RELATIVISM, RELIGION, AND RELATIONAL BEING

Kenneth J. Gergen

There was a time of my life in which, by common standards, I was deeply religious. My parents were fully agnostic, my father a mathematician and mother recoiling from the repression of zealous parents. In my household, issues of the spirit occupied no conversational space. However, at the age of ten my closest friends at school asked me to join them at church. I did, and found myself overwhelmed at the wondrous world that opened to me. The following year I was born again. Wasn't one birth sufficient, my parents asked? My religious enthusiasm was sustained for six more years, during which time I took Bible courses by mail, attended prayer meetings, developed religious services at school, and solicited for Christ door to door.

There was also a time of my life in which I was deeply modernist. The world changed for me as I left the South and entered Yale. A philosophy professor ripped to shreds my freshman attempt at a proof of God. My science courses contrasted the progress achieved by a materialist ontology with the futility of spiritual mythology. And in leisure hours, it was no longer the spirit of the heart that occupied my friends, but the spirits in the bottle. I departed Yale four years later committed to the career of a behavioral scientist, feeling I could best serve humanity through systematic research into human behavior.

And then, there is the present time, in which by some standards I might

be regarded (oxymoronically) as deeply relativist. Entrance to this new world seemed benign enough: in my leisure time, I gathered gnawing doubts about my experimental pursuits and ultimately published an article proposing that the behavioral sciences were not by nature cumulative. I ventured, further, that our theories and methods were saturated with unfounded beliefs and political values, and when disseminated, altered the phenomena under study. The article proved to be a bombshell, and I was suddenly embroiled in intense controversy.[1] In defense, I sought new companions; and with these, new intellectual routes opened. These routes to relativism, as some might describe them, will be familiar to most readers of this journal. They were to be found in the lively dialogues in critical theory, postfoundationalist philosophy, literary theory, rhetorical studies, and social studies of science.

These changes in life trajectory were fraught with personal conflict, a conflict that reflected larger institutional and cultural ones. The sciences, as the crowning achievement of the Enlightenment, had long waged war on the forces of "medievalism," and most specifically on the oppression resulting from despotic claims to clairvoyant truth. From Galileo to the Scopes trial, the victories of science over religion have been credited as triumphs of reason, objectivity, and democracy. I have sometimes espoused such arguments myself. The religious have responded, in turn, that cultural modernism has brought with it rampant materialism, an instrumental view of human relations, and the exploitation of the environment. Moreover, this argument goes, the sciences, in abandoning the realm of the sacred, have abandoned concern with the nature of the good. In the sciences' myopic focus on what "is," the crucial issues of "ought" have been hung out to dry. Such arguments have also leaped from my lips.

And now the relativist rogue begins to speak. Aren't there important similarities in religious and scientific orders? Where science made claims to freedom of thought, its institutions are effectively no less dogmatic than those they repudiate. Science rejects all forms of intelligibility that are not scientific. In creating their various realms of the subaltern, both science and religion embrace a rhetoric of exclusion. The epithets of "evil," "infidel," and "unclean" in the religious realm are matched in the scientific by "illogical," "subjective," and "fanciful." Both religion and science deploy "truth" as a suppressive device. And in their attempts at universal hegemony, both have succeeded in creating an ethos of antagonism subsuming, more or less, all of us. It is not simply a battle of the modern and premodern that is at stake. The antipathy and cutthroat competition that one finds among competing departments of science is writ lethally and large in the antagonisms among many world religions. In our present situation, science sup-

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1. Kenneth Gergen, "Social Psychology as History," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 26.2 (May 1973): 309–20. This article is sometimes said to have set off what is called "the crisis in social psychology"; more certainly it set off a crisis for its author.

plies increasingly sophisticated weaponry for the religious ever more efficiently to eliminate each other, along with the modernist culture in which the institution of science was spawned. We now confront the potential for global catastrophe in the name of unwarranted and unsupportable claims to foundational truth.

Arguments such as mine—often dubbed postmodern—have not gone unnoticed in religious and scientific enclaves. Both have responded in predictably hostile ways. Postmodern critics are the new kids on the chopping block. Perhaps the chief form of attack has centered on what traditionalists portray as the "dangerous slide into relativism," our slide into a realm where "anything goes" and no claims to reason, fact, or moral principle are commanding—indeed, where any such claims are deemed suppressive, ridiculous, or both. For the religious, the danger perceived is often that of *moral* relativism, while for scientists it is most frequently the *ontological* variety. These are not trivial matters for those of us most closely involved. A luncheon companion bolted from our table in midmeal, as he condemned me for having no grounds to resist Nazi brutality. A scientific colleague incited a room of conferees to laughter when he concluded that, as a relativist, I must believe that I could exit the room by walking through a wall.

Traveling these turgid waters, I find few instances in which foundationalists can be moved by arguments illuminating the historically and culturally constructed character of their claims. Even when it is clear that relativist arguments are not intent on disrupting foundationalist traditions (but rather, on understanding them in a more inclusive context), the response is tepid. To replace "our God" with "god as we understand god in our culture," or "is true" with "is true in the context of what we are doing here," or "is moral" with "conforms to our deeply felt protocols of morality," is understood as threatening. The basis for worship (in the first case), scientific experiment (in the second), or institutions of justice (in the third) is understood as threatened. Whether or not the perception of threat is valid, one cannot fault traditionalists for resenting the rhetoric. Moreover, foundationalists have one powerful counterargument. Even those who acknowledge that no sane relativist is proposing that all theologies, all truth claims, or all moral systems are equal—even these fair-minded critics can with justification complain that relativists in practice offer no guiding visions for the future. In the context of volatile global conflict, mere arguments for tolerance, ambivalence, irony, and the commensuration of opposed milieus do little good. It is from a fundamental sense of "ought" that both direction and desire are fueled; and without direction and desire, the antirelativist may well assert, we move fecklessly into the future.

This seeming impasse is my subject here. First, I would like to suggest a shift in the terrain of intellectual conflict. Foundationalists and relativists all argue from some circumscribed array of premises, cling to certain visions of the good, are committed to relationships within particular traditions—and, under these conditions, we may anticipate a continuation of conflicts that are of centuries' duration. Still, all parties concerned agree that moral pluralism is our

global condition; that we lack a mutually sustaining understanding of the real, the rational, and the good; and finally that, with the democratization of weaponry, these schisms are increasingly perilous to the world's peoples. My suggestion is that we consider ways of framing our condition—call them, discursive imaginaries—that could allow for mutually acceptable action. These imaginaries would not need to be in any way grounded or defended. The challenge would be to construct scenarios that could support a common desire to pursue viable futures.

Family therapists often employ discursive imaginaries when violent marital conflicts are at issue. Rather than determining which of the parties is at fault, which one is potentially pathological, the therapist collaborates with the couple, as a couple, to locate workable vocabularies. One common technique is to "externalize the problem," which means to reconstruct the problem as a common object about which they both may deliberate (and they are also free to resist). Rather than dwell on individual failings, they may come to speak of "the conflict" that is ruining *our* relationship and about which *we* must do something. In effect, new forms of action may be enabled, however ponderously, by a new form of talk—one that shifts the angle of attention.

I intend to suggest discursive imaginaries for articulating our common condition. With no attempt to be accurate or objective, these ways of speaking disregard the presumption of boundaries between entities (entities of whatever kind) and entertain instead a sense of their mutual constitution. This talk of "relational being" will extend to consideration of moralities in conflict and, eventually, comprise implications for action. The schism between foundationalists and postfoundationalists in the academy is, in a sense, a microcosm of far more lethal conflicts. I will begin inside our protected reserve of civility and move outward toward regions in which no protection can be found. Negotiating that transition successfully would make a consequential first step.

The Genesis of Meaning: A Relational Imaginary

We may begin with the common assumption that we live in a world in which there are numerous discursive traditions. Thus, in proposing that "Muhammad is not the founder of the Muslim religion," that "string theory demands that we think in terms of ten space-time dimensions," or that "better novels are open to a broader array of interpretations," one is drawing from different traditions or genres of speech. The subject of debates about relativism is, typically, the source of the language at issue—whether divine inspiration, reason, observation, or text. Let us set aside for now the matter of source to focus on the intelligibility of these various proposals. How do they come into meaning? At the outset, we find that none of the utterances carry meaning in themselves. If you were to state such propositions in Chinese or Russian—languages I do not read or speak—the propositions would be opaque to me. They would exist as sounds, but I would not

thereby be stimulated to discuss Islam, cosmology, or Roland Barthes. Still, the lack of "utterance meaning" pertains as well when we do share a language. For example, I may disagree with any of your proposals, in which case I have treated your utterance as "fallacious." I may say that your motive is to persuade, in which case I have reduced your words to "mere rhetoric." I may remark that you have said what I have always said, in which case I have treated your words as copies. Each of the numerous ways in which I may respond will attribute or lend to your utterance a specific kind of meaning. The utterance has no commanding presence in itself. Its meaning is revealed only in the manner of my response—in the coordination between my response and your utterance.

Still, we should not conclude that I create your meaning. For my responses are not in themselves meaningful or, rather, they are not full of meaning ready for transfer. Absent the utterance of your proposals, my seeming acts of disagreement lapse into nonsense. If you had said nothing, I could not sensibly announce, "you are wrong." Likewise, without your proposals I cannot comment on your motives or show that your words are copies. Absent your initiative, I am mute. Further, because we are participants in conversational traditions, our ability to speak meaningfully depends on compliance with the relevant rituals of conversation that precede us both. I may disagree with, reconstruct, or appropriate your proposals but not, in that context, tell you about my failing tomato plants or arthritic rotator cuff. I may be capable of responding in these ways physically, but in doing so I would exit the corridors of meaning. In order for me to become meaningful, not only do I require your utterance, but as well an already existing tradition of coordination between your utterances and my responses.

The debt of my authorship to relationship is not exhausted at this point. For whatever the form of my response to you, I now take my place in the role that you previously occupied. My attempts to disagree, reconstruct, or absorb remain empty until you invest them with meaning. You may argue with me, in which case you affirm that I was disagreeing with you. But you may also inform me that my disagreement is based on my failure to understand, on my ignorance; in which case you may disregard what I have said and continue to elaborate your proposal as though I have said nothing. Once spoken, the meaning of my utterance is not in my control. And once you have responded, you likewise cease to own your utterances. We can see from this account why rational argumentation so seldom yields a victor. Adversaries are not in command of their own reasons.

Words—even words like "the individual mind"—gain their significance through a continuous process of reciprocation.[2] Nor is the process of generat-

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2. Here we can also discover an answer to those who find fault with relativism for its inability to account for cross-cultural understanding. That critique is lodged in a view of understanding as a mental process that is prior to public speech. In the present imaginary, the very concept of mind is a construction emerging from relational processes. Meaning lies in the coordination, thus enabling communication to occur not only between disparate cultures but between humans and dogs, horses and birds.

ing meaning confined to linguistic collaboration: coordination will often involve bodily movements, postures, and gestures that sometimes can be more significant than verbalization. Further, in the same way that coordination in the use of words brings them into meaning, so the objects with which we surround ourselves are brought into significance. This "cup" becomes a vessel for drinking tea; this "clock," a device for coordinating action. Meaning issues from the forms of life in which we collectively engage.[3] All that we take to be significant, sacred, objectively true, or worthy of commitment comes into being through this process.

I will not expand on the implications of this relational account for theories of communicative action: my analysis here will bracket the perennial problems inherent in the dualistic view that places meaning within the minds of speakers or authors.[4] Nor do I wish to explore in this context the critical implications for Western individualism or the equally problematic primacy of the community. Forms of resistance to my account that arise from these sources are of less concern to me than those that arise out of unyielding commitments to something—anything—prior to our present conversation. The question of what sets the wheels of intelligibility in motion is one that I will entertain. Whether it is the voice of God, privileged experience, intuition, systematic observation, or simple self-evidence, many believe there to be an irrefutable source of our intelligibility. Of course, when one enters an imaginary space such as the one I am proposing, it is not essential to treat such questions. As we might respond to a poem or an aria, we might simply enjoy a world of coexisting expressions. However, in this particular case, a reply may serve to strengthen the intelligibility now at stake.

Let us, then, accept the proposal that *something* exists for us prior to our communicative coordination and that it is to this something that coordination is a response. Even granting the premise, it is not obvious how our responses are to be fashioned. How are we to make this something intelligible, and how should we coordinate our actions such that we are responsive to its character? There is nothing about this something that compels us to speak of it in Russian or a sign language, a computer language or in mathematical expressions; for that matter, we could yodel wordlessly or dance. The choice of language would seem to be at our option. If so, then the genre we select within the language we choose should be optional as well. There is nothing about this something demanding that we speak in a spiritual discourse as opposed to a materialistic, aesthetic, or phenomenological argot. Further, as we employ a discourse in which we are proficient, our renderings will be circumscribed accordingly. If my tradition is religious, I might worship the putative something; if I am a scientist, I might try to dissect it. A hermeneuticist might write on how *others* have written about it.

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3. Here I am paraphrasing Wittgenstein, of course, but sentiments not dissimilar may be found in texts of Bakhtin, Derrida, and many more recent thinkers.

4. For more on these implications, see chap. 11 of my book *Realities and Relations: Soundings in Social Construction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

If there is no tradition of articulation uniquely suited to characterize this prelinguistic something—if there is no more reason to worship than to dissect—then in order to "get it right," to say accurate things about it, we require another lens of intelligibility, a metalens, through which to make this determination. Another way to put this point might be: the ultimate is beyond accurate representation. If so, then what is the good of struggling over ultimates? We would not tussle over whether the cosmos was expressed more accurately by a symphony, an opera, or a piano solo. We do not fortify the languages of music with armaments called truth, reason, and reality. If such rhetorical devices, recognizing their more general inapplicability, were set aside, the scientific and the discursive would be mutually unthreatening and commensurable. And conceivably—though we do not know, not having tried it—the free lamination of traditions might produce richer registers of existence. We now think in terms of the dilution of traditions and discourses. We might find that greater density and complexity makes them more profound.

I will return to these arguments later, but now I must return to the sketch of relational being that I have interrupted. If we animate this imaginary in the context of moral pluralism, what new spaces of dialogue and action might be opened? If it is neither individual action nor social interaction from which human intelligibility emerges, but rather a process of co-action, what are the implications in the context of multiple, incommensurable, and conflicting visions of the good?

Our first task is to inquire into the origins of good and evil.

First-Order Morality: Essential Enmity

We commonly suppose that suffering is caused by people whose conscience is flawed or who pursue their aims without regard for the consequences to others. From a relational standpoint, we may entertain the opposite hypothesis: *in important respects we suffer from a plenitude of good.* How so? If relationships—linguistic coordination—are the source of meaning, then they are the source as well of our presumptions about good and evil. Rudimentary understandings of right versus wrong are essential to sustaining patterns of coordination. Deviations from accepted patterns constitute a threat. When we have developed harmonious ways of relating—of speaking and acting—we place a value on "this way of life." Whatever encroaches upon, undermines, or destroys this way of life becomes an evil. It is not surprising, then, that the term *ethics* is derived from the Greek *ethos*, the customs of the people; or that the term *morality* draws on the Latin root *mos* or *mores*, thus affiliating morality with custom. *Is* and *ought* walk hand in hand.

We may view this movement from rudimentary coordination to value formation in terms of "first-order morality." To function within any viable relationship requires embracing, with or without articulation, the values inherent in its

patterns. When I teach a class, for example, first-order morality is at work. The students and I establish and perpetuate what has become the "good for us." There are no articulated rules in this case, no moral injunctions, no bill of rights for students and teachers. The rules are all implicit, but they touch virtually everything we do, from the tone and pitch of my voice, my posture, and the direction of my gaze, to the intervals during which students may talk, the loudness of their voice, the movement of their lips, legs, feet, and hands. One false move, and any of us may become a target of scorn.

In a case of exclusively first-order morality, one cannot choose evil. Put less dramatically: if fully immersed within a relationship, one cannot step much outside the existing patterns of coordination and still be intelligible. In the case at hand, I would not take a nap during class time, let alone set a student on fire; no student would ask me for a failing grade or bring a poisonous snake to class. We do not engage in these activities primarily because they are unintelligible to us; they do not occur as options for deliberation. We carry on normal classroom life because it *is* our way of life. In effect, morality of the first order is *being sensible in context*. In the same vein, murdering one's best friend does not occur to very many of us—not because of some principle to which we have been exposed in our early years, and not because murder is illegal and often punished. The act is virtually unthinkable in the normal context of relations with my students, my colleagues, and virtually anyone else I know. Similarly, it would be unthinkable for a priest to break into a tap dance at mass, or for a microbiologist to destroy a colleague's laboratory. We live our lives mostly within the comfortable confines of first-order morality.

To what, then, can we attribute immoral action? We must take another look at the characteristics of first-order morality. Wherever people come into coordination, as they strive to find mutually satisfactory ways of going on together, they develop over time a local good, "the way we do things here." As a result, there are myriad traditions of the good, and everywhere that people congregate successfully they set in motion new possibilities. This generalization may be said to encompass not only the major religious traditions of the world but also traditions of government, science, education, art, entertainment, and so forth. In this sense, as internally moral practices, science and textual analysis are similar to religion, as are the countless local traditions of family, friendship, and community. All sustain visions of the good, some sacred and others secular, some articulated and others implicit. Layered upon these are newly emerging and rapidly expanding forms of coordination and thus an expanding array of first-order moralities. To valuing, devaluing, and revaluing, there is no end.

It is in this multiplication of "the good" that the stage is set for what might be called virtuous evil. One can only act intelligibly by virtue of participation in some tradition of the good; however, in a pluralistic world, a world in which

there is more than one good, any virtuous action will be alien to a multiplicity of alternative traditions. On the personal level, virtuous evil is a daily companion. In every commitment to an action, we relegate every other possible action to a lesser status. It is a good thing that I complete my work at the office but also a good thing that I am at home with my family. It is good to arrive on time for a dinner invitation but also good to obey the speed limit. It is good to feel the pleasure of someone's love but also good to feel the pleasure of yet someone else's love. It is good to defend one's country but also good to avoid killing. In this sense, struggles of conscience are not struggles between good and evil but between competing goods.

It is by virtue of multiplicity that we are also potentially alienated from any activity in which we engage. We carry into any relationship—even those of great importance to us—the capacity to find its conventions empty or repulsive. "Having a jolly time together" walks but a step ahead of "wasting time"; a thin line separates "religious ritual" from "mindless exercise." Each of these alienating voices speaks the language of an alternative intelligibility hovering over the shoulder of our actions. In effect, harmony and comfort in daily life are purchased at the cost of a vast inhibition.

Let us shift the focus to actions that fewer of us find attractive or performable—robbery, extortion, rape, drug dealing, murder. It is here that we find a dangerous transformation of the quest for the good. The petty transgressions of daily life are often disregarded, renegotiated, or forgiven. However, in the case of these more threatening activities, the impulse is to suppress them. This suppression is accomplished, typically, through various forms of defense (surveillance, policing), curtailment (imprisonment, torture), or more radically, extermination (death penalty, invasion, bombing). It is with the impulse toward suppression and eradication that we shift from the register of virtuous evil to what may be viewed as evil virtue—that is, virtuous action that invites, perpetuates, and intensifies what we understand to be evil.

By far the most obvious and most deadly outcome of suppression and elimination is the hardened shell separating the good within from the evil without. Those within can find value and nurture in punishing or destroying those without. Meanwhile, those outside are moved to collective action. As the condemned realize their common predicament, their own moral intelligibility becomes more apparent and fully articulated. Those within become an evil menace, and the eliminative impulse is again set in motion. Herein lie the seeds of the limitless extension of justified retaliation so familiar to the contemporary world. Once this dance of death is under way, it is not "the other" who is the major enemy, but the tradition of choreography.

There are more subtle effects issuing from the eliminative impulse. These include, for one, a diminution in sensitivity. Once the fear-driven lines separating

good from evil are clear, there is an emerging myopia to the complex particulars of life on the other side. This is the plight of a young man from Virginia convicted of incest at the age of nineteen, who was then classified as a sexual offender, and twelve years later lost his job when his name, photo, and offense were officially installed on the internet. It is also the plight of countless numbers who have been shot dead because they "looked" threatening. Moreover, dialogue closes down. When the aim is to eliminate, the doors to exploration are shut tight. There is no mutually explorative dialogue between "good people" and the mafia, neo-Nazis, or terrorists. Such options border on the unintelligible.

Finally, there is a blinding to the affinities shared by those inside and outside the line, and to the ways in which these shared values contribute to the condition of enmity. From a relational standpoint, all heinous actions must be intelligible within some world of value. Employing the same suppressive capacities commonly required in daily life, such actions can make moral sense at the moment of action. In this sense, bank robbery is not in itself an immoral action. Within the robber's world of the good, robbery is fully intelligible. And because the villain is embedded in an extended network of relationships, his values are likely to reflect those common to his society more generally. For example, common value in our social order is placed on income-producing activities, on bravery, individualism, and the outwitting of big business. The criminal sings in harmony with a chorus in which almost all of us participate yet simultaneously deny.

Second-Order Morality: Coordinating Coordination

In applying the account of relational being to the question of moral pluralism, we find that the production of the good establishes the conditions for villainous action. In effect, so long as we coordinate our actions to generate harmony and fulfillment, the struggle between good and evil will continue. These potentials can only be enhanced by the rapid development and proliferation of communication technologies: with each new connection, new formations of valuing (and devaluing) will arise. However, while agonistic tension is virtually inevitable, violence and slaughter are not. Conflicting goods will always be with us. The challenge is not that of creating a conflict-free existence: very often, it is those most anxious to shed blood who most favor a permanent end to conflict. The challenge is to locate ways of approaching conflict that do not tend toward mutual extermination. Given that efforts to generate the good establish conditions for evil action—given, in other words, the circumstances of human coordination—how should we go on?

One inviting possibility is to enter a common search for an originary or universal ethic, one to which all may cling and which will enable us to transcend our animosities. I have some sympathy with this view: given my cultural background,

I would not mind a universal ethic of love, compassion, and care or even sacrifice for others. The human rights movement indeed embodies such ethics. However, even when there is broad agreement on the nature of a universal good, the result is a dichotomy in which good and evil are the antipodes. The dichotomy is hierarchically designed to suppress the less-than-optimally good. Moreover, if there were genuine agreement on the universals, there would be little need to articulate their content. It is only because an apparent universal is denied or undermined that we are moved to define it. With respect to human rights, for example, their existence is premised on the intent to eliminate some forms of action. (Even the ethic of universal love condemns those who do not love.)[5]

The divisive potential of abstract goods is exacerbated by the ways in which their instantiations are defined. One cannot unambiguously derive concrete action from an abstract value or right: there is nothing about the value of justice, equality, compassion, or freedom that demands any particular form of action. Thus, actions *condemned* in the name of an abstract value may equally be *defended* in its name. In the name of freedom (an abstraction), conditions that many define as freedom can be curtailed. Exhortations to love one another, to seek justice, to promote equality, may all be calls to action, but there is little to prevent such actions from becoming lethal.[6]

Which brings us to "second-order morality" and its potentials. First-order morality, as I have sketched it here, may be essential to a satisfying life; it is a source of harmony, trust, and direction. At the same time, because of the enormous potential for variation and multiplicity in first-order moralities, the production of evil is continuously confronted. In the context of first-order morality, we are moved to control, isolate, punish, and ultimately eliminate much of what we have been instrumental in creating. Conflict is endemic to first-order morality; at the same time, it is important to note that first-order morality rests on a particular logic that we can dispense with or modify. It is a logic of distinct units. In Western culture, the unit is the individual; it is from the individual's capacity for reason and conscience that moral action springs (or not). It is the individual who

5. Related is Hauke Brunkhorst's argument that to achieve human rights would require a "juridification of global society." See his *Solidarity: From Civic Friendship to a Global Legal Community*, trans. Jeffrey Flynn (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), 2005.

6. This problem has been raised in earlier *Common Knowledge* issues and symposia, and it may be useful to mention affinities and differences between my evaluation and some of those offered here previously. Thus, my observation about calls to love, justice, and peace concurs with Jeffrey Perl's argument that the call to justice often functions as an impediment to peace. Likewise the argument of Cardi-

nal Lustiger that "the most noble declarations of principle can serve merely to justify the most abject abuses." I also greatly sympathize with Gianni Vattimo's proposal, discussed in Santiago Zabala's response to Cardinal Lustiger, that weight should be shifted from *veritas* to *caritas*, though it is not clear that charity alone could provide resources for resistance to abhorrent injustice. See Jeffrey M. Perl, "Civilian Scholarship," *Common Knowledge* 8.1 (Winter 2002): 1–2; Jean-Marie Cardinal Lustiger, "Rediscovering Universal Reason," 11.1 (Winter 2005): 22; Santiago Zabala, "Christianity and the Death of God: A Response to Cardinal Lustiger," 11.1 (Winter 2005): 33–40.

is typically held responsible for untoward actions, whether in the petty exchanges of everyday life or in courts of law. Much the same logic is employed in holding larger units morally responsible *as units*. Variously condemned are political parties, businesses, religions, armies, and nations, whose representatives may be punished, tortured, or destroyed because of membership alone.

Thus, a major outcome of first-order morality can be and often is the severing of communicative connections; indeed the very process of coordination from which a reality, a rationality, and a sense of the good derive is destroyed. The potential for the continuous generation of first-order morality is terminated. As the eliminative impulse is set in motion—as the exponents of first-order moralities move toward mutual annihilation—we slouch toward the end of meaning. It is at this point that we require second-order morality; that is, participation in a process that restores the possibility of first-order moralities. Immersion in our first-order moralities will prepare us, if we are fortunate, to value valuing per se and to resist its perishing in the present. To engage in second-order morality is to sustain the possibility of morality of any kind.

Second-order morality rests not on a logic of discriminate units, as first-order moralities do, but on a logic of relationship. There are no individual acts of evil on this account, for the meaning of all action is derived from relationship. Holding individuals responsible for untoward actions is not only misguided but results in alienation and retaliation. In the case of second-order morality, individual responsibility is replaced by relational responsibility, or a responsibility for sustaining the potential for coordinated action. To be responsible to relationships is to devote attention and effort to means of sustaining the potential for co-creating meaning. When individual responsibility is assumed, relationships typically go off track. Blame is followed by excuses and counterblame. In being responsible for relationships, we step outside this context or tradition; care for the relationship becomes primary. In relational responsibility, we avoid the narcissism implicit in ethical calls for "care of the self," and, moreover, the self-negation resulting from the imperative to "care for the other."

One may argue that this proposal for a second-order morality reinstitutes the problems inherent in any universal ethics. Am I not declaring that people *ought* to be responsible for sustaining coordinated relationships? And if so, is there not another hierarchy of the good established in which the irresponsible are deemed inferior and in need of correction? These questions, and their criticism of my argument, are reasonable within the logic of units. However, from a relational standpoint, there simply are no units to be held accountable. Relational responsibility must itself issue from coordinated action; it is essentially to participate in a process of coordinating coordinations.

Toward Transformative Dialogue

As the present analysis suggests, tendencies toward division and conflict are normal outgrowths of relational life. Prejudice is not a mark of a flawed character—inner rigidity, decomposed cognition, emotional bias, or the like. It is rather that, so long as we continue the normal process of creating consensus around what is real and good, classes of the undesirable are under construction. Wherever there are tendencies toward unity, cohesion, brotherhood, commitment, solidarity, or community, alienation is in the making. The major challenge that confronts us, then, is not that of generating cozy communities, conflict-free societies, or a harmonious world order. Given our strong tendency toward conflict, the challenge is how to proceed so that ever-emerging conflict does not yield aggression, oppression, or slaughter—in effect, the end of meaning altogether.

What actions follow from this conceptual excursion? In what sense would such actions deviate from existing traditions? As indicated earlier, abstract concepts such as second-order morality carry no necessary entailments. Logical consistency might suggest that whatever actions do follow should result from collaborative participation. Legislation and enforcement would be counterindicated. As a further desideratum, participation would include parties otherwise separated, alien, or antagonistic. Third-party intervention might be useful, but primarily as a means of inviting, advising, or stimulating to action those who have otherwise lost the capacity for generating a moral space together.

Since guidelines this broad leave an enormous latitude of possibility, it may be helpful to revisit the relational view of language. Language is a form of coordinated action: it has no directive or corrective power within itself but only within a relationship that may grant it these capacities. Here we begin to confront the limits of moral theorizing. The principal domain of coordination in which moral theorizing is meaningful is linguistic. That is, the form of life in which moral actions are significant is a life of letters. Such theorizing is not embedded in the day-to-day acts of coordination through which broad social consequences would follow. As some critics argue, because of the elite traditions in which it has developed, moral theory has little communicative value outside the halls of scholarship. Worse, because of a tradition that equates capacities of individual reason with linguistic complexity, opacity functions as a virtue. If rationality is viewed as a form of rhetoric, then scholarly rationality may ensure its social insignificance.

In the case of second-order morality, an alternative approach to action is desirable. We may begin with coordinated actions within the culture—actions that appear to be effective in achieving second-order morality. We may then cross communal boundaries, drawing practice into conversation with theory. Theory may not only be enriched but rendered more fully applicable; practitioners may become more reflective about their activities and find theoretical articulation useful in expanding the implications and potentials of practice.

The criteria I am suggesting may sound vague—I am afraid that they need to be abstract—but a range of recent innovations in dialogic practice fulfill them admirably. The practices to which I refer attempt to move beyond those traditions of rational argument, bargaining, and negotiation that presume the integrity of the unit entering into dialogue and, moreover, presuppose that participants in the dialogue will attempt to maximize its accomplishments. In effect, these aging traditions sustain both the illusion of separation and the reality of conflict.[7] Dissatisfaction with these traditions, dismay at the incapacity of large-scale organizations to improve conditions of conflict, and a sense of urgency about the problems at hand have stimulated various groups to forge new practices. Such practices are improvised under pressure, in contexts of conflict. Even so, they satisfy the theoretical criteria I have outlined for coordinated actions that bring us toward second-order morality. These innovative practices are thus contributions to transformative dialogue, and I would like to conclude with a description of three of them. These three have specific application to cases of conflicting investments in the good. Their attempt is to transform practices of coordination in such a way that alienated parties have their collective potential to create first-order morality restored. For the theorist, it is noteworthy that these improvised practices avoid headlong treatments of content, or else reduce its significance. Rather than emphasize content, the chief emphasis is on the process of relational coordination. As the success of these new practices suggest, if the process of coordination is productive, matters of content cease to play such a divisive role.[8] It is by productive coordination that second-order morality is achieved and, not coincidentally, that further combat between relativists and foundationalists is obviated.

Appreciative Inquiry and the United Religions Initiative

"Appreciative inquiry" is a transformative practice developed by David Cooperrider and colleagues of his worldwide. Theirs is a practice that, in altering the focus of dialogue, sets up a new form of discursive relationship. Traditional treatments of conflict are constrained by attention to deficits rather than potentials: participants are encouraged to notice and talk about the problem that separates them (including their animosities and the fault they find with each other); then they talk about finding a solution. In effect, the reality sustained by participants

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7. Continuing with my response to previous contributions to *Common Knowledge*, on this point I have reservations about Frank R. Ankersmit's "Hymn to Compromise." In compromise, the tension of fundamental separation remains, along with the search for ways to maximize one's own gain. See Frank R. Ankersmit, "Representational

Democracy: An Aesthetic Approach to Conflict and Compromise," *Common Knowledge* 8.1 (Winter 2002): 24–46.

8. A similar aim is discernible in the editing of *Common Knowledge*, where a form of dialogue is encouraged that does not revolve around the binary of credit/discredit or seek to establish conclusions closed to further discussion.

in traditional dialogue is an alienating reality. Whereas, in the practice of appreciative inquiry, the focus of dialogue shifts from deficits to positive potentials. Conversations are invited, for example, about times in which relations have been productive, instances of cooperation, or contexts in which the participants valued each other more. From these conversations are drawn positive images of what is possible, and on the basis of these images specific steps are developed for realizing their potentials in action. During the process, a form of relationship tends to emerge in which the participants are fully engaged in productive coordination.[9]

Of special relevance, in the context of this symposium, is the application of appreciative inquiry practices in the United Religions Initiative, a project begun by the Episcopal Church. Its effort is to build an organization enabling representatives of the world's religions to engage in productive conversation. The originators understand many of the world's worst conflicts to be religious in origin and argue that organizations (such as UN agencies) based on the participation of nation-states are ill equipped to take action. Practices of appreciative inquiry have enabled more than a hundred religious groups, separated sometimes by centuries of animosity, to commence discussion of viable futures.[10]

The Public Conversations Project

The Public Conversations Project draws primarily on the skills of family therapists. Typically the project team works with groups that have a history of demonizing and even killing one another. In some of the team's most important work, activists in the American abortion debate are brought together in small groups for evening meetings. Meetings begin not with a discussion of differences but with a meal, during which participants are neither identified in terms of their positions nor allowed to speak of matters relating to abortion. After conversation about various shared interests, formal meetings commence. Here the participants, seated next to (rather than across from) each other, are asked, for instance, to tell personal stories about how they became involved with the abortion issue. Recalcitrant questions of moral principle are avoided and, in their place, stories of pain and suffering are shared. These stories resonate across the divide of ideology. Participants are also asked to talk about what is, for them individually, at the "heart of the matter," and in many cases participants find their own values shared by supposed opponents. One tends to find, for example, that all participants greatly value the happiness and well-being of the potential mother. Late in the proceedings, participants are also asked to discuss "gray areas"—that is, any doubts they may have about the positions they espouse. Many doubts are indeed

9. For more on "appreciative inquiry," see appreciative inquiry.case.edu (accessed January 11, 2007).

10. For more on the United Religions Initiative, see ww .uri.org/About_URI.html (accessed January 11, 2007).

expressed at this stage, and participants perceive similarities that belie existing boundaries between them.

The results of such dialogues do not generally lead participants to abandon their commitments. However, participants do speak about having learned to avoid polemical language and about an increased ability to see value in what opponents have to say. The content of their positions may remain intact, but the context of meaning shifts, and the implications for future action become more promising.[11]

Narrative Mediation

Mediators have long sought means of settling disputes in ways less contentious than litigation. Of the many dialogic innovations that have resulted, perhaps the most closely allied with the relational view developed here is that of "narrative mediation."[12] In this practice, the mediator approaches a conflict as a social construction, not an obdurate reality. From this standpoint, the mediator pursues various conversational themes that invite the development of alternative and more collectively viable narratives about the conflict. For example, disputants may be invited to speak of the conflict as if it were external to them and impeding their potential for moving in more positive directions. They thus abandon the more familiar exercise of mutual blame and locate a common object against which they may join in resistance. Similar in this way to appreciative inquiry, participants may also be asked to recall times in which their relations were successful; this material may then be used in the process of narrative reconstruction. To broaden the relational arena, others may be invited into the process, especially those who have been negatively affected by the conflict. Collective support is garnered for narrative reconstruction. The result, when the process succeeds, is the development of a new narrative, shared by the participants and those around them—a narrative with greater promise for all concerned.

Movements toward second-order morality, bringing alienated parties into positive coordination, demand but a limited degree of consensus, and not one that issues in a new regime of control. These initiatives do not try to suppress conflicting values and realities, which is a problem that relativists and nonrelativists alike see in most attempts to achieve harmonious relationships between adversarial points of view. The three practices I have briefly described (along with many other practices and initiatives, including the international movement for "restorative justice," the World Café, the Compassionate Listening Project, the Reuniting America Project, the Seeds for Peace Camp, the use of narrative in

11. For more on the Public Conversations Project, see www.publicconversations.org (accessed January 11, 2007).

12. See John Winslade and Gerald Monk, *Narrative Mediation: A New Approach to Conflict Resolution* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2001).

multicultural education, and the interfaith-dialogue project of the World Council of Churches) succeed when they find means to leave beliefs intact. In each case, it is not content but form—the form of coordination—that is crucial. In terms used previously in *Common Knowledge* discussions, such initiatives constitute a small but highly promising step toward answering Ulrich Beck's urgent question: "how will cohesion be possible in a high-risk, unpredictable world of technologically constructed multiple modernities (and multiple antimodernities)?"[13]

In Conclusion

There was bitter and sometimes bloody conflict, in early Irish history, among the four major provinces. As Celtic lore would have it, a Fifth Province emerged, a magical place where chieftains could speak in peace with each other and attempt to resolve their conflicts. The Fifth Province was a zone in which contradictions could coexist, ambiguities flourish; and the imagination could soar into new spaces of possibility. The preceding analysis has essentially been an exercise in Fifth Province deliberation. My offering is a sketch of how we might move beyond the understanding of persons or groups as units and come to appreciate the crucial value of collaborative action for all that we regard as good. The attempt is not to negate the verities and values inherent in any of the contending traditions, whether their origins are pre- or postmodern. In this imaginary space, this Fifth Province, we do not find, because we do not look for, a new truth or foundation or antifoundation. Rather, the hope is that by concentrating on the relational we may move toward practices that replace the conflict of competing moralities with collaborative processes in which new orders of the good may continue to be generated. The alternative is more talk about us versus them, our truth versus their falsehood; and as a byproduct, more talk of the danger posed (both to us and to them) by relativism.

13. Ulrich Beck, "Neither Order nor Peace: A Response to Bruno Latour," *Common Knowledge* 11.1 (Winter 2005):
5.