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### Toward A Relational Ethic

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# 1 Toward a relational ethic

*Kenneth J. Gergen*

## Introduction

Several years ago I was having lunch with a philosopher friend, and described to her some of my theoretical work in social construction. The work focused on the way in which people together generate interpretations of what is real, rational, and good. As I explained, such ideas have been inspiring to many people, because they remove the rational grounds for any authority – whether secular or sacred – to dictate or determine what is true or good for all. A space is thus opened for the expression of all opinions. Yet, as I waxed enthusiastically about the implications of these views for science, education, and daily life, my companion grew quiet. When I paused for her reflections, I was met with a glowering silence. Finally, with clenched teeth, she let me know that she could no longer remain at the table with me. Dumbstruck, I pleaded to know the source of her irritation. As she explained, she had relatives who had died in the Holocaust, and the ideas I expressed offered no means of resisting Nazi atrocities. For constructionists, she reasoned, there was no commitment to an ethic that could stand in the way of such evil. This was intolerable.

We did work our way slowly through the entanglements of logic in such a way that we could complete the meal in relatively good terms. However, the experience was a powerful one, and its reverberations have continued to the present – now finding expression in the present offering. As I have now come to see it, we were caught that day within a tension of centuries' duration, reaching its zenith in the late 20th century. One might say we were still toiling with the outcome of the Enlightenment, in which the forces of reason and observation were set against religious beliefs. In the early 20th century, this tension emerged as the struggle between a secular and largely materialistic orientation to life and deep investments in spirituality, human values, and traditions of the sacred. As the century grew on, the Enlightenment echoes could be located in various forms of pluralism as against various efforts to sustain foundational values on the other side.<sup>1</sup>

Such dialogues continue, but now with a new and far more sinister edge. In my view, the emerging plethora of globe-spanning technologies of

communication has radically intensified our differences. We have reached the point today at which values and beliefs have leaped from their geographical boundaries and are everywhere in conflict. Jet transportation enables one to relocate to virtually any other corner of the earth in less than 24 hours. By virtue of the World Wide Web, one may locate the like-minded in any geographical location, near or far. With email, one may remain in close contact with any acquaintance, no matter where they are. With smartphones we may instantly be in contact textually, auditorily, and visually. The result is that anyone seeking security in a tradition of value or belief can potentially locate around-the-clock support throughout the world. Communities of belief may thus engage in continuous reinforcement of their views, strengthening, intensifying, and expanding. With this solidification, all that is outside the wall of belief becomes alien, a potential threat. My luncheon colleague argued passionately, but hers is only one of myriad passions. As convictions spread and intensify, so the world becomes more deadly.

Paradoxically, however, these technologies that intensify a world of conflict also lend themselves to the deterioration of moral relevance. For large segments of Western culture, they undermine commitments to any belief or value whatsoever. Everywhere, individuals and organizations make strong claims to the moral high ground – in religion, politics, gender, race, and so on. All too often, such claims result in the demeaning, oppression, imprisonment, or murder of massive numbers of people. For those witnessing these effects, strong, passionate, or foundational claims to the good seem increasingly dangerous. Indeed, an inflexible commitment to any moral value seems childish or primitive.<sup>2</sup>

More problematically, a resistance to fundamentalism also lends itself to moral indifference.<sup>3</sup> Righteous claims to the good pose a danger. And if every group can make claims to ‘the good’ in its own terms, then no one’s claims have commanding force – this includes the claims of government, the law, the church, one’s parents, and so on. Thus “whatever I declare as good, is as legitimate as any other.” Indeed, why should one bother inquiring into the good at all? Just live life<sup>3</sup> as it comes, fulfill yourself, and don’t bother with the rest. This is a world in which public lying, embezzlement, profiteering, fraud, intimidation, money laundering, tax evasion, and the like are not particularly shameful. The only significant problem is getting caught. Such views – often equated with moral relativism – find little resistance in the culture. There are no strong arguments against them, save those of yet another foundationalist enclave. Because of their alliance with the Enlightenment, and their need to remain non-partisan, our schools offer few resources for moral deliberation. Slowly, the resources for an ethical consciousness are bled from society.

We thus enter a period of history in which value commitments are moving in diametrically opposing ways. On the one hand, such commitments are moving toward an intense and globally threatening pitch; in stark contrast, in many enclaves of the world, value commitments are ceasing to be

regarded or relevant. How are we thus to proceed? We cannot easily fall back on any of the traditional religions for an answer, because their very claims to moral authority contribute to the situation at hand. Nor can we in the West dip into the repository of ethical positions – from Aristotelian virtues, Kantian imperatives, or human capabilities – to sustain a universal imperative. All are byproducts of Western culture, and thus suspicious for those outside that culture. And, on what grounds could they establish moral authority? Whose tradition would justify these grounds? More directly relevant to world conditions are ethical positions that favor generalized love or care for others – for example, a feminist ethics of care (Tronto, 2005), or a Levinasian entreaty to attend to “the face of the other” (Levinas, 2005). But even here we are left with enormous ambiguities in how an ethic of care for the other would play out if ‘the other’ wishes to restrict education to males, abandon a two-state solution, expel immigrants, or segregate the races.

In what follows, I will open a space for an alternative orientation to ethics, one that could blunt the attempts to impose ethics that would silence all others, but that could simultaneously rekindle a concern with ethical deliberation. More precisely, I wish to generate an ethical standpoint that honors all visions of what is good or moral in human activity. At the same time, I will make no foundational claims for this meta-ethical standpoint. As ungrounded grounds, the proposal functions not so much as an imperative but rather as an invitation. Where will this take us? How would it benefit humankind or life on the planet more generally? What are we asked to sacrifice? The invitation to deliberation is inclusive. Yet, I do not view such deliberations as primarily conceptual in nature. The challenge here is not conceptual justification or a scholarly adventure into abstraction. Rather, the attempt is to explore the ethical implications in ongoing action. This means that neither a foundational commitment nor a relativistic insouciance will allow escape. The challenge lies in the way in which our actions play out together from moment to moment.

To explore what I shall call a relational ethic, I will first consider the origins of all moral orientations. This will invite an appreciation of the multiple and conflicting visions of the good now circulating the globe. It will also illuminate the closely related ‘sources of evil.’ This discussion sets the stage for considering the significance of relational process in giving rise to all moral orientations. Valuing this source of value thus serves as a meta-ethic. I then take up four domains of action that may ground the more abstract logic of relational ethics. This will allow us to confront the twin challenges of foundationalism and relativism.

### **The relational origins of good and evil<sup>4</sup>**

The range of what humans have come to value over the centuries is virtually boundless – from the love of gods, community, country, love, self-realization, and equality, on the more sweeping side; to family, gun ownership, privacy,

and football on the more specific. One might even find values deeply insinuated into every movement of the day – from the hour of arising, to the choice of what one eats, to whom one speaks, to each of the websites visited as one traverses cyberspace. To be sure, we find many speculations about universal goods – for example, peace, benevolence, freedom, or sensual pleasure. But for any value that one identifies in such efforts, there are people in various conditions who will find war more desirable than peace, self-satisfaction more appealing than benevolence, control more helpful than promoting freedom, and asceticism more fulfilling than sensual pleasure. One is drawn, then, to the ineluctable conclusion that moral values are specific to various cultures or subcultures in various times and specific places.

Such a conclusion is no small matter because it reveals what may be viewed as the primary source of values: human relationships. Whether any activity is a good in itself – possessing intrinsic value – remains conjectural. However, there is virtually no activity that some people at some time have not resisted. The value of an activity does not emerge, then, from the activity in itself, but from the meaning it acquires in human interchange.<sup>5</sup> In this sense, values acquire their meaning in the same way as language: participation in a social process. Virtually all relationships will generate at least rudimentary understandings of ‘what is good for us.’ They are essential to sustaining patterns of coordination. It should not be surprising, then, that the term *ethics* is derived from the Greek, *ethos*, or essentially, the customs of the people; or that the term *morality* draws from the Latin root, *mos*, or mores, thus equating morality with custom. Our constructions of reality walk hand in hand with our logics, and our moralities.

Let us view this movement from rudimentary coordination to value formation in terms of first-order morality. To function within any viable relationship will virtually require embracing, with or without articulation, the values inherent in its patterns. When I teach a class of students, for example, first-order morality is at work. We 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, and the movement of lips, legs, feet, and hands. One false move and any of us becomes the target of scorn. In effect, morality of the first order is essentially being sensible within a way of life.<sup>6</sup> In the same vein, most people do not deliberate about murdering their best friend, not because of some principle to which they were exposed in their early years, and not because it is illegal. It is virtually unthinkable. Similarly, it would be unthinkable to break out in a tap dance at a holy mass, or to destroy a colleague’s laboratory. To be sure, such ways of life may be solidified in our laws, sanctified by our religions, celebrated in our moral deliberations, and intensively articulated in ethical theory. We live our lives largely within the comfortable houses of first-order morality.

It is at this point that we also join hands with writings on moral or value pluralism. As often attributed to Isaiah Berlin (1991), we recognize the possibility of a range of fundamentally different, incommensurable, and potentially conflicting traditions of morality. And, while pluralist writings are often equated with political liberalism – standing against fascism or absolutism of any kind – less is said about ‘origins of evil.’ But consider: whenever people come into coordination, first-order morality is in the making. As we strive to find mutually satisfactory ways of going on together, we begin to establish a local good, “the way we do it.” Simultaneously, the emergence of ‘the good’ creates an alternative of the less than good. A range of actions are now featured as off limits, or forbidden – a door behind which lies mystery. All children know the joy of breaking the rules, whispering in class, laughing at a prank, stealing a cookie. And what is forbidden always invites the curiosity of “what if. . . .” Further, there is rebellion against the tyranny of the enforcer. “Why can’t I . . . ?” “Who says I can’t . . . ?” “I don’t take orders from you.”

The potential for immorality is furthered by the fact that most cultural traditions carry multiple values, variously important or emphasized depending on context. We place a value on working hard, and on playing; on freedom, and on responsibility; on obedience, and on disobedience; on fitting in, and on being unique; on pleasing others, and on autonomy; and so on. Thus the stage is set for choosing the good, and simultaneously being scorned or punished for being bad. One should care for one’s family, but may be jailed for stealing to fill their needs; women should have the right to abort, but be ostracized for doing so; a president should not lie, but will be protected by his colleagues if the lie enhances the power of their party. ‘Bad actions’ may always seem to be a ‘good idea at the moment.’ And, of course, we now confront the clashes of civilizations, as deeply entrenched traditions of the good come face to face, often finding a threatening evil in the other.

### **Relational process: the ethical invitation**

As I am proposing, as people coordinate their actions, creating a way of life that will optimally be harmonious and nourishing, they are laying the groundwork for what we call moral action. In this sense, moral action is always under production, whether unstated and little regarded, or articulated and staunchly defended. This also leaves us with the following paradox: the very production of first-order moralities also establishes the conditions for immorality. But whatever is immoral for one may be valued by another. In this sense, conflicting goods will always be with us. The challenge is not to achieve a conflict-free existence, but to locate ways of approaching conflict that do not bend toward mutual extermination. Given the challenge of moral apathy, are there means of inspiring moral engagement without the demands of singular commitment?

It is just here that we can return to the original source of moral commitment, and indeed, meaning of any kind: coordinated action. The value

of harmonious relationships is scarcely new to ethical inquiry. However, almost invariably the ethic has restated on a fundamental assumption of separation. The ethically informed person acts toward others in a way that harmony will ensue: “I do unto *others*,” “I am compassionate toward *others*,” “I am caring for *others*,” and so on. By focusing on the emergence of human meaning, we shift from this traditional concern with individuals to the more fundamental process of relating. Out of this process, the very idea of individuals is created. Human communication is essentially the outcome of coordination among persons. Like language, moral leanings are not the product of any single person. They depend on relational process. Without this process, we have no religion, science, political institutions, commerce, education, or organizations. There is nothing to care about or live for – big or small. Regardless of tradition – existing or in the making – the positive potentials of this process are vital. If we all draw life from this process, then it demands our collective attention. Here we may speak of what should be a universal concern, the grounding for a relational ethic.

Now consider the consequences of the paradoxical relation between ‘good and evil.’ Most typically, challenges to a moral order are met with resistance. As children we are encouraged to ‘be good’ through rewards, and our failures are met with irritation, lectures, correction, penalties, and physical punishment. In each case, a space of alienation emerges between the parties. Then there are the more heinous actions – robbery, extortion, rape, drug dealing, or murder. It is here we find a dangerous transformation in the quest for the good. In the case of these more threatening actions, an impulse toward elimination is often unleashed. This is typically accomplished through various forms of defense (surveillance, policing), curtailment (imprisonment, torture), or, more radically, through extermination (death penalty, invasion, bombs). This shift from alienation to elimination can be accompanied by a sense of deep virtue.

As we shift from alienation to elimination, we also undermine the potentials of positive coordination. Placed in jeopardy is the process of coordination, from which reality, rationality, and a sense of the good is derived. As the eliminative impulse is set in motion, and we move toward mutual annihilation, we approach the end of meaning. It is precisely here that a relational ethic becomes imperative. Required is participation in a process that can restore, sustain, and strengthen the possibility of morality making. In the embrace of a relational ethic, we sustain the possibility of morality of any kind.

From the standpoint of a relational ethic, there are no individual acts of evil, for the meaning of all action is derived from relationship. Holding individuals responsible for untoward actions not only is misguided but results in alienation and retaliation. In the case of a relational ethic, individual responsibility is replaced by relational responsibility, or a responsibility for sustaining the potential for positive coordination (McNamee & Gergen, 1999). To be responsible to relationships is to devote attention and effort to

means of sustaining the potential for co-creating meaning. When the wheels of individual responsibility are set in motion, relationships typically go off track. Blame is followed by excuses and counterblame. In being responsible for relationships, we step outside this tradition, and care for the relationship becomes primary. In relational responsibility we avoid the narcissism implicit in ethical calls for 'care of the self' and as well, the self-negation resulting from the imperative to 'care for the other.'

One may argue that this proposal for a relational ethic simply reconstitutes the problems inherent in foundational ethics. Is this not equivalent to declaring that people *ought* to be responsible for the process of sustaining coordinated relationships? If so, is this not another hierarchy of the good in which the irresponsible are deemed inferior and in need of correction? Such a critique presumes, however, that lying beneath a relational ethic is some kind of moral authority, a bedrock on which it is established. There is no such foundation. The logics put forward here are themselves issuing from traditions of the good, no less socially constructed than all others. To be sure, the account provides a form of meta-ethic, but in the end it can only invite participation. It is not an authoritative pronouncement, but an invitation to re-coordination.

### Relational ethics in practice

Thus far the proposal for a relational ethic is abstract and minimally explicated. Further development is needed, and this development should itself reflect the participation of many voices. To invite such discussion, what follows is an exploration of critical dimensions of ethical action. It is one thing to lay out a rationale for a meta-ethic, but what kind of actions would realize its implications? What is it to 'act ethically' from a relational standpoint? While this question may seem transparent enough, preliminary attention is required. As we shall see, the traditional relationship between ethical theory and practice – with abstract formulations dictating action – is problematic. Simultaneously thrown into critical relief is the concept of moral agency.

The philosophy of ethics has primarily been an exercise in language. Inquiries into 'what is the good' are exercises in discourse, with a reasoned account of ideal consciousness as the goal. An ethically informed consciousness should provide the grounds for ethical action. Yet, there is a major problem inhering in these attempts, one that threatens their relevance to cultural life. This is the challenge of deduction: how one is to derive from a general category of the good – or an ethical consciousness – a set of particular actions. The ideal category of the good provides no rules as to what counts as an instantiation. If one seeks to be kind, compassionate, tolerant, or appreciative, for example, what precisely is entailed in the way of action? What does one say, with what tone of voice, with what direction of one's gaze, and with what posture or movements of the arms and hands? We may all agree that it is good to 'love one another,' but what it means to love



in terms of concrete actions varies dramatically – from a simple smile, to restricting a child’s behavior, to smothering another in kisses, or smothering them with a pillow.

The relational account developed here adds a further level of complexity. One’s actions in themselves do not count as kind, compassionate, or loving, for example. One’s actions come into these meanings depending on the coordinated action of others. If one’s self-considered action is ‘compassionate,’ and another reacts to it as ‘condescension,’ then it ceases for the moment to be compassion. Attention thus shifts from the traditional assumption of the ‘moral agent’ who engages in ‘moral action’ to morally rich processes of relating.

It is here that Wittgenstein’s landmark work, *Philosophical Investigations*, is of special significance. Placed in question by this work is the traditional view of language as a picture of the world. By abandoning this view, the problem of deduction is also eliminated. If our accounts of love, compassion, care, and so on are not pictures of the world, then there is no problem of deducing what counts as instantiations of these accounts. In Wittgenstein’s outline of a use-based account of language, our attention shifts to the pragmatic uses of ethical languages in ongoing social life. Ethical philosophy, cut away from ‘contexts of application,’ runs the risk of irrelevance. The most sophisticated theories of the good may undermine their potential through their very sophistication.

Thus, in what follows, I wish to explore four domains of ethical action from a relational standpoint. In each case, I attempt to wed conceptual ideals to practices of relationship.

### *Caring communication*

If the primary value is placed on processes of relating that foster, sustain, and enrich the process of relating itself, then major attention shifts to our practices of communication. What forms of communication can achieve these ends? How can we relate with each other in ways that *care for the relationship itself*? When there is shared agreement on a way of life, common, civil communication may itself nourish relationship. The simple participation in a traditional way of life together symbolically honors ‘our way.’ To chat lightly with Emily, the cashier at the local grocery store, may seem a trivial event, but it is the kind of glue that holds the community together. At the same time, there is a sustained tendency toward fragmentation in any culture, with those sharing tradition drawing together in separation from others. On university campuses, for example, communication within departments of study far eclipses communication across departments. In corporations, there are separations in terms not only of management levels, but of the functions served (e.g., operations, marketing, R&D). Wherever people organize – in government, religion, hospitals, schools, and so

on – there are tendencies toward separation. In effect, there may be care *within* various enclaves, but relations *among* them are threatened.

It is here that we may appreciate the ethical implications of far-reaching efforts to enhance collaborative practices. In universities, there is increasing reliance on collaborative research; in technology labs is now the major source of creativity; in classrooms collaborative projects are now common forms of teaching; many therapists now see their relationship with clients as a collaboration; in healthcare there is a shift toward collaboration across specialties, with the patient now included as part of the team; military top-down structures of command and control are giving way to linking collaborating teams; and in business, the practice the need for collaborative leadership is increasingly realized. To this we must add international collaborations to combat global warming, protect wildlife habitats, control the spread of diseases, coordinate air traffic, and much more. As practices of collaboration become instilled into the routines of daily life, we embody a relational ethic. For more on relevant practices of dialogue and collaboration, see Skeie (Chapter 10 in this volume), van Meijl (Chapter 11 in this volume), and M. Gergen (Chapter 12 in this volume).

### *Conscience: responsible to all*

One might take a dim view of relational ethics on the grounds that it stands for so little in itself. Where are the hard questions of the world – questions of human rights, the rise of fascism, racism, and so on? To be sure, nothing within a relational ethic provides a foundation for voicing either support or resistance in such cases. At the same time, however, there are no foundational arguments against voicing preferences in any such cases. This is not for a lack of what might be called ‘conscience’ within the relational orientation. On the contrary, a relational ethic calls for an overflowing conscience. That is, to champion relational process is to treat with respect the intelligibility of all participants, even when other views are disagreeable. It is to carry the voices of all value orientations, to respect their validity within the circumstances in which those values were created. Every voice of value, no matter how heinous to others, carries the assumption of its own good. To be relationally responsible is to defend the rights of all to make themselves intelligible. One may surely resist what is seen as ‘evil action,’ but with a sense of humility –with respect to both one’s own lack of fundamental grounds and the realization that, under identical circumstances, a similar choice could have been made.

What would this expanded form of conscience mean in action? It would favor, for example, supporting movements for social justice, for minority rights, or against tyranny of any kind, but without pathologizing those who might be targets of such movements. It would be to support those who speak out against sexual harassment, but respecting the possibility of alternative

intelligibilities. In many cases, a relational ethic would lend support to the expression of multiple goods. Thousands are escaping the bloodshed and poverty in their home countries and seeking entry – often illegal – into other lands. The legal voice is relevant to such conditions, but it should function as only one voice among many. Here it is important that multiple expressions be set in motion, including those of the immigrants, citizen enclaves, economists, religious figures, educators, and so on.

### *Creativity: confluence in motion*

A relational ethic is an ethic of improvisation and innovation. It is an ethic of improvisation because the daily challenge of sustaining harmonious relations with others requires continuous agility. At base, every conversation is a novel event. The words that are spoken, the way they are spoken, and the context in which they occur are always new. This means that all utterances harbor a certain ambiguity; one's interlocutors may shift the direction of their meaning in many ways. What seems to be a compliment may be construed by its recipient as a subtle criticism, a way of currying favor, a means of demonstrating superiority, an act of kindness, or something else altogether. And responses to this seeming compliment may also be construed in many ways. Whether the pair emerges from the conversation as caring companions or alienated acquaintances depends on coordination in improvisational skills.

A relational ethic also favors innovative action. This is so because all traditions of the good are limited in their forms of action. One may be taught from an early age that 'giving to the poor' is commendable. One may thus be drawn by the plight of the beggar on the street, and feel pangs of guilt in hurriedly passing by. It would not occur to one in this tradition that giving is an evil. And yet, for inner city workers attempting to reduce drug dependency, this is a warranted conclusion. Food and shelter are available to the homeless, it is argued. Money that is begged is likely to maintain a drug habit. The point here is especially important in terms of attempts to bridge contrasting moral traditions. If traditions are limited in their forms of action, then bridging work requires innovation – the creation of forms of action that may invite participation from differing traditions but be new to all. This is particularly relevant in the context of the global clash of moral traditions and the ensuing bloodshed. What Alma (Chapter 4 in this volume) calls a *moral imagination* is required. We may thus applaud the work of various groups – in peace building, community building, interreligious dialogue, mediation, witnessing, repatriation, and the like – attempting to create new forms of dialogue. Rather than settle for the "natural ways we talk with each other," they consciously set out to create new forms of interchange for building or restoring viable relations. Such efforts should not be limited to grassroots organizations, as they often are, but should also be shared by major institutions of business and government. Especially related

to issues of leadership, see also ter Avest (Chapter 5 in this volume) and van Loon and Buster (Chapter 6 in this volume).

*Continuation: process over outcome*

There is a strong tradition in Western culture to seek decisive conclusions. It is within this tradition that *truth*, as a singular and universal account of the world, has had a prevailing sway. And it is within this context that the discourses of *principles*, *certainly*, *clarity*, *resolution*, *resolve*, *grounding*, *outcomes*, *solutions*, and *scores* have played a contributing role. All such discourse lends itself to final fixing, certain knowledge – ensuring a ‘last word.’ From a relational standpoint, a last word is no word at all, as its meaning will not be revealed until others coordinate with it in some way. A last word is the end of conversation, the end of communication, and thus the end of meaning. From a relational standpoint, then, the action focus is not on ultimate outcomes, but in the continuing conversation.

Here the work of Catholic theologian David<sup>OF</sup>Tracy is illuminating. As Tracy (1987) points out, there is a strong tendency in the major religious traditions to fix the nature of God, good and evil, the nature of human beings, the universe, and so on. Religious texts such as the Bible or the Qur’an are often used in this way. As Tracy argues, however, such texts always permit multiple interpretations. Not only are the texts inherently ambiguous, but the differing assumptions, values, visions, and so on that the reader brings to the text will permit or invite different interpretations. For Tracy, this is not a failing, but an invitation to increase the richness of the text. Thus, the readings of texts within various traditions “are different construals of Ultimate Reality itself” (Tracy, 1987, p. 90). For Tracy this is a clarion call to interfaith dialogue, as multiple construals add enriching laminations to our understanding and to the potentials for spiritual life (Tracy, 1991). For Tracy, engaging in such dialogue is itself a spiritual action. Also see Ipgrave (Chapter 8 in this volume) for a discussion of the significance of plural interpretation.

It is in this context that a relational ethic places a premium on the continuous process of relating. Issues of moral import should not be *solved*, thus permitting participants to retire with a sense of righteous satisfaction. Rather, recognizing the ambiguity inherent in such decisions, and the potential for multiple standpoints, there should be no principled end to the conversation. In terms of action, such a logic favors mediation over the structure of contention within the legal system. In the classroom, it also favors dialogic pedagogy with an emphasis on multiplicity in interpretation. Examinations and testing of students should be replaced by more relational processes that enlist multiple voices in an atmosphere of mutual respect. If properly conducted, it favors town meetings, and community-wide projects. In such practices we do not *apply* a relational ethic; we embody it in practice.

## Beyond conclusions

My attempt in this offering has been to find a means of pressing toward an ethical form of life that would avoid the way in which competing ethical positions invite extremist intolerance and bloodshed on the one hand, and a moral lethargy on the other. The hope is that by bringing into focus the very origins of moral action, we might locate a process that could be embraced by all traditions. As proposed, moral action and ethical reasoning emerge within relational process. Thus, it is the life-giving potential within this relational process that must be placed in the forefront of concern. As also reasoned, ethical theory should not proceed, cut apart from the forms of life that might give it meaning. Thus, discussion was opened on various forms of action coherent with proposal for a relational basis of moral action.

To be sure, many issues remain unexamined in this treatment. It may first be apparent that in explicating a relational ethic, most of the discussions in the domains of practice concerned the challenge of moral or ethical conflict; how to bring people together, sustain dialogue, collaborate, and so on. Little was said about the twin problem of pluralism, namely a lethargic relativism. What does a relational ethic offer to those who simply shrug their shoulders in the face of moral issues? It is cavalier to suppose that, even if introduced into our educational systems, the reasoning offered here for a relational ethic would invite a transformation in ethical sensitivity. But, as advanced earlier, ethics in the abstract are little more than language games. The challenge is to embed the abstractions within forms of cultural life. In my view, the beginning of ethical consciousness lies, then, in participation in ethically relevant forms of life.

Most children learn at an early age not to lie, cheat, or steal, and for most, the lessons are sustained for a lifetime. Very few, however, would be able to provide an in-depth rationale for why these are unethical acts. Thus, in confronting the issue of moral lethargy, the primary emphasis may properly be placed on instituting forms of activity that privilege positive relational process. In education, as pointed out, pedagogies of collaboration are highly consistent with a relational ethic. Dialogic classroom practices can foster mutual understanding and tolerance, along with an appreciation for the creative outcomes of working together in groups. Much the same may be said of the increasing prominence of project learning, in which students work collaboratively toward a goal. Testing and grading practices generally work against generative relationships. They invite alienation and distrust among students, between students and teachers, and between students and their families. There is great advantage in replacing traditional assessment with practices of evaluation built into dialogic and collaborative processes, along with shared reflection on learning process (Gergen & Gill, forthcoming). In this case we build moral muscle not through declarations of the good, but through ethically informed practice.

A second significant silence in the present account concerns cases of illegal and/or onerous action. Consider here, for example, acts of pedophilia,

murder, or terrorism. While illegal and detestable, the actor can offer arguments for their intelligibility. Now, much of the earlier discussion in this chapter presumed the possibility of interchange – the bridges for communication could be built between otherwise disagreeing parties. Mutual understanding and transformation might result. In the cases of actions of deep repugnance, such bridges would seem impossible. While one might come to understand why these acts were intelligible, they would still be roundly condemned, and incarceration enthusiastically endorsed. At the same time, such a conclusion would lead us into a *cul de sac*; it would suggest that a relational ethic is just fine until it isn't. Can we extend the ethic, then, to include cases of deep repugnance? Again, continuing discussion is needed; but again, we gain some purchase by considering realms of practice. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, healing the wounds of apartheid, is exemplary. The increasing numbers of restorative justice programs also point in a promising direction. And a relational ethic would entail abandoning the death penalty.

Yet, while opening a space for an overarching ethical orientation, the present attempt is scarcely complete. It cannot be complete in principle, because if the attempt is itself coherent with the ethic it espouses, it is essential to sustain multiparty deliberation. One might say that the proposal is for an ever-emerging theory and practice. The present account is but the beginning of a conversation.

## Notes

- 1 See also Taylor (2007) on the rise of the secular age.
- 2 See also Stout (1988) on the failure of foundationalism and its contribution to moral malaise.
- 3 A resistance to religious foundationalism is scarcely the result of multiple and competing claims. The general drift of the West toward secularism, often traced to the period of the Enlightenment, is clearly relevant (cf. Taylor 2007). Many hold that the secularist drift is now prevailing globally. As Bullard (2017) reports in *National Geographic*, the “world’s newest great religion is no religion.”
- 4 A preparatory note: Concepts of ‘the good,’ the ‘moral,’ and the ‘ethical’ are closely bound. In my view, the sense of ‘good’ functions as a primitive (we may find it ‘good’ to have peace and quiet); when the sense of good is codified or articulated we speak of it as ‘morality’ (it is a moral good that we don’t disrupt others’ wellbeing, for example, by playing loud music); and when we provide a conceptual account of why such morality is imperative, we enter the field of ethics.
- 5 The remainder of this discussion draws from Gergen (2007, 2009).
- 6 Also see McIntyre’s (2007) discussion of the way in which these ways of life are realized in individual identity and responsibility.

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