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## The Word is the Knife: Janus-Faced Communication in Sartre's *No Exit* and Rose's *Twelve Angry Men*

In this article the authors offer an analysis of Jean-Paul Sartre's 1946 play *Huis Clos* (*No Exit*) and Reginald Rose's 1954 play *Twelve Angry Men*, with particular attention paid to exploring the insights from each theatrical text about communication. The process of communication may be ambivalent or Janus-faced, and one of the objectives of this analysis is to consider communication in terms of its duality and incisive power. In doing so, the aim is to explore its antithetical tensions by amplifying the mythological, deliberative and philosophical dimensions of communication praxis. In particular, the archetype of the knife provides a useful metaphor for understanding the potentials and pitfalls of communication in human interaction. Scott Haden Church is an Assistant Professor in the School of Communications at Brigham Young University. He has recently published in *Critical Studies in Media Communication*. Jesse King Jones is in the Masters Programme of the School of Communications at Brigham Young University.

*Key terms:* *pharmakon*, *mêtis*, mythology, Derrida.

THE HUMAN enterprise of speech is grounded in duality – in practice, it can be strikingly violent at times and banal at others. While it presents a process whereby humans can solve their problems, it simultaneously creates a host of others. Historically, the process of communication has positive and negative connotations related to sharing, making common, transmitting, even corrupting: many philosophies, dilemmas, and popular culture texts deal with communication, especially its failures.

Communication, then, may be considered as Janus-faced. Befitting this mythological moniker, one of the objectives of the following analysis is to consider the human act of communication in terms of its duality and incisive power. In this article we aim to explore this antithetical tension productively by amplifying the mythological, deliberative, and philosophical dimensions of communication praxis through its literary representation in two mid-century texts. The promise and peril of communication is represented in both through the metaphor of a knife. Further, this archetypal knife, robust in its sym-

bolic performative potential, may function as a critical tool for scholars of communication.

Communication was an especially salient topic in scholarly and popular discourses during and immediately following the First and Second World Wars. Its duality provocatively emerges through an analysis of the philosophical themes contained in two iconic performed texts from that era: the 1946 existentialist play *No Exit* (*Huis Clos*) by French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre and the 1954 teleplay *Twelve Angry Men* by American playwright Reginald Rose.

The analysis of these two plays, known for their philosophical rigour, is warranted here. Theatrical scripts and performances have long been mined for their insights into the process of communication. For example, in their influential text, *Pragmatics of Human Communication*, Paul Watzlawick, Janet B. Bavelas, and Don D. Jackson illustrated their systematic theory of interactive communication by demonstrating its tenets in the Edward Albee play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* – an exercise 'intended to give some life and specificity' to their theory'.<sup>1</sup>



Scene from the trailer of the film *Twelve Angry Men* (1957).

Like Albee, Sartre and Rose also provide compelling material for advancing insights into the practice of communication.

What makes these texts notable is a similar unifying premise, though each has a very different motivation and cultural genesis. On first reading both texts, certain similarities readily emerge: both are accounts of people who are sequestered in a small, claustrophobic space around others with whom they do not easily coexist. Likewise, the protagonists and antagonists argue with each other for much of the time. In essence, these two plays provide insight into the potentials and pitfalls of communication praxis; communication plays an outsized role for each narrative. Curiously, each play is also connected by *the knife*, an archetypal figure that performs a material and symbolic role in each play. The knife not only propels the plot forward, it stands as a nexus of meaning, incisively pinpointing the tensions manifested by communication in human interaction.

By placing these two texts in conjunction with each other, our objective is to discover their respective theoretical imperatives regarding communication praxis and to advance a theory about the utility of communication derived from the metaphor of the knife. We contend that these texts use philosophical and mythological concepts to shed light on the Janus-faced nature of the process of communication. The article will unfold in three parts: first, it will provide definitions of the essential mythological terms Janus, *pharmakon*, and *mêtis*. Second, it will give an overview of both plots and expound on the knife as a form of communication in each. In particular, it will advance the mythical metaphor of the word *as the knife*, with contribution from Jacques Derrida's philosophical construct of the *pharmakon* as well as Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant's *mêtis*. Finally, it will discuss the knife's potential as a critical tool for future scholarship in communication and performance studies.

## Janus

Mythology, modern signs and symbols derived from ancient narratives of gods and heroes are a resource for understanding human psychology, language, and culture. One of the relevant figures from Roman mythology, Janus, was the god of duality.<sup>2</sup> He represented the beginning and the end of all things, transitions, and time. Taken literally, he was often associated with gates, doorways, and passages, where his two-faced image was often displayed. Janus is traditionally depicted with two opposite-facing profiles, symbolizing his ability to see into the past and future. His status as a god provided him dominion over the abstract as well as the physical. Because of his important role, often before any other god, he was invoked at liturgies and at the beginning of each day, month, and year.

The expression *Janus-faced* strongly connotes a duality. In communication research, it is used as a trope for 'looking two ways at once'.<sup>3</sup> But beyond that basic definition is the idea that communication extends beyond the material as well as the abstract, and exists as movement between transitions and time. It can metaphorically sit in the past, directly in the present, or in the future. Likewise, communication can be a double-edged sword, a human process of interlocution, characterized by both violence and banality. However, the communicative connotations of Janus, while rich with potential, still need additional symbolic elements to create a productive tool to analyze communication praxis. These are some of the ideas explored here through the related mytho-philosophical elements of *pharmakon* and *mêtis*.

## Pharmakon

The *pharmakon*, though very similar to the concept of being Janus-faced, holds within it an extra, albeit optional, component of morality. Like something that is Janus-faced, the *pharmakon* is saturated by duality. In Plato's *Phaedrus*, the main character relates the legend of Theuth, the Egyptian god who

invented letters or *grammata*. Theuth approaches Thamus, the ruler, to propose how useful writing would be to the Egyptians. Writing, it seems, is an elixir (translated from *pharmakon*) for memory and wisdom, as it allows people the ability to record their thoughts. Thamus, however, considers writing detrimental because it creates a condition of dependence upon its users and detracts from memory.<sup>4</sup> Further, writing does not provide true wisdom; merely 'the conceit of wisdom'.<sup>5</sup> Media theorist Neil Postman saw this duality embedded in the *pharmakon* of writing: 'Every technology is both a burden and a blessing; not either-or but this-and-that.'<sup>6</sup> The *pharmakon* is simultaneously the sickness and the cure.

*Pharmakon* does not apply solely to writing or technology, nor does it hold the sole translation of 'elixir'. As a critical concept, it holds within it the duality this presented in *Phaedrus*: a tool simultaneously benign and detrimental, 'beneficent or maleficent'.<sup>7</sup> The *pharmakon* is a philosophical analogue to the mythical trickster. Conceptualized by Plato, but crystallized by Derrida, the *pharmakon* is fundamentally ambivalent.<sup>8</sup> In fact, its ontological status depends upon its oscillation between opposites:

If the *pharmakon* is 'ambivalent', it is because it constitutes the medium in which opposites are opposed, the movement and the play that links them among themselves, reverses them or makes one side cross over into the other . . . The *pharmakon* is the movement, the locus, and the play: (the production of) difference.<sup>9</sup>

Through its embrace of difference, the *pharmakon* can exist on its own merits even as it ostensibly contradicts itself. It is opposition somehow conflated into agreement, a rule that comes into existence only through its own negation. This logical disjunction still exists, however, because the *pharmakon* is without substance; rather, it is codified movement: 'The *pharmakon* has no ideal identity; it is aneidetic'.<sup>10</sup> As philosopher John Sallis explains: 'What is

perhaps most immediately striking about the *pharmakon* is its resistance to being essentially anything, its withdrawal from essential determination'.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to elixir, *pharmakon* has been translated variously as remedy, poison, and scapegoat, and thus exists in ambivalence. In his 'Plato's Pharmacy', Derrida deconstructs *pharmakon* through its toxicology-related translations: remedy and poison.<sup>12</sup> He states that because the term holds both translations and definitions, *pharmakon* exists in the middle of two opposites, such as the good and the bad and the true and the false. Like the liminal realm over which Janus presides, *pharmakon* also deals with movement and oscillation between two poles of meaning or existence; it is elusive. All that exists within the two poles, including the ends themselves, are *pharmakon*.

Derrida describes *pharmakon* as substance and anti-substance: 'which resists any philosopheme, indefinitely exceeding its bounds as non-identity, non-essence, non-substance; granting philosophy that very fact that inexhaustible adversity [literally, 'othersidedness'] of what constitutes it and the infinite absence of what dissolves it'.<sup>13</sup> Thus, because *pharmakon* cannot follow a distinct path, it is strongly signified by an element of unpredictability.

One example of this concept is synthetic drugs, which provide health benefits and simultaneously hold potential harmful side effects. The *pharmakon* cannot be attributed to either cause or effect, as it is present in all stages of action. It 'constitutes the original medium of that decision, the element that precedes it, comprehends it, goes beyond it, and can never be reduced to it'.<sup>14</sup>

Like the trickster, the *pharmakon* 'produces a play of appearances which enable it to pass for truth'.<sup>15</sup> The *pharmakon* is, in a sense, an abstract shape-shifter. But even so, after parsing out everything the *pharmakon* is and is not, Derrida concludes too that the *pharmakon* has no identity.<sup>16</sup> The *pharmakon* is essentially a 'resistance to essence' or 'withdrawal from essence'.<sup>17</sup>

## Mêtis

The final ancient concept, *mêtis*, originates from Metis, Zeus' first wife, who was known as the patroness of wisdom and cunning. When she became pregnant, Zeus feared that their offspring would be more powerful than he, so he subsequently swallowed Metis. In swallowing her, Zeus became *mêtis*, or both wisdom and cunning, which meant he would then be forewarned of future dangers and so of cunning plots against him or others. Thus, *mêtis* is a way of knowing that is not a product of precise calculation, but an intuitive, cultivated understanding that prevents or opposes the decision-making process. It is associated with its somatic use, a type of embodied intelligence; it is the ability to respond quickly, be it through insight, trickery, or deceit.

*Mêtis* is particularly shrewd because it 'always appears more or less below the surface, immersed as it were in practical operations which, even when they use it, show no concern to make its nature explicit'.<sup>18</sup> Because of its subterranean orientation, *mêtis* embraces chaos, moving freely and covertly. It does not find itself bound to stable locations or ideologies:

It operates by continuously oscillating between two opposite poles. It turns into their contraries objects that are not yet defined as stable, circumscribed, mutually exclusive concepts but which appear as powers in a situation of confrontation and which, depending on the outcome of the combat in which they are engaged, find themselves now in one position, as victors, and now in the opposite one, as vanquished.<sup>19</sup>

We read this construct as a cunning, corporeal characteristic. This extreme ambivalence also makes *mêtis* immune to the constraints of logic, having its cleverness rely on its embodied movement. *Mêtis* uses its clandestine properties to its advantage, which allows it to infiltrate the mythical narrative. Crucial to its connection to communication is the fact that *mêtis* is largely unrecognized due to its slippery ontology. *Mêtis*, like *pharmakon*, oscillates between two

poles, because the outcome or action upon *mêtis* cannot be determined before its occurrence. Possessing *mêtis* leads one to unstable and unpredictable outcomes analogous to the *pharmakon*. Thus, it becomes most useful as a tool for analyzing situations that defy simple classification. Plato and Aristotle describe this as the 'shortest way of reaching one's goal . . . obliquely by way of a detour'.<sup>20</sup>

In the following section, we will observe how the two texts of analysis, *No Exit* and *Twelve Angry Men*, use a knife to propel the narratives forward; the knife in each play is the embodiment of a trope with the same analytical power as the mythical concepts of Janus, *pharmakon*, and *mêtis*.

### The Word is the Knife

Taken together, *No Exit* and *Twelve Angry Men* portray communication to be a double-edged sword. This metaphor can be extended literally to one of the props that each text holds in common: the knife. In each allegorical representation of the power (or danger) of speech, the knife assumes the mythological role of the trickster. Ross Abbinnett specifically referred to the *pharmakon* as a medium, both poisonous and therapeutic, in relation to writing; like the *pharmakon*, the knife in *Twelve Angry Men* and *No Exit* is a symbol of the ambivalence of communication.<sup>21</sup>

Jean-Paul Sartre's play was published in English in 1946. Sartre spoke systematically about the composition and function of existentialism in other works,<sup>22</sup> defining it as a type of accountability: 'existentialism's first move is to make every man aware of what he is and to make the full responsibility of his existence rest on him'.<sup>23</sup> This idea is certainly expressed in *No Exit*, where the characters are made painfully aware of their personal responsibilities for their respective existences. In this particular text, his existentialist objectives are fulfilled by creating a space where three people are 'ironically walled in toward existence'.<sup>2</sup>

The basic premise of the story is as

follows: three strangers – Garcin, Inez, and Estelle – are trapped in a locked room with each other. It soon becomes apparent that the room is an allegory for hell, as the dialogue between Garcin and the Valet suggests when they first enter the room: 'Where are the instruments of torture? . . . the racks and red-hot pincers and all the other paraphernalia?'<sup>25</sup> But the torture is something far more ordinary: Inez determines correctly that 'each of us will act as torturer of the two others'.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, their eternal coexistence and subsequent psychological torture is gauged by the characters to be far worse than physical torture.

Perhaps the most important line of the play is also its pithiest, uttered by Garcin in the waning moments: 'Hell – is other people!'<sup>27</sup> Directly thereafter, Estelle tries to persuade Garcin to make love, but Garcin denies her, saying he cannot when Inez is watching. Promptly, Estelle picks up a paper knife, rushes toward Inez, and stabs her several times. Inez just laughs and says: 'But, you crazy creature, what do you think you're doing? You know quite well I'm dead'.<sup>28</sup> Estelle appears surprised and drops the knife. Inez picks it up and begins to stab herself with it while crying, 'Dead! Dead! Dead! Knives, poison, ropes – all useless. It has happened already, do you understand? Once and for all. So here we are, forever.' Bitterly, they begin to laugh, and Estelle reflects, 'How funny! Forever!'<sup>29</sup>

Published in 1954, *Twelve Angry Men* relates a poignant story of twelve jurors who are sequestered in a small room to deliberate the fate of a young man who had allegedly stabbed his father. Initially, eleven of the jurors are willing to judge the boy to be guilty of the act, due to the apparently damning evidence against him. However, Juror 8 thoughtfully states that he does not know if the boy is guilty; he has a reasonable doubt. As in *No Exit*, the room is hot and stuffy, the fan is broken – it is among the hottest days of the year – and the jurors are sequestered there by a polite guard waiting outside the room.

When Juror 8 disagrees with the other jurors, his opinions are initially met with much resistance. It appears that the others want to condemn the alleged killer because it will facilitate a quick and easy resolution to the trial; they have been watching the proceedings for six days and some of them are clearly ready for the trial to end. It becomes apparent throughout the play that Juror 8 does not necessarily believe that the boy is innocent, but wishes to prevent groupthink from occurring. Moreover, he strongly believes in the power of language: 'it's not easy for me to raise my hand and send a boy off to die without talking about it first'.<sup>30</sup>

Toward the end of Act I, the guard brings in the knife that was used to kill the father. Juror 4 dramatically flips open the knife and, jamming it into the table, states that it could be no coincidence for someone to have such a unique knife and then use it to stab the young man's father. Disagreeing adamantly, Juror 8 flips open a knife and jams it into the table next to the first knife. To the surprise of the others in the room, the knives are identical. Through his humble yet persuasive arguments, coupled with this dramatic event, Juror 8 is able systematically to put into doubt all of the evidence that has been brought against the defendant. As his argument progresses, other jurors are able to strengthen his appeal to deliberation by bringing additional doubt to the case. Eventually, every juror changes his mind and votes 'Not Guilty'.

## The Knife

In both works, the knife is emblematic of the dualistic nature of communication and performs a critical role in each, demanding the attention of the audience. Still, its meaning is polysemic, mirroring the essence of the *pharmakon* and is initiated by and produces *mêtis*.

In *Twelve Angry Men*, the prominent role of the knife is illustrated by its frequent appearance. It is mentioned forty-four times in Rose's teleplay. The knife is a fundamentally ambivalent *pharmakon* in that

it is both a representation of guilt (the poison) and the key to innocence (the remedy). Although the unique appearance of the knife first appears to be a sign of the young man's guilt, Juror 8 shows that the one he had purchased has the same markings, thus suggesting that the young man's knife was not unique, after all. The knife furthers the Janus effect through its dual function as both a liberator and a condemner: the juror from the slums uses the positioning of the knife wound to suggest the boy's innocence, and later, Juror 3 tries to use the knife to condemn Juror 8 to injury or death, as he points it threateningly at Juror 8's chest. Thus, the knife is a concrete instance of the abstract process of oscillation between two opposite poles.

The paper knife in *No Exit* performs a similar oscillatory function – in this case, between life and death. During a critical moment, Estelle uses the knife to try to stab Inez and escape the torturous confines of the room. However, rather than liberating her by mercifully ending her life, the knife condemns her further, reminding her that her existence is no longer bound by the confines of mortal life: she truly will be trapped in her hellish existence forever. The knife functions as a reminder to all those in the room of the power of speech. In this way, the incisive power of speech exceeds the immediate danger of the knife. The Janus-faced communication has no confines of time, no end point. Rather, it is continually moving towards an indeterminate conclusion.

The knife is also the trickster, the object that mediates boundaries between life and death, guilt and innocence, and condemnation and liberation.<sup>31</sup> A mythological figure, the trickster-as-mediator forces the participants in the myth to decide between two opposing choices.<sup>32</sup> The pairing of opposites in the narrative context of both plays is the distinction between life and death: the knife mediates both. Language and deliberation also assume the trickster's role. Extending the knife metaphor to the performance of communication, the paired opposites are either cooperation or obstruction. Communication joyously and

mischievously oscillates between both possibilities, waiting to be used for either outcome.

### The Knife as Guilt/Imprisonment and Innocence/Freedom

In both texts, the knife simultaneously represents the characters' freedom and incarceration.<sup>33</sup> The context for Sartre's play provides insight into this duality. *No Exit* was created from the ideological perspective of the mid-century French intellectual and 'evolved out of the 'cyclone of 1940': defeat, treachery, occupation, collaboration, resistance – these are the circumstances which enveloped Sartre'.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, its proximity to the war may account for what could be called the nihilistic tendencies inherent in the text.

While the characters in *Twelve Angry Men* are generally portrayed as guilty until proven innocent (or at least with cause for

reasonable doubt), the characters in *No Exit* are generally innocent until proven guilty. Sartre initially presented their innocence by withholding the information leading to their condemnation, only revealing it later. Early on, it is clear that Garcin, for example, is a pacifist and a gentleman, while Estelle pleasantly chats about the banality of the room. Inez is the exception, appearing guilty in relation to her punishment from the beginning, and she repeatedly reminds the others of this fact. Even as Inez doggedly insists on their culpability, the other two maintain the façade of their innocence until their omniscient visions provoke confessions that indicate otherwise. Ultimately, the narrative is relatively consistent with Sartre's existential philosophies: '[Sartre is] apparently pessimistic in [his] emphasis on the pain and disillusion, the grief and despair of existence; yet [he rejects] death as a choice for man and deliberately [commits



Henry Fonda and Lee J. Cobb in a scene from the trailer of the film *Twelve Angry Men* (1957).

his] heroes to live on.’<sup>35</sup> This summing up is also consonant with the social situation under France’s occupation and the subsequent disillusionment of many of the country’s people. The purpose, then, of the knife in this context is to bring Garcin, Estelle, and Inez to the realization that if life was hell, death will be so too. Nothing of which they are capable will free them from other people, who embody hell. Although Estelle wields the knife as a tool of murder, her fate makes the knife a tool of never-ending life.

The characters are all portrayed as self-interested sadists. Sartre focuses the text on the ‘search and destroy’ technique used by each character to injure the others psychologically through language. In a broader perspective, this pessimistic portrayal is necessary for Sartre to justify his famous argument that ‘hell is other people.’ Because the individuals are dead, they are no longer the authors of their own lives, and thus, hell is living with others who define their lives.

Immediately after Garcin makes his declaration that hell is other people, Sartre introduces the knife. The knife was mentioned in passing, and while its presence is acknowledged no one uses it. Then finally, at the end of the play, Estelle uses the knife to try and kill Inez. But Inez – *mêtis* personified – takes the knife, stabbing herself, knowing it will do her no harm; they realize that there can be no death within death. The knife-as-trickster does not produce the death that Estelle intended. Instead it produces within her and the others a far graver consequence – the realization of death.

As a communicative tool, the knife acts as a medium for interaction between the *mêtis* and the *pharmakon* – cunning, intelligence, and ambivalence – which, in this case, would be life and death or freedom and imprisonment. Not the *acknowledgement* of, but the *use* of the knife has heightened the three individuals’ awareness.

This same idea is also viable for *Twelve Angry Men*. In contrast to the initial innocence of Sartre’s characters, the young man in Rose’s play is presented as a guilty hoodlum

from the beginning. The knife in evidence, presented by Juror 4, symbolizes guilt and pending imprisonment, while the knife presented by Juror 8 represents the young man’s innocence and possibility for freedom. It was the *mêtis* of Juror 8 that created a possibility for the other jurors – already convinced of the young man’s guilt – essentially to exonerate him. The knife is a catalyst for tipping the scales. After Juror 8 presents an identical knife, the remaining jurors vote on whether they think the young man is guilty. One strays from the majority opinion and votes ‘Not Guilty’. From there, eventually all jurors change their votes to ‘Not Guilty’. The knife, as *pharmakon*, has the power either to condemn or to liberate the accused young man.

Here too, the knife is used as a communicative tool, to communicate an opposing opinion. Before Juror 8 presents the identical knife, he provides a hypothetical situation, saying that it was ‘the boy lost the knife and that someone else stabbed his father with a similar knife. It’s possible’.<sup>36</sup> At this point, Juror 8 does not yet show the identical knife he has bought near the accused’s house. He waits until Juror 4 jams the knife in evidence into the table, lets him argue that it is one of a kind, and badgers him by again saying, ‘I’m not trying to make anyone accept it. I’m just saying it’s possible’.<sup>37</sup> Thus, Juror 8’s *mêtis* releases the *pharmakon* of the knife, but this only came to pass when the knife was put into action, so to speak, by the *mêtis*. While in *No Exit* the ostensible innocence of the characters is *destroyed* by the use of the knife – as a harbinger of destruction and condemnation – for Rose it is the key to truth and liberation.

These analyses suggest the importance of the knife’s role in communication. Another important role of the knife within communication is its ability to insert itself within and deliberation.

### The Knife as Means of Deliberation

In 1957, *Twelve Angry Men* was adapted for film and, due to its prominence, it has been the object of multiple academic interp-





Scene from the play *No Exit* by Jean-Paul Sartre (Sarahszloboda/CC SA 3.0).

relations. Its cinematic analysis also applies to the play on which it was based. One critic, Walter Jost, provided an in-depth analysis, offering several different meanings related directly to American culture in the middle of the twentieth century:

The film performs in part as political allegory in which the judicial institution of a free democracy is itself put on trial and found not guilty – not, again, because it is innocent . . . but because, let us say, it is found to be naïve as an institution, acquitted this time of the mindless conformism of the 1950s.<sup>38</sup>

Several critics noted that the play was written directly after the peak of McCarthyism and its pressures of demanding conformity. This is a requisite cultural condition of one of the important messages of the film and, consequently, of the play. Indeed, Juror 3

speaks often only of using the ‘facts’ (as opposed to personal opinions) to make his decision. His rhetoric almost directly parallels the historical discourse of Joseph McCarthy.

Other critics pointed out that the film reinforced American democratic ideals; only in a true democracy is the power of reasoned deliberation evident. Juror 11, a refugee from Europe, reinforces these democratic ideals late in the play: ‘We have a responsibility. This is a remarkable thing about democracy . . . We have nothing to gain or lose by our verdict. This is one of the reasons we are strong. We should not make it a personal thing.’<sup>39</sup>

This statement reveals one of the play’s key themes: deliberation is an integral part of a functioning democracy. Speaking as the lone foreigner in the room, he is able to use

his difference to offer an outside perspective on the democratic ideal. Similarly, the knife punctuates critical moments of deliberation. When Juror 8 stabs his knife into the table, the act provokes a stunned silence among the participants. Not only does the knife symbolize the *pharmakon*, nor is it solely a Janus-faced paradigm for conversation, it also produces a heightened form of *mêtis*-infused outcome. It epitomizes verbal bedlam and, simultaneously, an absence of verbal communication. The knife is the medium for *mêtis* and *pharmakon* colliding. Jurors gasp, they all fix their gaze on the knife, and silence persists until Juror 3 asks in a staggered tone, 'What are you trying to do?' The spell is broken as Juror 10 says loudly, 'Yeah, what is this? Who do you think you are?', followed by Juror 5 who exclaims the obvious: 'Look at it! It's the same knife!'<sup>40</sup> In taking centre stage, the inanimate knife has the power of communication – to assuage, to incite outrage, and to plant confusion. Yet, crucially, the knife's provocation leads to the boy's assumed exoneration.

Sartre also addresses the issue of deliberation, although the text focuses on the power of communication to drive people mad through its sheer banality. Throughout the play, the three characters converse but are relentlessly irritated with each other. Their shared communication does not provide clarity or epiphany; rather, it is a means for torture. The knife breaks up the tyranny of communication. After Estelle attempts to stab Inez, and then Inez stabs herself, they all proceed to laugh. When silence eventually replaces the laughter, Garcin says, 'Well, let's get on with it.'<sup>41</sup> Here, the knife represents the dichotomy between silence and noise, jointly resisting the oppressive power of communication.

### The Cutting Power of Communication

In conclusion, a comparative analysis of these mid-century plays allows some insight into the Janus-faced properties of communication. The plays also introduce the metaphor of the knife for identifying puncta

in communicative interaction. By the same token, the knife is a material analogue for a powerful idea. It represents the duality of communication and, at the same time, a multiplicity of outcomes, one of which comes to fruition based on the speaker's intent or *mêtis*. When the knife functions as communication, it instigates a moment of reckoning for the interlocutors. Thus, the power of the knife extends beyond dual meanings. Like the cunning of the *mêtis* and the potency of the *pharmakon*, the knife may lead to greater, all-encompassing knowledge, insight, or conclusion.

In everyday interactions, the knife is the metaphorical catalyst for disrupting ineffectual communication. It interrupts ongoing conversations; it 'slices' the conversation in half and forces individuals to think rather than endlessly cycle through unproductive argument. The knife pinpoints the discursive 'aesthetic moment' that precedes silence and instigates deeper-level thought.<sup>42</sup> However, in contrast to the order that often accompanies the epiphany, the knife channels chaos towards productive ends. The knife represents the oscillatory moment that takes place in communication in which interlocutors forgo the sense-making process that follows verbal communication and shift, instead, to what is not being spoken. The process of speaking – or *not* speaking, as the case may be – can deconstruct and inspire 'atom cracking' more efficiently than a knife.<sup>43</sup> In other words, the knife can be employed as a productive tool for criticism within communication.

Considering the process of how communication can mirror the dual functions of a knife enriches and illuminates understanding of how to relate to others through speech. Communication propels lived experience forward, usually either towards cooperation or stonewalling. Communication is powerful because it is taken for granted by those who use it, seeing it merely as a tool for transmitting information. However, 'communication in its broadest sense [is] not merely the purveying of information, [it is] the sharing

of sympathies and purposes, the doing of acts in common, as with the levelling process of the communication vessels'.<sup>44</sup> Thus, when communication is recognized as a process that has equal parts of symbolic meaning and material energy, its potential as a transformative agent can be realized. If meaningful communication is perceived as something worth fighting for, its usage becomes liberating. Where there is a failure in communication, individuals should try to understand and explain why it happened. Like a knife, communication can cut through the strings that bind relationships together, or it can cut through the frivolities of ideology and perception to render the heart open and ready for the sutures necessary for insight and healing.

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4. Gerasimos Kakoliris, 'The "Undecidable" Pharmakon: Derrida's Reading of Plato's Phaedrus'. in Burt Hopkins and John Drummond, eds., *The New Yearbook for Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), p. 223–34.
5. Plato, *Plato's Phaedrus*, trans. Reginald Hackforth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952), p. 157.
6. Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Vintage, 1992), p. 152.
7. Jacques Derrida, 'Plato's Pharmacy', in Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, eds., *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, 2nd ed. (Malden: Blackwell, 1998), p. 429.
8. Patrick McCarthy-Nielsen, 'Education as Pharmakon: Plato and Derrida's Dialectic on Learning', *Philosophy of Education* (2015), p. 152–8. Some would say not crystallized but made more nebulous by Derrida.
9. 'Plato's Pharmacy', *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, p. 443.

10. Ibid.
11. John Sallis, *The Verge of Philosophy* (University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 74.
12. Derrida, 'Plato's Pharmacy', *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, p. 436.
13. Ibid., p. 429.
14. Ibid., p. 98–9.
15. Ibid., p. 437.
16. Ibid., p. 429.
17. Sallis, *The Verge of Philosophy*, p. 74.
18. Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society*, translated by Janet Lloyd (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 3.
19. Ibid., p. 5.
20. Hugo Letiche and Matt Statler, 'Evoking Metis: Questioning the Logics of Change, Responsiveness, Meaning and Action in Organizations', *Culture and Organization*, vol. 11, no. 1 (2005), p. 4.
21. Ross Abbinnett, 'The Politics of Spirit in Stiegler's Techno-pharmacology', *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 32, no. 4 (2015), p. 65.
22. Simone de Beauvoir, 'Existentialist Theatre', in Margaret A. Simons and Marybeth Timmermann, eds., *'Useless Mouths' and Other Literary Writings* (University of Illinois Press, 2011), p. 125–50.
23. Sartre quoted in Ernst Loeb, 'Sartre's *No Exit* and Brecht's *The Good Woman of Setzuan*: A Comparison', *Modern Language Quarterly*, vol. 22 (1961), p. 283.
24. Karl S. Weimar, 'No Entry, No Exit: A Study of Borchert with Some Notes on Sartre', *Modern Language Quarterly*, vol. 17 (1956), p. 153.
25. Jean-Paul Sartre, *No Exit and Three Other Plays* (New York: Vintage Books, 1960), p. 4.
26. Ibid., p. 18.
27. Ibid., p. 47.
28. Ibid., p. 26.
29. Ibid.
30. Reginald Rose, *Twelve Angry Men: A Play in Three Acts* (Chicago: The Dramatic Publishing Company, 1983), p. 15.
31. The association between the knife and the trickster has appeared elsewhere. Joseph Campbell's book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* contains the following anecdote from Western Africa about a trickster-type divine figure who was walking along a path between two fields: 'He beheld in either field a farmer at work and proposed to play the two a turn. He donned a hat that was on the one side red but on the other white, green before and black behind . . . so that when the two friendly farmers had gone home to their village and the one had said to the other, "Did you see that old fellow go by today in the white hat?" the other replied, "Why, the hat was red." To which the first retorted, "It was not; it was white," "But it was red," insisted the friend, "I saw it with my own two eyes." "Well, you must be blind," declared the first. "You must be drunk," rejoined the other. And so the argument developed and the two came to blows. [Then] they began to knife each other . . . the old trickster revealed himself, made known his prank, and showed the hat. "The two could not help but quarrel," he said. "I wanted it that way. Spreading strife is my greatest joy".' Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 41–2.
32. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf (New York: Basic Books, 1963), p. 224.

33. Konstantin Kolenda, *Philosophy in Literature: Metaphysical Darkness and Ethical Light* (Macmillan, 1982).
34. Karl S. Weimar, 'No Entry, No Exit: A Study of Borchert with Some Notes on Sartre', *Modern Language Quarterly*, vol. 17 (1956) p. 154.
35. *Ibid.*
36. Rose, *Twelve Angry Men: A Play in Three Acts*, p. 23.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
38. Walter Jost, 'Sweating the Little Things in Sidney Lumet's *Twelve Angry Men*', in Michael J. Hyde, ed., *The Ethos of Rhetoric* (University of South Carolina Press, 2004), p. 77.
39. Rose, *Twelve Angry Men: A Play in Three Acts*, p. 44-5.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
41. Sartre, *No Exit and Three Other Plays*, p. 27.
42. Leslie A. Baxter, 'Relationships as Dialogues"', *Personal Relationships*, vol. 11 (2004), p. 12.
43. See Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose*, 3rd ed. (University of California Press, 1984), p. 308.
44. *Ibid.*, p. 250.