The Mythic Reality of the Autonomous Individual

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FROM MORAL AUTONOMY TO RELATIONAL RESPONSIBILITY

by Kenneth J. Gergen

Abstract.　　　Given that the conception of the person as an autonomous agent is a cultural construction, inquiry is directed to its potentials and shortcomings for cultural life. While such a conception contributes to sustaining the moral order, it also supports an individualist ideology and social divisiveness. As an alternative to the conception of moral autonomy, I explore the potentials of relational being, an orientation that views relational process (as opposed to individual agents) as the wellspring of all meaning. Such an orientation sees all moral concepts and action as issuing from coordinated action. However, at the same time that relational process generates moral orders, so does it establish the grounds for "immorality" and social conflict, which undermines the relational process of creating moral order. Thus, a concept of "second-order morality" is advanced, which seeks to reestablish a more inclusive first-order morality. Responsibility for productive processes of relationship is invited. Recent innovations in dialogic practices lend themselves to relational responsibility.

Keywords:　　　action; agency; autonomy; causality; collaboration; cultural construction; dialogic practice; discourse; individualism; intelligibility; justice; meaning; moral order; relational coordination; relational ontology

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Across cultures and over the centuries, human communities have demonstrated enormous variation in their constructions of the person. Accounts vary in terms of what inner processes, qualities, abilities, possessions, dispositions, and so on are attributed to the individual (cf. Lutz 1988; Danziger 1990; Erchak, 1992). And, as it is clear, these various constructions are an inherent feature of particular ways of life, embedded as they are in various institutions, societal structures, rituals, and so on. The discourses of the real are constitutive of particular ways of life (Gergen 1994). That the concept of the autonomous individual is a cultural construction—as opposed to an ontological essential—seems beyond debate at this juncture. There are many excellent accounts of the historical conditions under which the conception of the autonomous self emerged in Western culture and its subsequent transformations over the centuries (cf. Cary 2000; Taylor 1999; and Seigel 2005). The important question, then, is not whether the capacity for autonomous decisions is an actual possession of the individual agent, but how this particular conception functions in terms of the cultural, and indeed, the global order. What forms of life are sustained, what institutions erected, and what are the implications for viable lives together in the future? It is just such issues I wish to address in what follows. My special focus is on the implications of the presumption of individual autonomy for sustaining the moral order. First, I will touch on some of the major critiques and defenses of the conception of autonomy and its moral consequences. Then, I turn to what I view as a promising alternative to the traditional conception, in this case tracing moral action to relational process.

THE ROILING WATERS OF AUTONOMOUS BEING

Although long-honored, the concept of individual autonomy is now embroiled in controversy. At the outset, the concept functions as a virtual lynchpin in the ideology of Western individualism. Here, cadres of critics have deliberated on the ways in which this ideology fosters a sense of fundamental loneliness and alienation; generates a sense of pervasive doubt in oneself; invites one to think of oneself as the sole arbiter of what is good and evil; establishes a tension between self on the one hand and community on the other; defines relationships as secondary to well-being of the self; and ultimately encourages forms of self-serving, narcissistic, and exploitative behavior (cf. Gelpi 1989; Hewitt 1989; Bellah, et al. 1985; Lasch 1978; and Leary 2004).

And yet, in spite of its unhappy consequences, many view the concept of the autonomous individual as critical to sustaining a moral order. Resonating with elements of the Christian tradition, the belief that persons are free to decide between good and evil enables us to channel social action by rewarding people for the former and punishing them for the

latter. In effect, from roughly the age of three onward, we hold individuals responsible for what we take to be willful acts of wrongdoing. And thus, we emerge with a reasonably stable moral order. This tradition is also central to the formal process of administering justice—locally, nationally, and internationally.

On the other side, behavioral scientists have despaired of using agentive explanations, both within the sciences and daily life. Attributing action to voluntary agency is a pseudo-explanation, it is said. It is simply to transcribe the description of an activity into an identical tendency within. If we say that the reason someone robbed a bank is because he chose to, we have done nothing more than say that he had an internal tendency to rob a bank. Most importantly for the scientist, such explanations discourage a search for other, more empirically available factors (external impingements, cognitive mechanisms, etc.) that may account for such activity. Or as Skinner (1971) would have it, the concept of free agency is counter-productive; if problems of human conduct are to be controlled, it is essential to locate their determinants.

Responding to these accusations, those championing free agency argue that causal explanations invite us to view individuals as mere objects. In particular, we come to view individuals as "manageable," as entities that can be moved in one direction or another by those who have the resources to control the relevant conditions. It is this mentality, it is argued, that lends itself to command and control management practices, that suppress the opinions and needs of organizational participants, that supports top-down pedagogical practices that disregard the motives and values of students, and that favor the control of crime and terrorism without understanding their meaning for the perpetrators. It is simultaneously a mentality that breeds suspicion of all those in positions of power—in government, business, law, and advertising.

And yet, despite their disagreements, both voluntarists and determinists subscribe to forms of punishment for the individual who violates communal standards of morality. Yet, such solutions are also subject to critical scrutiny. As reasoned, the common reaction to being corrected is not contrition and transformation, but alienation and resentment. Even murderers often feel their actions were justified ("he was no good," "he was a threat," "he stupidly got in the way," "this is a way of life in my neighborhood"). Further, imprisonment seldom results in chastened individuals, but rather, hardened and sophisticated criminals. And, by holding single individuals responsible for untoward actions, we are discouraged from exploring the web of relations in which the individual is enmeshed. We hold the individual terrorist to blame, for example, without taking into account the religious traditions in which the individual participates, nor the relationship of this tradition to the larger culture that threatens it. In this sense, individual blame represents a vast simplification

and suppression, a way of terminating deliberation on complex issues. Such deliberation might also reveal our own complicity in bringing about the act we wish to punish. In this sense, sustained and productive dialogues between antagonistic groups are far more promising than incarcerating or destroying individual representatives from the opposing sides. Individual punishment simply exacerbates the antagonism.

RELATIONAL BEING: BEYOND AGENCY AND DETERMINISM

There is no obvious resolution to these long-standing antinomies. They indeed reflect two major traditions of world construction, the one emerging from the premodern world that defined the soul as the central ingredient of human make-up, and the modern or scientific view of persons as denizens of the natural world of cause and effect. But in certain respects such an impasse is to be welcomed. If we view these traditions not as competitors in the game of Truth, but as interpretive communities committed to certain values and ways of life, we should be pleased to see both remaining robust—but restrained. Both may have circumscribed utility, and for one to extinguish the other would be a cultural loss. However, their problems do invite us to consider the potential of alternative constructions. If individual autonomy and determinism are discursive achievements, then further dialogue may generate alternative constructions with different consequences. It is to one such alternative that I now turn.

In a broad sense, both the concepts of agency and causality lend themselves to a picture of an atomized society. In both cases, society is composed of individual, bounded units. Whether moved to action by voluntary choice, or by an external causal force, the concept of individual units remains. There has been much recent interest in moving beyond this view of bounded being, and with it the voluntarism/determinism binary, and articulating a relational account of human action. Such a view would replace the individual as the atom of society with relational process. While this is not an appropriate context for reviewing the emerging corpus of literature on this topic, it is fair to say that Wittgenstein's later writings (1953) have played a primary germinating role. It is not simply that such writings question the ontological status of all mental predicates (including the will), but more importantly, they locate the genesis of all ontologies within the linguistic practices of persons in relationship. The metaphor of the language game is pivotal here, as it suggests that all words come into meaning through their communal use. It is thus that we may reasonably view such terms as will and determinism as cultural resources. Or to extend the logic, the ontological presumption of individual or bounded selves is lodged within a relational practice. It is not individual agents who enter into relationships, but relational processes that give rise to the very discourse of the individual.

A more elaborated account of this process is contained in my book, *Relational Being, Beyond Self and Community* (Gergen 2009). However, a useful entry into this relational orientation can be appreciated by a brief account of the genesis of meaning. Traditionally, we view meaning as the possession of the individual mind. We use language, as commonly put, as a vehicle for expressing this meaning to others. Putting aside the deep philosophic problems in mind/world dualism, and the hermeneutic challenge of understanding another's mind through their words, we immediately see that this view is at one with the voluntarist/individualist orientation now in question. How, could we, then, shift the locus of meaning from within the person to between persons? Consider a series of rudimentary propositions that place meaning squarely within the relational matrix:

An individual's utterances in themselves possess no meaning. We pass each other on the street. I smile and say, "Hello Charles." You walk past without hearing. Under such conditions, what have I said? To be sure, I have uttered two words. However, for all the difference it makes I might have chosen two nonsense syllables. You pass and I say "Umlotnigen..." You hear nothing. When you fail to acknowledge me in any way, all words become equivalent. In an important sense, nothing has been said at all. I cannot possess meaning alone.

The potential for meaning is realized through supplementary action. Lone utterances begin to acquire meaning when another (or others) coordinate themselves to the utterance, that is, when they add some form of supplementary action (whether linguistic or otherwise). Effectively, I have greeted Charles only by virtue of his response. "Oh, hi, good morning..." brings me to life as one who has greeted. Supplements may be very simple, as simple as a nod of affirmation that indeed you have said something meaningful. It may take the form of an action, for example, shifting the line of gaze upon hearing the word, "look!" Or it may extend the utterance in some way, as in "Yes, but I also think that...." We thus find that to communicate at all is to be granted by others a privilege of meaning. If others do not treat one's utterances as communication, if they fail to coordinate themselves around the offering, one is reduced to nonsense.

To combine these first two proposals, we see that meaning resides within neither individual, but only in relationship. Both act and supplement must be coordinated in order for meaning to occur. Like a handshake, a kiss, or a tango, the individual's actions alone are empty. Communication is inherently collaborative. In this way, we see that none of the words that comprise our vocabulary have meaning in themselves. They are granted the capacity to mean by virtue of the way they are coordinated with other words and actions. Indeed, our entire vocabulary of the individual—who thinks, feels, wants, hopes, and so on—is granted meaning only by virtue

of coordinated activities among people. Their birth of "myself" lies within relationship.

Supplementary action is itself a candidate for meaning. Any supplement functions twice, first in granting significance to what has preceded, and second as an action that also requires supplementation. In effect, the meaning it grants remains suspended until it too is supplemented. Consider a therapy client who speaks of her deep depression; she finds herself unable to cope with an aggressive husband and an intolerable job situation. The therapist can grant this report meaning as an expression of depression, by responding, "Yes, I can see why you might feel this way; tell me a little more about your relationship with your husband." However, this supplement too stands idle of meaning until the client provides the supplement. If the client ignored the statement, for example, going on to talk about her success as a mother, the therapist's words would be denied significance. More broadly, we may say that in daily life there are no *acts in themselves*, that is, actions that are not simultaneously supplements to what has preceded. Whatever we do or say takes place within a temporal context that gives meaning to what has preceded, while simultaneously forming an invitation to further supplementation.

Acts create the possibility for meaning but simultaneously constrain its potential. If I give a lecture on psychoanalytic theory, this lecture is meaningless without an audience that listens, deliberates, affirms, or questions what I have said. In this sense, every speaker owes to his or her audience a debt of gratitude; without their engagement the speaker ceases to exist. At the same time, my lecture creates the very possibility for the audience to grant meaning. While the audience creates me as a meaningful agent, I simultaneously grant to them the capacity to create. They are without existence until there is an action that invites them into being.

Yet, it is also important to realize that in practice, actions also set constraints upon supplementation. If I speak on Freud, as an audience member you are not able to supplement in any way you wish. You may ask me a question about object relations theory, but not astrophysics; comment on the concept of repression but not on the taste of radishes. Such constraints exist because my lecture is already embedded within a *tradition of act and supplement*, it has been granted meaning as a "lecture on Freud," by virtue of previous generations of meaning givers. In this sense, actions embedded within relationships have *prefigurative* potential. The history of usage enables them to invite or suggest certain supplements as opposed to others—because only these supplements are considered sensible or meaningful within a tradition. Thus, as we speak with each other, we also begin to set limits on each other's being; to remain in the conversation is not only to respect a tradition, but to accede to being one kind of person as opposed to another. If you tell me that I have not been a good

friend, I will scarcely be recognizable unless I ask you to tell me why you feel this way, and what have I done. Your very comment constrains my potentials.

Supplements function both to create and constrain meaning. As we have seen, supplements "act backward" in a way that creates meaning of what has preceded. In this sense, the speaker's meaning—his or her identity, character, intention, and the like—are not free to "be what they are," but constrained by the act of supplementation. Supplementation thus operates *postfiguratively*, to create the speaker as meaning this as opposed to that. From the enormous array of possibilities, the supplement gives direction and temporarily narrows the possibilities of being. Thus, for example, for a therapist, to inquire into a client's depression is to establish a form of constraint. If the client is to remain sensible, he or she may readily accede to being depressed. In this way, a therapeutic question can harbor implications for an entire life trajectory.

While act/supplements are constraining, they do not determine. As proposed, our words and actions function so as to constrain the words and actions of others, and vice versa. If we are to remain intelligible within our culture, we must necessarily act within these constraints. Such constraints have their origins in a history of preceding coordinations. As people coordinate actions and supplements, and come to rely on them in everyday life, they are essentially generating a way of life. If enough people join in these coordinated activities over a long period, we may speak of a cultural tradition. Yet, it is important to underscore that our words and actions function only as *constraints*, and *not as determinants*. Coordination is always located in the here and now, in momentary and fleeting conditions—in the kitchen, the boardroom, the mine, the prison, and so on. These local efforts to coordinate give rise to local patterns of speaking and action—street slang, academic jargon, baby talk, jive talk, signing, and so on. And, because those who enter into such coordinations may issue from different cultural traditions—new combinations are always under production. In effect, we inherit an enormous potpourri of potentially intelligible actions—each arising from a different form of life—and the repository is under continuous motion. Our actions may be invited by history, but they are not required. In this sense, we can indeed "step over our shadows," and in order to function adequately in continuously changing circumstances, creative combinations will always be invited. As we speak together now we have the capacity to create new futures. However, there are challenging questions here, as to the relational conditions and practices most likely giving rise to new intelligibilities and forms of action (cf. Rosen 2007; Kelley and Littman 2001).

Traditions of coordination furnish the major potentials for meaning, but do not circumscribe. To amplify a preceding line of reasoning, it is important to recognize that the words and actions upon which we rely to generate

meaning together are largely byproducts of the past. If I approached you and began to utter a string of vowels, "ahhh, ehhhh, ooooo, uuuu. . .," you would surely be puzzled; perhaps you would make for an exit, as I might well be dangerous. This is so because this utterance is nonsense, or to put it another way, not recognizable as a candidate for meaning within Western traditions of coordination. Similarly, if we began to dance and you suddenly crouched and gazed at the floor, I would scarcely continue dancing. Your actions are not part of any coordinated sequences with which I am familiar. Our capacity to make meaning together today thus relies on a history, often a history of centuries' duration. We owe to traditions of coordination our capacities for being in love, demonstrating for a just cause, or taking pleasure in our children's development.

If meaningful language comes into being through relational coordination, the same may be said for meaningful actions outside the verbal realm. In this sense, our gestures, gaze, and posture are fashioned within the matrix of relationship. And if we are to function adequately in society, the ways in which we walk, sit, or stand will be those deemed appropriate by standards negotiated in relationships.

The emotions furnish a convenient illustration of the relational perspective. Traditionally, the emotions have been viewed as inherent properties of the individual, biologically based, and evolutionarily grounded. In contrast, for the relational perspective, what we call "emotions" are byproducts of human interchange. Emotion terms (e.g., anger, love, depression) may serve as key elements of conversation (e.g., "That makes me angry," "Do you love me?"). Yet, these terms are also embodied, in the sense that without certain patterns of facial expression, tone of voice, posture, and so on, they would lose their intelligibility. In effect, we may say that emotions are forms of cultural performance (Averill 1982). One does not possess an emotion so much as he or she engages in the doing of an emotion. The question is not, then, whether one is truly feeling love, sadness, or depression, but whether he or she is fully engaged in such performances.

At the same time, these embodied performances of emotion are also embedded within patterns of interchange. They acquire their meaning from their use within the ongoing process of relationship (Shields 2002). I use the term "relational scenario" in referring to the culturally sedimented patterns of interchange within which emotional performances may often play an important role (Gergen 2009). Thus, for example, the performance of *anger* (complete with discourse, facial expressions, postural configurations) is typically embedded within a scenario in which a preceding *affront* may be required to legitimate its meaning as anger. (One cannot simply shout out in anger for no reason; to do so would be to exit the corridors of intelligibility.) Further, one's performance of anger also sets the stage for the subsequent performance of an *apology* or a *defense* on the part of another; and if an apology is offered a common response in Western

culture is *forgiveness*. At that juncture, the scenario may be terminated. All the actions making up the sequence, from affront to forgiveness, require each other to achieve legitimacy. To function as a normal, human being is to participate successfully within scenarios of relationship.

While the way in which a relational account dispenses with voluntary agency as a natural kind, a final note on the abandonment of causal determination is clarifying. As outlined, the concept of mechanistic causation is wedded to an ontology of atomization. That is, required is a separation of the causal source from the object or entity affected by the cause. However, from a relational standpoint, the separation is removed. An action on the part of one person cannot in itself cause another's response, because the act in itself has no meaning. It only comes into meaning as others coordinate themselves with the action. A given statement such as "I am angry at you," constitutes an expression of anger when the target apologizes. If the target responds with "I don't think you are angry, but you are hurt by what I did," or "you're joking, aren't you?" the expression has not been certified as anger. We do not have cause and effect, but relational coordination that brings forth the meaning of events.

ORDERS OF MORALITY

Attempts to generate a relational conception of human action are yet in their infancy. At the same time, their potentials are substantial. This is so both intellectually and in terms of socio/political reverberations. From the relational perspective, we confront the possibility of developing intelligibilities that go beyond the naturalization of separable units, animated by some interior arche or causal impingements. We understand distinctions between *me versus you* or *us versus them* as contingent and potentially problematic characterizations of the human condition. Our concern shifts instead to the relational processes by which the very idea of individual units—including both self and group—come into being. The focus moves from the dancers to the dance. And, we are invited to consider alternative constructions and practices that may better serve humankind. For example, consider the implications of shifting from an individual centered to a relational ontology in practices of education, judicial process, treating mental illness, and running an organization. The potential is enormous.

What, then, does a relational ontology offer as an alternative to traditional conceptions and practices of individual responsibility? How can the moral order be sustained without unleashing the powerful tendency to attach responsibility to individuals or resorting to cause and effect reinforcement. To appreciate the possibilities, we must first inquire into the origins of good and evil, and to do so in a way that neither invokes the vision of the individual evildoer, nor the hapless victim of heredity

and environment. We may then consider the potentials for a relational orientation to a moral society.

FIRST-ORDER MORALITY: ESSENTIAL ENMITY

We commonly suppose that suffering is caused by people whose conscience is flawed or who pursue personal 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 relational coordination is the source of all meaning, as outlined above, then it is also the source as well of our presumptions about good and evil. Indeed, rudimentary understandings of right versus wrong are essential to sustaining patterns of coordination. Deviations from accepted patterns of coordination constitute a threat to meaning and to a predictable world. When we have developed harmonious ways of relating—of speaking and acting—we also place a value on "this way of life." Whatever encroaches upon, undermines, or destroys this way of life becomes a form of evil. Without agreements concerning the good, there is nothing to be called 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, let us say, my students, my colleagues, and everyone whom we have ever met. Similarly, it would be unthinkable for a monk 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 our daily relations—in families, friendship circles, communities, and the like— but also the major religious traditions of the world along with traditions of government, science, education, art, entertainment, and so forth. In this sense, as moral communities, the sciences are similar to religions. All sustain visions of the good, some sacred and others secular, some articulated and others implicit. Layered upon these longstanding traditions are also newly emerging and rapidly expanding forms of coordination. Abetted by the internet in particular, any small cluster may invite others into their circle, thus spawning a new range of religions, political enclaves, interest groups, and so on. First-order morality is continuously in the making.

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 world of plural goods, 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 a "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 and necessary suppression.

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 take 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—between Israelis and Palestinians, Northern Ireland Catholics and Protestants, Iraqi Shiites and Sunnis, and so on. Once this dance of death is underway, it is not "the other" who is the major enemy, but the tradition of choreography.

There are more subtle effects issuing from the impulse to protect the good within one's group and eliminate what we take to be threatening forms of evil. 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. Indeed, for many people, such dialogue would be unimaginable. When dialogue shuts down the options for action become narrowed and often more extreme.

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 actions that

we take to be heinous 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.

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 identifying what we see as 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, oppression, cruelty, 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 is perhaps a secular version. 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.)

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. Even in the name of love we may hurt, oppress, or even destroy its object (cf. Mitchell 2002).

Let us consider, then, the possibility of "second-order morality." 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 faced. 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 virtually endemic to the generation of 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 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; and the 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 suppression and 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—

as outlined earlier—derived from relational process. 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 cocreating meaning. When individual responsibility is assumed, relationships typically go off track. Blame is followed by excuses and counter-blame. 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 might draw sustenance here from the concept of *kenosis*, in this case the emptying of self into the process out of which the very possibility of the self is created.

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 these proposals, are reasonable within the logic of responsible units or agents. However, from a relational standpoint, there simply are no individual units to be held accountable. Relational responsibility must itself issue from coordinated action. It is not an individual achievement, but essentially participation in a process of coordinating coordinations.

Relationally Responsible Practice

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 tendencies toward conflict, the challenge is how to proceed so that ever-emerging conflict does not ultimately give rise to aggression, oppression, or slaughter—in effect, the end of meaning altogether.

What actions follow from this relational view of first- and second-order moralities? And would such actions deviate at all from existing traditions?

As indicated earlier, abstract concepts such as second-order morality carry no necessary entailments. Nothing follows from the formulation in itself. The analysis might suggest that whatever actions do follow should emphasize collaborative participation. In this sense, top-down legislation and enforcement would be counter-indicated. As a further desideratum, participation in such collaborations should include parties otherwise separated, alien, or antagonistic. However, guidelines this broad leave us with an enormous latitude of possibility. Would it be useful, then, to elaborate more fully this relational view of morality? Could such elaboration provide more effective insights into useful practices? I am doubtful. Language in itself has no directive or corrective power in terms of action implications. Its activating power lies within traditions of relationship that have combined words and action into a "form of life" (Wittgenstein 1953). The phrase, "home run" has no implications in itself; however, when embedded in the tradition of playing baseball, it is highly consequential to the actions that follow. It is here that we begin to confront the limits of moral theorizing. The principal domain of coordination in which moral theorizing is meaningful is within a tradition of theorizing. That is, the form of life in which such language plays a significant role is a life of letters. Academic theorizing is not generally embedded in the day-to-day acts of coordination from which broad social consequences would follow. As some critics argue, because of the elite traditions in which it has developed, philosophic discourse has little communicative value outside the halls of scholarship. Worse, because of a tradition that equates capacities of individual reason with linguistic complexity, theoretical opacity often functions as a virtue. If scholarly rationality is viewed as a form of rhetoric, then moral theory of the traditional kind is not likely to play an important role in our patterns of daily action.

In the case of achieving second-order morality, an alternative approach to action seems desirable. Rather than beginning with a full-blown theoretical analysis, we may search for existing patterns of action within the culture—actions that appear to be effective in achieving second-order morality. We may then cross the boundaries separating theory and practice by drawing these domains into conversation with each other. In this case, relational theory may not only be enriched by such practices but rendered more fully "actionable" (see also Reich 2002). Practitioners may become more reflective about their activities and find theoretical articulation useful in expanding the implications and potentials of practice.

As a preliminary move in this direction, a range of recent innovations in dialogic practice may provide useful exemplars. The practices to which I refer, attempt to move beyond the common traditions of rational argument, bargaining, and negotiation. Although useful to a degree, these traditional practices are limited by presuming the integrity of the units (persons, organizations) entering into dialogue, and that dialogic participants will

attempt to maximize their gain through the process. In effect, these aging traditions sustain a construction of the world both in terms of ultimate separation and self-seeking. Further, such approaches more or less presume a fixed reality, or "the way the world is." The limitations of these traditions, along with dismay at the incapacity of large-scale organizations (e.g., governments, religions) to improve conditions of conflict, have stimulated various groups to forge new practices. Such practices are often improvised under pressure, in contexts of heated 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 brief description of four of them (see also Bojer et al. 2008). These practices 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 realize their collective potential to bring about the restoration of first-order morality. For the theorist, it is noteworthy that these improvised practices tend to avoid or suppress headlong controversies over problem content (e.g., which side is right, what compromises are necessary). Rather than emphasize content and its presumption of "the way things are," they place chief emphasis 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. It is through this kind of generative coordination that second-order morality is achieved.

The Public Conversations Project.   Developed by a group of family therapists concerned with irremediable conflict (Chasin and Herzig 1994; Chasin et al. 1996) the project attempted to establish practices of communication that would enable otherwise alienated groups to live more peacefully together. The resulting practice includes bringing members of groups together first for a meal. Then, rules are established for an ensuing dialogue. Arguing about the principles underlying one's cause (e.g., pro-life vs. pro-choice) is forbidden. Instead, participants are invited to tell stories that bear on their commitment, to describe what is at the heart of the matter for them, and to describe any areas of doubt in their position. These dialogic practices prove highly successful in bringing about forms of understanding that enable participants to live together amicably, even recognizing their differences.

Narrative Mediation.   Traditional mediation presumes a fixed reality with parties to the conflict functioning to maximize their own ends. With narrative mediation (Winslade and Monk 2001), this individualist view is abandoned in favor of an approach that presumes socially constructed realities and unfixed ends. Through particular forms of questioning,

the mediator enables the participants to see their conflict in terms of constructed stories, and to search together for new and more viable ways of understanding themselves and their relationship. Blame and retaliation are replaced by a joint search for a new and more connecting reality. Friends of the participants are often brought in to witness the newly developing reality.

Restorative Justice.   There is currently a globe-spanning movement to replace traditional practices of blame and punishment for violent actions with collaborative interchange. The restorative justice movement (Umbreit et al. 2003; Hopkins 2005) has been particularly concerned with cases of violence, and means of restoring the fabric of community as opposed to leaving an interminable rift of blame, resentment, and retaliation. Practitioners in this case typically work with both the victim and the offender, but with an interest in including all stakeholders in the matter. Through practices of mediation, the further attempt is to help the offender and the victim understand what has taken place from the other's point of view. Further, assistance is provided to offenders so that they may repair the harm they have caused, and for other stakeholders to enter into the process of resolving the injustice.

Appreciative Inquiry and the United Religions Initiative.   "Appreciative inquiry" is a transformative practice developed by David Cooperrider and colleagues of his worldwide (Cooperrider, et al. 2000; Barrett and Fry 2005). 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 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.

Of special relevance, in the context of this symposium, is the application of appreciative inquiry techniques 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 U.N. 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.

These few practices are only representative of a large body of inventive means of fostering and protecting the kinds of relational process contributing to a second-order morality. On the theoretical side, they point to the importance of mutual storytelling, speaking together about issues that unite (rather than divide), sharing ideals, admitting shortcomings, bringing witnesses into the situation, and working together to generate a new and more viable reality. Such practices represent only an overture, however, to a full flourishing of relational responsibility. Given the growth of relational consciousness, and an understanding of the potentials of relationships for creating both community and conflict, we may hope for a vast enrichment of transformative dialogic practices.

NOTE

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