Social Theory in Context:
Relational Humanism

Kenneth J. Gergen

What is the "the mark of the social" in contemporary theory? Or more generally, how are we to regard the demarcation of a phenomenon or a domain of scholarly inquiry? If we remain within the long honored and companionate discourses of the Enlightenment and "the scientific world view," the answers are readily forthcoming. In comprehending the world in which we live, in submitting it to rational analysis and empirical scrutiny, ontological clarity is imperative. We must carefully delineate among entities, or else thinking becomes clouded and research may become irrelevant. Clarity in such matters is also important for purposes of professional efficacy. With domains of study carefully delineated, the goals of the various professions are legitimated, we avoid redundancy of effort, and we encourage scholarship in depth. In the present context, to distinguish the social from the psychological, the interpersonal from the societal, the relational from the autonomous, then, is to lay the foundations for productive and complementary disciplines of inquiry.

Yet, as scholarship has accelerated exponentially within the present century, we have also become fitfully aware of the limitations of this "rage to order." As various enclaves lay claim to territories of the real, so do they insulate themselves from the dialogues of neighboring (and typically "less important") domains. When experts from otherwise alienated encampments do attempt collaboration, their models are often ill-fitting: hypothesis testing in one domain conflicts with multi-variate modeling in another; the organismic metaphors favored by one clash with the mechanistic metaphors of the other; nativist explanations collide with environmentalist; and so on. Further, each circumscribed basis of explanation appears capable of infinite expansion, ultimately absorbing all human action in its propositional corpus (for example, tracing all action to cognitive schemata, bio-genetics, micro-social process, etc.). All contending forms of explanation are reduced to the single frame and alterior argots dismissed as irrelevant or obfuscating. Finally, we have witnessed in the past decade a mushrooming of hybrid areas of scholarship - Black studies, women's studies, environmental studies, cultural studies, queer studies, and more. Here and elsewhere we find a generalized restlessness with the traditional disciplinary boundaries. Urban sociology begins to converge with anthropology, social psychology with social linguistics, psychology with evolutionary biology, cultural anthropology with literary analysis, and so on. In all these adventures, demarcation on either phenomenal or explanatory grounds is obstructive. We gain most, it is argued, when "language goes on holiday."

More importantly, various intellectual movements of the past thirty years raise

serious question with attempts to delineate domains of study. Quine's Word and Object raised early doubt in the possibility of tying a descriptive language unequivocally to an array of observables, and Saussurian semiotics had demonstrated the fundamentally arbitrary relationship between language and referent. Developments in both the history of science and the sociology of knowledge place in jeopardy all demarcations based on characteristics of "phenomena in themselves." As widely demonstrated, ontological commitments and their instantiations are byproducts of communal interchange; the world as it is makes no obvious demands on our forms of theorizing. With referentially based meaning thus replaced by a communal (cultural, historical) account, the particularly political and ideological components of demarcation are drawn into focus. To demand a particular arrangement of discourse, and a related domain of practices, can be seen as authoritarian, self-serving, and oppressive to all who fail to acquiesce. Developments in literary deconstruction theory lend further credibility to this view. For Derrida and others, the meaning of any utterance is not self-standing, but dependent on a vast history of language use in which this utterance is embedded. To treat the meaning of a word as transparent and trans-contextual is to deny its history, to suppress its broad web of interdependencies, and prevent its potentials for creative and variegated usage.

It is against this backdrop that I wish in the present exercise to move more dialogically. I do not wish to argue against drawing any distinctions; but rather, against distinctions removed from historical and cultural context. Drawing from the above analysis, to remove distinctions threatens the destruction of community. The challenge, then, is to place distinctions into the context of ongoing interchange. Rather than determining in the abstract and in advance what constitutes the "mark of the social," my attempt here will be to enter a longstanding dialogue of broad significance, and to introduce a particular conception of the social that may press that conversation forward in interesting and potentially significant ways. The impetus then is not toward Apollonian purity, an ultimately satisfying point of respite, but a Dionysian brawl in which a catalytic clash of discourses may yield unanticipated moves in meaning. The experiment is one in which I wish to enter a specific dialogue of longstanding, introduce adversarially a preliminary and necessarily ambiguous conception of the social, and in pressing the dialogue forward move toward a richer and more pragmatically useful conception. The more elaborated view will attain its meaning within, and because of, its placement within this specific context.

Social Construction in the Humanist Tradition

In the halcyon years of French existentialist thought, a broad stirring developed among many French humanist thinkers. Existentialist theory did seem to embody much that was essential to the humanist. The pivotal commitment of existentialist theory was to individual agency; the theory was preeminently a celebration of human subjectivity and freedom. Yet, existentialist thought also seemed to lack a very special ingredient, any sense of moral or ethical direction. Too often, it seemed, existentialists sacrificed ethical sensibility for the "gratuitous act" - the spontaneous

burst of unencumbered action. In doing so the existential hero denied the significance of history, culture, and community - any commitment to the good of others. Sartre's little volume, Existentialism and Humanism, served as a reply to his critics, and in this volume the attempt was made to show that existentialist theory did indeed lay the groundwork for moral concern.

Sartre's particular arguments were scarcely convincing. As he proposed, we are essentially responsible for our actions. But in our choices for ourselves, we "choose for all men (sic)." (p.29) We do this because we always chose what we feel is valuable, estimable, or better, "and nothing can be better for us unless it is better for all."(p. 29) Why one person's good should speak for all, what we are to do with competing goods, and how such a position can speak to any of the abiding evils of society are left unanswered. These problems not withstanding, the present offering echoes Sartre's concern with reconciling a thesis that ostensibly flies in the face of the humanist concerns with certain aims of the humanist tradition. Specifically I shall argue, as we move toward a theoretical imaginary in which the social precedes the personal, so do we undermine major tenets of the humanist intelligibility. Because many humanist ideals are deeply woven into the fabric of western tradition, and the erosion of these ideals would constitute a major loss, the "shift to the social" must be viewed with circumspection.

I shall carry out this analysis from the standpoint of what may be viewed as a radical social constructionism. I am here taking constructionist texts to include all recent sources treating the manner in which language is used by persons to generate intelligibility, and the repercussions of such intelligibilities for the human condition - thus including within the dialogue a substantial range of writing in the sociology of knowledge, the history of science, discourse analysis, critical theory, feminist theory, semiotics, literary theory, rhetorical analysis, communication theory, hermeneutic theory, and postmodern political theory and philosophy.

These dialogues scarcely yield a univocal account of social construction; there are numerous tensions among grounding assumptions. Many contributors continue to hold fast to various forms of psychological functioning (e.g. intending, thinking, experiencing); others wish to maintain a materialist metaphysics; and still others presume the existence of macro-social institutions. A radical social construction places all these presumptions in brackets. Avoiding the objectification implied in these accounts, terms of psychology, materialism, and macro-sociology (among others) are taken to be integers within discursive practices. They owe their intelligibility to relational process, that is, forms of coordination among two or more persons. Linguistic meaning is born, then, not within the minds of single individuals, but from coordinated action - or "joint-action" in Shotter's (1993) terms. One may speak, but the meaning of the utterance is deferred until granted (temporarily) through another's mode or relationship to the utterance, the meaning of which is open to further supplementation by the speaker, and so on. In effect, from the process of coordinated actions the full array of intelligible utterances is generated, including the account of constructionism itself. The precise meaning of relatedness, then, remains

indeterminate, and dependent upon further coordinations within relationship. We cannot, then, locate relationship within language, but can through continued dialogue generate the sense of the palpable.

In many respects, as constructionist dialogues have developed, grown strong, and concatenated across the humanities and social sciences they seemed for a time to be a valuable friend to the humanist. In its critique of the behavioral science rage to reduce human action to scale points, biological urges, response potentials, mental mechanisms and the host of other scrofulous metaphors with which the profession has attempted to colonize humanity, constructionist writings added a powerful new arsenal of weapons. In this sense constructionist thought played a parallel role to existentialism of earlier decades, significantly strengthening the humanist voice in the social sciences. Yet, as the dialogue has unfolded, humanist thinkers have begun to find much at fault in the constructionist expansion. On closer inspection, many conceptions and values central to the humanist tradition, seem to be abandoned or destroyed by constructionist thought. In its rampant relativism, it is said, constructionist theory lacks moral or ethical commitment; it offers no reason for rejecting the most vile and inhumane actions. Its "anything goes" mentality seems morally bankrupt, even repulsive.

In the present offering my attempt is, first to examine the critical implications of a fully extended constructionism for the humanist tradition, and second to explore the potentials of such thought for engendering humane forms of cultural life. These challenges, in tandem, should succeed in extending the meaning and implications of a particular mode of defining and explaining the social. In the first instance, I will argue that humanists have generally underestimated the critical implications of constructionism for their project. "Rampant relativism" is only the beginning of what might be viewed as a wholesale slide into humanist despair. However, as I shall then endeavor to argue, one may locate within the bosom of constructionist writing an alternative horizon of understanding. And if we play out the potentials of this conception of the social, we confront the possibility of redrawing the face of humanism. We locate in a specifically relational humanism a new and significant means of realizing traditional visions of human well-being. Further, it is within this elaboration that we acquire a richer elaboration of a uniquely social account of human action.

Social Constructionism: a Humanist Damage Report

As a general surmise, it is my view that the forms of argument deriving from constructionist dialogues - fully extended - are fully lethal in their potential. That is, they have the capability of undermining, dissolving, or rendering suspicious - even meaningless - any form of advocacy, declaration, authority, or protest - including their own. The forms of argument developed within constructionist spheres taken together, are little short of "doomsday weapons" in the evolving generation of human meaning. If allowed full expression, there simply is nothing left to say - or do. For present purposes, I simply wish to play out some of the potentials of these dialogues,

as they apply in this case to pivotal assumptions in the humanist tradition. I will not attribute responsibility for any of these critiques to any particular individual (which itself would be problematic in light of constructionist arguments), but will simply allow the criticisms unadulterated expression relevant to several pivotal assumptions in the humanist tradition.

Subjective Experience: In the humanist view individual, subjective experience is of paramount value. One's conscious experience, it is held, is indeed inseparable from one's identity as a human being. (The value of an accident victim who will never recover consciousness, but whose life can be sustained by machines, rapidly becomes marginal.) To prize the subjectivity of each individual is thus to render the project of humanity viable. But, asks the constructionist critic, what is the warrant for the preeminent presumption of private experience, a state of inner experience as against an outer reality, a psychological as opposed to a material reality? This subject-object binary cannot be substantiated by virtue of "what there is;" there are no viable philosophical justifications for the distinction. Is this metaphysical commitment not, then, a byproduct of a uniquely situated cultural history? Are there not myriad other ways of conceptualizing human consciousness? And indeed, are there not multiple characterizations of human action extant in the world that make no mention of human consciousness? And if the concept of human subjectivity is thus optional, a cultural construction of our own making, then what is to be said in support of its collective objectification? Is the concept not a justificatory device for a tradition of self-contained individualism, in which the state of my subjectivity gains paramount importance, and in which narcissism becomes a cultural pastime?

Human Agency: The concept of human agency is a close companion to that of individual subjectivity. It is within the realm of individual consciousness that responsible deliberation and choice take place. It is deliberative choice that gives consciousness its distinctive character. However, the presumption of human agency adds important dimension to the traditional humanist project, inasmuch as it places the origins of action, and thus of the good society, within the individual. Because of human agency we may chose the welfare of others, and we may desist in patterns of conduct inimical to them. However, again the pariah of constructionist criticism enters from the wings. In this case ample preparation had been made in other intellectual quarters. Already the presumption of agency had been badly damaged by 20th century science, arguing as it had that individual action is best understood in terms of its antecedent conditions, and that the concept of agency is an unfortunate and mystifying holdover from an obfuscating, medieval metaphysics.

However, constructionist arguments add still further laminations of doubt. The concept of agency begins to lose gravity in our preceding deconstruction of consciousness. So fully conflated are the concepts of consciousness and agency that to dispense with one is virtually to abandon the other. (It is scarcely intelligible to say, for example, that personal agency is beyond conscious control.) Further, the constructionist questions, why should we presume that there is an originary source (a crypto-speaker or Doppelganger) lying somewhere behind and pulling the strings of

public action? Not only are there no compelling grounds for such a presumption, but to make arguments of this form is to create a double problematic - not only that of explaining the public actions themselves, but additionally, that which presumably lies beneath. This would be akin to presuming a god who directs the motions of the clouds or the eruptions of volcanoes. The presumption generates a double concern - with both the natural conditions of the weather, and again, with the sentiments of the supernatural being. Must we, however, gain access to these exotic sentiments in order to predict the weather.

And, the critic continues, in what sense is free and unfettered deliberation ever possible? How can I make a moral decision that is truly my own - beyond the influence of others? If I took away all the cultural language - a language of justice, moral worth, equality, and the like - on what grounds could I deliberate? If we empty the individual of culture, leaving him/her completely free to chose, would we not find ourselves with an empty vessel - unable even to conceptualize what it is to have a choice?

Individual Liberty: For many humanists the concept of liberty serves as the critical component of the tradition. We must, it is extolled, value the liberty of each and every individual - endowed as we are with unique subjectivities and the capacity for free and responsible action. Oppression in any form is to deny the individual expression of his or her fundamental humanity. It is such thinking that is foundational as well to the view of inalienable human rights, universal rights of free individual action - without interference or control of others. However, with subjective experience now impugned by constructionist arguments, as well the related concept of individual agency, how are we to rationalize the concept of liberty? If conscious deliberation proves to be a cultural construction, along with the presumption of human agency, have we not undermined the concept of liberty and the associated commitment to fundamental rights of man? And, suggest many feminists, careful note should be taken of the convenient phrase, "rights of man." For has the valorization of liberty not primarily been of androcentric origin? And does it not lend justification to male liberty, in particular, which is to say, freedom from commitment, from family, from community, indeed all forms of interdependence?

Of course, it may be countered, we need not view the concept of liberty as foundational; we can take a more instrumental approach in which the term and its cognates ("rights" "freedom," "justice") are essentially used to condemn oppressive conditions in society. Liberty, in this case, serves both as a term of moral evaluation and as well a battle cry of emancipation. This is certainly a reasonable rejoinder, and many would consider the gains of various activist groups (e.g.women, blacks, gays) as supportive evidence. However, this view scarcely suffices. For in a world of pluralistic moralities, oppressions can be claimed from multiple standpoints, and one group's emancipation is another's enslavement. Here we should keep in mind the incremental increase over the past decade in "claims to rights." So pervasive and vituperative are such claims that suspicious if not calloused columnists now speak of

the "rights babble." Clearly, liberty as a form of rhetoric is insufficient.

Moral responsibility: As intimated above, the concepts of subjectivity and agency form close companions to the presumption of moral responsibility. While the individual is fundamentally free to chose, such choice is accompanied by a responsibility for action that will not injure or unjustifiably constrain others. Each individual may thus be held responsible for his/her actions, and may be penalized or rewarded by dint of his/her conduct toward others. The ethical or humane society thus rests on the moral responsibility of the individuals composing that society. Yet, as we have explored the problematics of consciousness, individual agency, and liberty, we also find the justification for moral responsibility rapidly dissolving. How indeed is one to be responsible to oneself, when there is no private, unacculturated self to offer guidance? How could the morally advanced individual generate a set of personal moral principles, except from the repository of cultural intelligibilities at his/her disposal? And, in matters of moral deliberation, if one does hearken to the cultural installation within, then which of the voices should be favored? For are we not all, in a Bakhtinian sense, akin to polyphonic novels, speaking in multiple voices, reflecting multiple traditions? If we inherit a pluralism of moral intelligibilities, on what grounds could we select among them - save from the standpoint of yet another inherited intelligibility? And, finally, if moral deliberation is inherently cultural, then in what sense are we justified in holding individuals responsible for the the humane society? Isn't individual blame thus a mystification of our condition of interdependence? I shall return to this issue shortly.

From Individual to Relational Humanism

These accumulated arguments - all common within constructionist dialogues more generally considered - erode the very foundations of traditional humanism, grounding assumptions on which many have placed our hopes for encouraging a moral, humane and solidary society. Further, there are no easy counters to such arguments - other than an ostrich-headed antipathy - inasmuch as the rebuttals stand as well to be undone on grounds of their ideological, rhetorical and constructed character. And, should we succumb to the powers of deconstructive arguments, and turn them reflexively on themselves - essentially deconstructing the deconstruction - then we simply have no room for further conversation. All dialogue terminates. But we need not conclude the present discussion in this dolorous condition. Indeed, the sense of nihilism is warranted only from within the humanist tradition itself. If for the nonce we can bracket the humanistic perspective, that is, consider it one possible account among many, we may then inquire into 1) the potential of humanist thought to engender the humane and solidary society, and 2) the positive potentials inherent in radical constructionism.

In the initial case, it is not at all clear that the humanist legacy can deliver as hoped. Surely there is little evidence that beliefs in individual agency, freedom, and moral deliberation - central to the western tradition from at least the Enlightenment to the present - have contributed to the humane treatment of human beings. Massive

obliteration of peoples in western culture has not diminished markedly since the 17th century - that epoch often identified with the origins of humanist thought. Further, as we move rapidly toward conditions of a global village, it is not clear that humanistic assumptions can help us to grapple with alterity - others who are not like us in their values and beliefs. Not only does humanism eschew contrary metaphysics (e.g. materialism, constructionism), but it favors a conception of the individual as fundamentally isolated, alone within his/her subjective experience, ideally generating his/her own decisions without the intrusive influence of mere social opinion. The very best that might be hoped from such a perspective is that the coming world condition would allow for peaceful coexistence - each individual, and each cultural enclave simply persisting in its own self-determined way - independent of the others. However, world conditions no longer allow us to live in such independence; we now recognize our common existence on a ship that shows every possibility of sinking. Under such conditions, to celebrate the preeminence of the individual is to invite an ingurgitating conflict of peoples seeking to save their own skin.

At this point I wish to turn the discussion in a more positive direction. Rather than ruing and retrenching, let us reconsider the constructionist arguments, and more pointedly, explore the implicative network of assumptions for more promising potentials. When we move beyond the deluge, are there implications for the creation of a humane society? Of course, there are many lines of constructionist argumentation, and there are substantial differences in their entailments. However, there is one domain of discourse which, in my opinion, harbors significant promise for humane relationships in a shrinking world. Consider in particular the emerging network of interlocking arguments regarding language. Constructionist thinkers generally abandon the view that our language about the world (or the self) functions as a mirror or map, or that it bears any transparent or necessary connection to an array of existants outside itself. In contrast, constructionists have largely favored some form of Wittgensteinian or use-based (neo-pragmatist) account of language. Here the emphasis is placed on meaning as embedded within language use, words deriving their meaning from the attempt of people to coordinate their actions within various communities. In this vein, the meaning of language originates within ongoing relations among people. The individual mind is abandoned as the originary source of meaning, and replaced by relationship. Or to extend the implications still further, our capacity to mean (to think, to be intelligible, to count ourselves as individual agents at all) is born of relationship. Relationship precedes individual existence, and not vice versa.

If we can grant the preeminence of relationship in fostering human intelligibility, we are positioned to reconsider the foundational assumptions within the humanist tradition. Can we, in particular, re-vision the family of humanist concepts in terms of human relationship - altering our understanding of them such that they are rooted in relationship? And, as we attempt to reconceptualize these concepts in terms of a relational ontology, let us consider their implications for human well being:

Experience as Relationally Grounded: Earlier we questioned the subject-object binary

on which the concept of a personal or subjective experience is grounded. Let us consider, then how we might abandon the binary, and attempt to reconceptualize experience in terms of relationship. Rather than holding experience to be akin to an internal mirror reflecting an exterior reality, let us consider experience as a form of relational action. Experience in this case is not a specific form of action, separate in kind from all others, but action indexed in terms of relationship - linking what we presume in western culture to be individual being and other "entities" within the conventional ontology. "To experience," then, is to engage in a relationship or a oneness - a being with. This kind of reconceptualization draws importantly from the phenomenological tradition from Husserl to Merleau-Ponty. However, unlike phenomenology, it does not recognize the subject-object unity as foundational. Rather, the very idea of experience as a relational action is itself a construction, deriving in this case from a particular tradition of dialogue.

As the same time, we must expand on this conception in an important way. In particular, we must trace the character of the momentary "experience" to the broader array of relations in which one is embedded. The experiential action acquires its intelligibility within processes of relationship. On this account, to experience happiness or sadness is to manifest a particular immersion in a cultural tradition. My moment-to-moment sense of the real is premised on my history within the culture; in effect, there would be no experience of "happiness" save through a particular array of coordinated practices within the culture (Relationships, for example, in which we come to agree that happiness exists and these are the conditions in which we feel it.). Thus the phenomenal unity of experience (what we generally index as "perception" or "experience of the world") would function as an extension of relatedness. Or to put it otherwise, in significant degree, "conscious experience" is relatedness speaking through us. Relatedness furnishes the forestructure for the condition of our immediate immersion in onrushing life.

If we are successful in recasting "subjective experience" as a relational process, we are no longer invited to consider our subjectivities as isolated, cut away, or alienated from others, beyond the comprehension of others. Rather, we sense ourselves as both constituted by, and constituting, the other. In a certain sense, we are each other, our conscious experience born of each other. For me to make sense here and now is in essence to duplicate you, to act as a partial replication of you. Should I fail in this duplication, I would also fail to achieve a comprehensible action. In a broad sense, I owe all that I value to my relationships, and all that I find grievous can be altered only through relationship. Individual subjectivity, then, is not a mark of differentiation, but of relatedness. To seek a better quality of life is not a narcissistic endeavor but a communal one.

Agency as Relational Engagement: Rather than viewing individuals as originary sources of their own actions (an assumption that casts the individual in the image of God), let us abandon the entire voluntarism-determinism binary. To speak either of these symbiotic languages is optional, and we are not obliged either to chose between them or to sustain one pole at the expense of the other. Rather, let us consider

individual action as always already embedded within patterns of relationship. One acquires impetus (indexed as a sense of motive, consciousness of value, or desire) by virtue of the manner in which one is enmeshed in relationship. For example, why do we strive for high self-esteem if not by virtue of our particular location in western culture at a particular point in its history? We possess telos or direction in life not because of some inner possession of motive, calling, or biological proclivity, but by virtue of the forms of relationship of which we are a part. Agency, then, may be more usefully conceptualized as a form of relational engagement.(To want is to "want with," to "chose" is to reflect the condition of one's relatedness.)

If we do envision the impulse toward action as a byproduct of relational engagement, we may also refigure the institutions of blame and responsibility. For if we hold single individuals responsible for their actions, we again position ourselves symbolically as God - here the supreme judge of good and evil. And in our godlike form, we effectively deny our participation in the culture, treating ourselves as the overseeing eye, suspended above the acts of mortals. In contrast, if we envision action as a relational outcome, our sensibilities are horizontally recast. Specifically, a stance of relational responsibility is invited, one in which we approach heinous and egregious action with a curiosity of context. That is, we broaden the network of participation, to consider how the relationships in which the erring individual was involved (personal, mediated, and environmental) have brought about such an end. And, as we broaden the relational context so as to include multiple others, so should we consider their relationships and how they impinge on the actions in question. And if our concern is sufficiently great, we may eventually reach the point in which we realize our own complicity in the action. Blame and responsibility are thus distributed within the community, and indeed the culture. We are all invited thereby to join together in actions that would establish more promising future. (Here, for example, we might consider our own participation in the problem of drugs, rape, homicide, and joblessness.)

Liberty as Polyphonic Expression: On the traditional humanist view, the concept of liberty functions as a condition of free-floating individuality, an expression of pure and unencumbered agency. The individual may chose irrespective of, and indeed with some suspicion of, the remainder of the culture. If conditions seem oppressive, they are distended from the self - typically attributed to blameworthy others. If a marriage, a friendship, a community, or even a political condition becomes disagreeably binding, we are moved by humanistic discourse, to "free ourselves from the shackles," to liberate ourselves from social constraint, and restore the state of pure freedom or independence. As Bellah and his colleagues have argued (1985), such thinking strongly encourages the dissolution of marriages, and the avoidance of communal or political participation. "If the relationship does not benefit me, if it harms my development, then I will chose freedom."

In contrast, the relational view proposes that we cannot escape the requirements of relationship to locate a condition of pure agency. We are never free of relationships. And indeed, the very sense of being an individual agent, the senses of pleasure and

anguish derived from daily interchange, and the motive to seek freedom are all premised on a history of relatedness. Invited, then, is first a diminution in the tendency to blame the other or the conditions, and an increased concern with the ways in which we participate in the conditions deemed oppressive. Further, attention is directed to the broader patterns of relationship that figure in or contribute to the present condition (e.g. economic relationships, man-machine relationships). Finally, consideration must be directed to the alternative forms of relationship into which one would be propelled should "freedom" be achieved. A condition of free and autonomous action - disconnected from the ongoing social world, simply leaves one spinning in the residues of relationships of the past - in the long run potentially incapacitating one from full participation in the unfolding of cultural life. We do not move from the pressures of engagement to freedom, but from one set of relational requirements to another.

Morality as Infinite Conversation: Earlier I questioned whether several centuries of commitment to the idea of moral principles has actually contributed to humane circumstances. While it would be difficult to draw an affirmative conclusion, we could, in a very rough way view moral deliberation as superior in its effects on humankind to the force of arms. The use of moral discourse in settling complex problems of conflict and anguish represents, in this sense, a positive step in cultural evolution. However, moral principles also stand as justifications for the most brutal actions - from the crusades and the Grand Inquisition to the slaying of an abortion specialists by pro-life advocates. Further, as we move rapidly into a world in which we daily confront sub-cultures or civilizations whose moral principles differ from our own, moral principles reach their upper level of efficacy. With the clash of incommensurables, a resort to moral justification typically intensifies the conflict. The "global village" requires a new step in the evolution of cultural resources.

Let us consider the contours of a relational alternative. As we have seen, the relational emphasis favored by much constructionist writing would first of all reduce the tendency to place moral judgment on the other (or the self). We are, instead, invited to spread the concern to the network of relations from which issues of conflict or wrong-doing arise. But how, on this account, are we to confront conditions of incommensurable moral traditions, cases in which groups find each others' traditions of the good intolerable? In this case, because of its emphasis on the communal construction of the real and the right, a relational view would place the strong emphasis on altering discursive forms. The problem would not be to "settle the issue" of moral superiority, or rationally to adjudicate territories, but to locate means of mingling the discourses, enabling alterior signifiers to play freely - to form new combinations, new metaphors, and ultimately new forms of interdependence.

The important point here is that the relational orientation does not obliterate moral deliberation and a concern with moral principles. To do so would be to eliminate tradition, and without tradition there would be no intelligibility. Rather, the attempt is to respond to situations traditionally favoring a moral judgment, with an invitation to conversation - to a particular form of relationship. Moral principles have the ultimate

effect of terminating conversation. One must ultimately lodge one's rationality in an unwarrantable declaration: "This is where I stand." "Beyond this point I cannot go." "This is right, because it is right." In effect, disconnection. In contrast, the relational view urges us as theorists, human scientists and practitioners to seek ways - multiple ways - of generating integrative conversation. For if we can but join in the construction of such cultural resources, we stand to make a contribution to the expression and peaceful interpolation of multiple voices - both in the culture and the world at large. In my view, such an imaginary is congenial with the deepest hopes of the humanistic tradition.

Explicating the Social

The attempt here has been to put forward a rudimentary conception of "the social" within the context of a particular discursive tradition, and from the matrix of tensions thereby created, to press this conception toward further articulation. In this way we avoid a priori and context free commitments, and set out to generate the meaning of "social" within a dialogic space. Within the dialogue we stand to open new vistas of intelligibility. We thus began with a vision of the social implicit in much social constructionist writing, one which holds meaning itself to be a byproduct of processes of communal coordination. This orienting commitment was then placed within the context of the liberal humanist tradition, in which the attempt has been to derive foundations for moral action from conceptions of individual agency. Within this context, the constructionist view seems morally vacuous. So as to explore the weaknesses of the liberal tradition, and to counter its critical assertions, a constructionist relationalism was set in motion.

As we initially found, various arguments within the constructionist colloquy could satisfactorily undermine both the legitimacy and the intelligibility of moral foundations based on humanistic individualism. These critiques, in turn, closed out certain descriptive and explanatory options for what would become the contrasting account of the social. Specifically, this view of the social could not be based on traditional assumptions of individual interaction (e.g. individual, conscious, self-determining agents coming together to form a social world). With such forms of intelligibility now bracketed, the attempt was to begin the articulation of a relational replacement for individual humanism. In doing so, a view of the social emerged in which:

- Recourse to individual beings proved necessary, owing to a tradition in which relationships are inherently made up of independent parts. The question, then, is how at once to participate within this tradition and simultaneously shed the semantic baggage which it imposes. By implication, this was done by using the concept of the individual person as a conversational indexical for physical bodies making up a relationship. However, it is simultaneously to recognize that these singular bodies are, in terms of what we take to be human action (as opposed to physical behavior) manifestations of relatedness. By tradition, we take persons to be independent entities, but it is this tradition which is placed in question. Rather, the individual actor

is essentially a relational integer, and gains meaning as an actor through the relational process.

- It proved necessary to reassert a language of "experience," and by implication, the full array of mental predicates pivotal to the humanist tradition. Again, however, the attempt was to recast the meaning of experience and its cognates. This was done by de-objectification, pragmatization, and indexicalization. That is, mental terms were first cut loose from their putative objects (or referents in a specifically mental universe). Second, such terms were be cast as integers within processes of relational pragmatics. Such terms don't refer, then, to processes that generate relationships, but are constitutive of relational patterns themselves. Finally, such terms function indexically within relationships (e.g. ongoing conversation) to refer to conditions of relationship ("myself"/"my environment").

In a broad sense, we began with a conception of the social which feeds from the traditional binary of individual-social. That is, the individualist conception was essential to give meaning to the contrary alternative of a radical relationalism. Yet, as the relational theoretic was further elaborated, so did it begin to absorb the language of the individual, recasting individual attributes and processes in terms of a relational ontology. Slowly the binary moorings were cast off. At the same time, we find that the relational ontology permits neither critique nor completion. On its grounds, all critique is born of relationship, and its terms are given meaning within relationship. Critique can furnish no foundations, no transcendent rationality, or "good arguments" without collaborative assent. To deny the collaborative process would be to remove the possibility for meaning itself. At the same time, the ontology of radical relationship remains forever incomplete. This state of polymorphous contingency is essential, for to objectify and canonize its suppositions would be to remove the language from the dialogic sphere in which its meaning is born and reborn as the conversation moves on. The quest for intransumtability - immortality for the emanations of individual psyche (spirit/mind) - is to approach the void.

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