can he rise to the position of a person, a communicative being who seeks communion and builds it in the relationship mediated by

¹⁹ Sfântul Ierarh TIHON din Zadonsk, *Comoară duhovnicească, din lume adunată*, Egumenița Publishing House, Galați, 2008, p. 84.

divinity with those like him, can discern what is good and what is not in dialogue with others. Prayer provides an opportunity for reflection, for examining one's own conscience, and for anchoring oneself in good. The willingness to receive the good word and make it bear fruit makes a person attentive to what is happening around him, granting him a state of active presence; in other words, it energizes him toward what is beneficial for him. The gift of speech can be valued if individuals relate to God, avoid lies or ambiguity in communication, and recognize that manipulation in communication is nothing other than a departure from the truth, an attempt to gain benefits through deception, and a form of isolation, of captivity.

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