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Transformative Dialogue: Coordinating Conflicting Moralities

by
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Foreword

The annual Gary Lindberg Award was established by the College of Liberal Arts in 1986 in memory of Professor Gary Lindberg of the Department of English. Professor Lindberg was an exceptional scholar and outstanding teacher whose dedication and service to the University of New Hampshire as well as the wider community exemplified the highest academic standards and ideals.

In memory of Professsor Lindberg and as a means of publicly supporting superior faculty accomplishment, the College of Liberal Arts annually recognizes one truly outstanding scholar and teacher within the College. The award carries a $5,000 stipend. The recipient is invited to present the Liberal Arts Lecture to the public during the following academic year.

Transformative Dialogue: Coordinating Conflicting Moralities

I would like to invite you, the reader, to reflect on some issues that I believe are crucial for us to consider. We live in a world of differences and conflict. We are globally connected in ways that have not been previously possible, highlighting differences and conflicts of significant proportion. Daily people die due to our collective inability to navigate our differences. Many of us feel the desire to do things differently – to understand, to connect – yet, we are frozen by uncertainty. I would like to offer some rudimentary ideas about what we might do to confront this state of affairs. The central requirement for us is to move beyond either/or thinking and enter a space where we consider the very processes we engage in constructing the social order. Dialogue, a very specific form of communication, offers us a way to step into and embrace the diversity of moral stances that we confront in today's world.

Richard Rorty says, "Intractable moral conflicts are not easily resolved and, in many cases, may not be resolvable. Indeed, many such conflicts should not be resolved, but they can be argued in more humane, enlightening, and respectful ways, at least 'continuing the conversation'" (p. 394). Let me offer a colorful illustration of Rorty's idea of more humane, enlightening, and respectful ways of engaging our differences as narrated by Sally Miller Gearhart, a self-proclaimed activist:

> Five years ago when I'd see a logging truck loaded with redwoods or old oak, I'd shoot the driver the finger. He'd (could it ever be a she?) shoot one right back at me and then go home and put a bumper sticker on his truck that would read, "Hey, Environmentalist, try wiping your ass with a spotted owl!" Three years ago, I was a shade more gentle (sic). I would stop dead in my tracks, glare at the driver . . . and make sure he read my lips: "Fuck you, mister." Then

he'd go home and add another bumper sticker to his truck: "Earth First! We'll log the other planets later."

These days . . . I'm practicing acknowledging loggers as "fellow travelers on Planet Earth," as Trudy the bag lady would say, doing what they do just as I do what I do; I'm laying off any attempt to change or even judge them, and I'm trusting that acknowledgment of our kinship can make a positive difference in the texture of all our lives.

When I meet an erstwhile "enemy," instead of moving immediately into horse posture or splitting the scene entirely . . . I look for the joining point, the place where we are the same, where we can meet each other as beings who share the experience of living together on this planet. I introduce that into the conversation, and we talk about the thing that belongs to both of us . . . When I can't find any common ground upon which to stand with some "enemy," like a logger, then I ask him to take me into his world for a day or two so I can hear him and his buddies talk about what it means to be out of work . . . with a family to feed.

When all's said and done . . . I like "joining" better than fighting or running away . . . I've learned a lot. I've learned that it is never individual men/people who are my "enemy" but complex systems of exploitation that have emerged from centuries of alienation and per-petuation of violence; it is these systems and that con-sciousness – not the people – that I can, with integrity, hope to change. I've learned that my pain, anger and / or hatred accomplish nothing except to render me in-effectual and to increase the problem by adding to the pain, anger, and hatred that already burden the world. I've learned that whole parts of my identified "enemy" are really my own self, walking around in different cos-tume. And in the moments where we've found some joining space, I've learned that, though I still may not choose to spend time with him, I do feel a kinship or love for that killer, that exploiter . . . If I can still hold

strong to my standard of what is just and decent and appropriate behavior for human beings and yet go about my life with a new awareness, with joy in the process instead of my former debilitating pain, and if I can do all this without creating and maintaining "enemies," then I have to try it. (Miller Gearhart, 1995, pp. 8-11)

My work is centered on precisely the transition Gearhart describes in her approach toward "the enemy." It is an approach that can be commonly misunderstood. To some, Gearhart's approach might be summarized as conflict avoidant. Others might describe her way of acting as idealistic and thus, no solution to the moral conflict at hand. To me, Gearhart's story illustrates neither conflict avoidance nor idealism. I see it as one illustration of how we might coordinate conflicting moralities.

There are two issues I would like to address here that resonate with Rorty's idea and Gearhart's example of "continuing the conversation." These two issues are framed as questions: *What is dialogue?* and *How can dialogue be useful in moving beyond moral conflict?* In order to explore these questions, it is important to first consider the topic of moral conflict.

Daily, we confront conflicting moralities ranging from the diverse values of Western modernity and traditional cultures to local campus or community politics, not to mention the clashing moralities we encounter in some of our most intimate relationships. Let us refer to these moral stances as moral orders – that is, ways of being in the world that are taken for granted as necessary for maintaining "goodness." Moral orders emerge out of the unwritten social conventions which serve to maintain social order. We operate within moral orders every time we utter to ourselves or others the "oughtness" or "shouldness" of a given action or set of actions. To that end, we need not leave the issue of morality in the hands of ethicists and philosophers. Rather, the exploration of diverse moralities should be a common focus for us all since every morality is constructed in our day-to-day interactions with one another. Pearce and Littlejohn (1997) claim, "Reality is social, and the moral order within which it is constructed is a product of historical process in which stories are told and re-

told and a moral tradition is established" (p. 52). The following diagram offers one way of depicting the construction of moral orders: [1]

COORDINATION

RITUALS

STANDARDS &
EXPECTATIONS

MORAL ORDER

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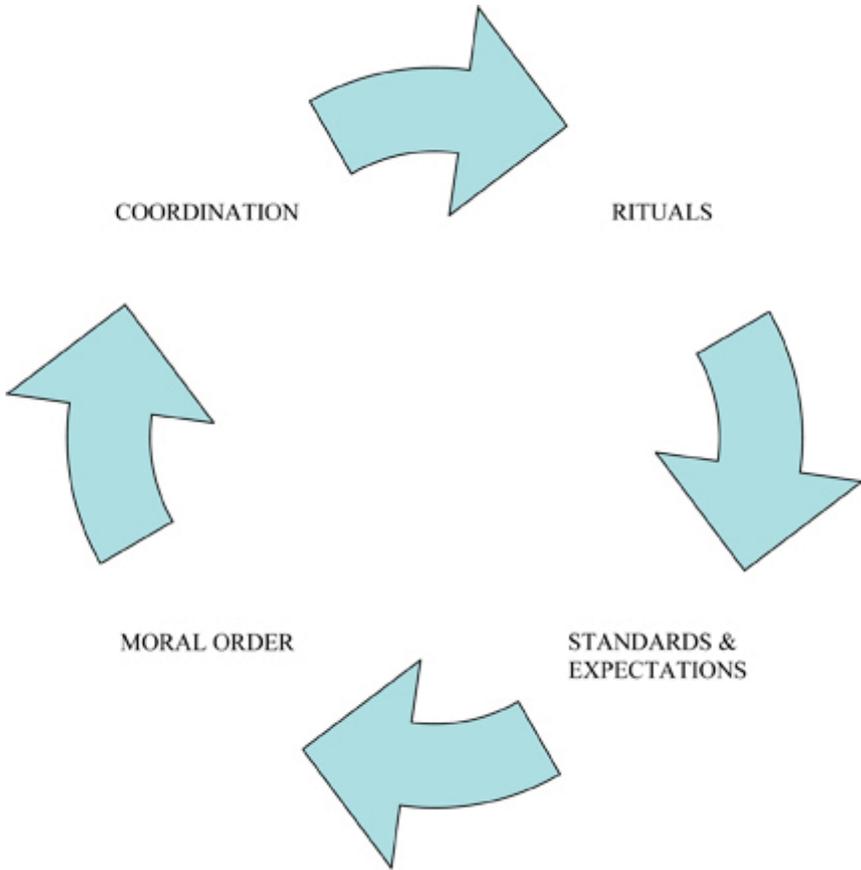
1 I want to emphasize that any representation is limited. In this visual, I am emphasizing the point of coordination as the locus of constructed moral orders. I am *not* intending to represent a closed system, nor am I attempting to portray an individual's cognitive process. This illustration is about coordinated, situated activities *of people in relation*; it is not a depiction of one individual's activities or mental process.

With our stories, and in our interactions with others, we craft our worlds. The moral orders within which we live are emergent products of the flux and flow of daily engagement. The possibility that one or another might respond differently to our actions is always ready to hand. To this end, the moral character of everyday life rests on the contingent quality of communication and therefore, communication becomes our necessary focus of attention.

I often think about the off-handed ways that we justify our actions: "It's written in the rule book," or "This is the way we've always done it," or even more popular, "These are the procedures and I can not make exceptions." But from where do these rule books, ritualized patterns, and procedures materialize? Each represents its own moral order – the taken for granted expectations we have for "how things should be." And each is no more permanent or solid than the patterns of communication that create them. Moral orders arise out of our interaction with others. They are *made* not *found*.

Briefly, let me provide an image of the sort of focus to which I would like to draw our attention. When you confront difference, do you think long and hard about how to craft your argument, what persuasive tactics to employ, and privately rehearse the anticipated conversation? Many people do. And, I would like to suggest that this is precisely the focus that traps us in unending conflict. There is no possibility to successfully persuade the other because when we compare what is coherent for each conflicting party, we are comparing apples and oranges. Your good reasons and compelling evidence are discounted as irrational by my standards and vice versa. We are trapped in a debate of "my good" over yours.

What if, instead of – or at least in addition to – careful crafting of our argument, we entertain, as Gearhart does, how we would like to "meet" the other and what sort of conversation we would like to have? What if our vision of winning was reframed as an opportunity to be in extended conversation with the other in which new understanding – not agreement, validation, or consensus – could be constructed? This is the difference of dialogue.

As I shall argue, understanding the distinct practice of dialogue – as a particular form of communication – can assist us in coordinating conflicting moralities. My own interest is not with determining universal or dogmatic rights or wrongs. Rath-

er my focus is on creating opportunities where conflicting factions can find a way to bridge their incommensurate moralities.

Undoubtedly, moving beyond our own passionate positions is a seemingly impossible task. It requires a dramatic yet simple refocusing of attention away from the carefully planned sequence of actions that we imagine might secure a firm place for our own moral order. I believe that our focus is better placed on *what people do together and what their "doing" makes*. Put differently, I am proposing that we shift from a focus on the "rightness" of any person's or group's actions – *temporarily* – to consider what *conditions* might generate more humane ways of confronting difference. It is in our coordinated activities with others that we make meaning. And, it is these coordinations with others that place our focus on the social, relational aspects of what we come to assume is or is not moral. Let's examine, for example, the various moral positions constructed around the issue of same-sex marriage. No one is born with a position for or against this issue. Rather, the positions we all adopt are worked out in the give and take of our conversations with others – family, friends, acquaintances, and media. The position we take on this issue emerges from those relational coordinations that are most central to us. And, while discussing this topic with others who share the same opinion, we experience a particular form of coordinated action that confirms and substantiates our view.

Think for a minute now of this process of coordination occurring every time we interact with another. The smallest and most insignificant of moments becomes a moment of confirming or reconstructing meaning. Furthermore, every time we interact with another, we are constructing meanings that have implications not only for the present relationship and/or the present moment, but also for other relationships in which we are engaged. Additionally, our moment-to-moment engagements with others have important implications for the expectations we impose upon ourselves and others and, by extension, there are implications for what we come to see as moral. In other words, in every encounter we are crafting moral orders with others.

Reflect for a moment on the various issues about which you are passionate. Think about some of your strongest beliefs. Perhaps your intensity is focused on issues of social justice, racial equality, abortion, polygamy, war, euthanasia, substance abuse, pornography. Over what issue

or issues would others claim you lose your "objectivity?" What are the topics you have a difficult time discussing in a civil manner? Now think about the conversations, the coordinations, and the relational histories where you feel supported and virtuous for your stance on these heated issues. These are the very moments within which you create, confirm, and solidify your moral stance. And, as I mentioned earlier, this process is occurring every time we engage with others. It is a moment full of potential in that new "positions" or meaning can emerge at any moment because of the contingent quality of our situated activities with others; it could also be a moment further amplifying a dogmatic stance.

We are no longer talking about universal good or bad but good and bad that are worked out at a very local level. Goffman (1959) says, "participants contribute to a single overall definition of the situation which involves not so much a real agreement as to what exists but rather a real agreement as to whose claims concerning what issues will be temporarily honored" (p. 9-10). And so it is with our coordinations with others. They can be generalized into patterns and rituals that we come to expect. It is in this process that our "moral orders" are born.

Now let us consider the fully functioning, well coordinated moral orders of same-sex marriage advocates as well as the moral order of those who opposes it. The moral stances are completely coherent within their communities (i.e., they are relationally crafted). Yet, between them, there is no point of contact, no way to *bridge* their incommensurate beliefs. The clash of their moral orders could be portrayed as follows:
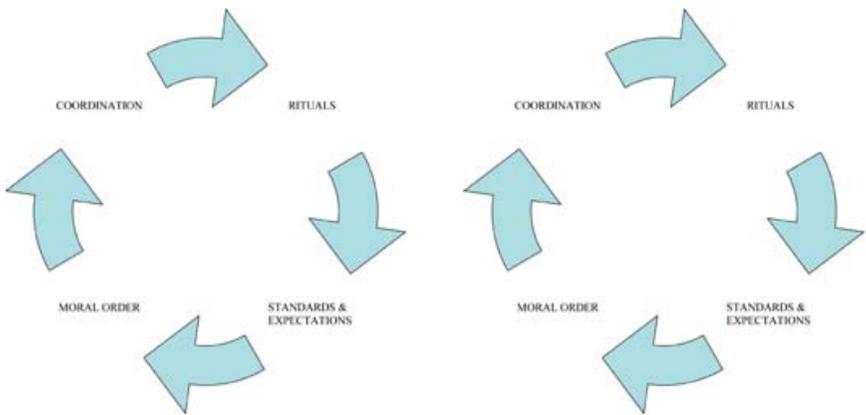
Advocate of Same-Sex Marriage   Opponent to Same-Sex Marriage

Of note here is first the clarity of oppositional moralities. Second, is the clarity that social processes have produced these very specific moral orders. And finally, there is the clarity of division between the two moral orders. In other words, they are both internally coherent; they are both rooted in patterns of social coordination; *and* they are incommensurate. Why should we expect either group in this conflict to think they are morally wrong? How do we choose which morality to employ as the evaluative standard? Even as a potential third party to this moral conflict, would it be possible for any of us to stand outside one of these two moral orders? Are not all of us already embedded within one or the other?

Is persuasion our only recourse in the face of competing moralities? Persuasion, in these moments, is an easy defense. I can argue you are wrong and evil and I can tell you why (i.e., you don't share my values). You can do the same. Like Gearhart and her enemy loggers, we have accomplished nothing but the further construction of pain and anger without locating a way of "going on together" (Wittgenstein, 1953). More challenging and more humane is finding a way to bridge these differences.

The challenge we face is to take this understanding of how communication processes construct moral orders and use this same attention to process, not content and not individual moral character, so we might bridge these moralities thereby providing some way to continue the conversation. Clearly, if moral orders are crafted out of ordinary coordinations among people, the diversity, and thus incommensurability, of these orders is inevitable. How could we ever imagine a single, unquestioned moral order? Dialogue, as a very special form of communication, places our attention on coordinating multiple moral orders. I would like to suggest that dialogue is a way to move beyond the oppression of one moral order over another. Let me turn my attention to dialogue; what is it and what is it not.

THE DIFFERENCE OF DIALOGUE

Bakhtin (1984) says, "Truth is not . . . to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born between people . . . in the process of their dialogic interaction" (p.110). I draw on Bakhtin's understanding of dialogue. He claims that dialogue is a responsive, multi-voiced activity, and as such is not limited to self-interest, psychological or relational improvement, or to crafting cooperative, conflict-free ways

of living. When we are responsive to others, our words and actions are not entirely our own, they carry traces of our histories of relationships and the beliefs and values these relationships have crafted.

Because dialogue is a responsive, situated activity, it differs from our persuasive tradition. In dialogue, we are steeped in uncertainty, incompleteness, and multiplicity. This may appear to be a very uncomfortable space to occupy. After all, we place high value on just the opposite: certainty, completeness, singularity. Privileging uncertainty, incompleteness, and multiplicity highlights how very different dialogue is from our common understandings of communication. Dialogue is not about successfully *transmitting* our meaning, knowledge, or information to another. It is not about persuasion or self-promotion. On the contrary, dialogue is a process of holding firmly to one's position while maintaining a curiosity and respect for another's very different position. This is what Bakhtin refers to as responsivity.

Is it possible to dissolve the dichotomy of incommensurate world views by creating opportunities for the sort of *responsiveness* that dialogue offers? And, in dissolving the good/bad, right/wrong dichotomies, can we achieve some form of coordinated social action where diversity is tolerated and even respected? **Can we imagine – and more important, can we create – a social order that is not *ordered* by similarity but is ordered by coordination of diversity?**

Since our expectations about good and bad, right and wrong emerge from our very basic and simple interactions with each other, and, since most of us interact with a wide array of others, the possibility of shifting moralities as well as the possibility of simultaneously holding incompatible moralities (depending upon which community one is engaged with at the moment) is omnipresent. Dialogue implies that we begin by presuming the other's *rationality*. In other words, the challenge is to find a way to approach the other (the immoral other) as an other who is coherent and rational within his or her own community of significance – despite his or her diversity. This stance moves our focus away from *assessment* of who is right and who is wrong or who is a good person and who is not. It places our focus on understanding very different moral orders *on their own terms and temporarily suspending evaluation*. Such a stance invites transformative dialogue where our focus is on making space for multiple rationalities as opposed to per-

suasive rhetoric where securing the rightness of our own morality is our main concern. Of course, I am not suggesting that we completely abandon attempts to resolve incommensurate moral orders, nor am I suggesting we adopt an "anything goes" stance. I am simply suggesting that we *begin* the process of confronting the other dialogically. From this different origin, new possibilities for coordination can emerge.

So, our challenge is to create opportunities for dialogue.

Creating Conditions for Dialogue

Our first task is to explore ways of creating a context (physical, relational, and personal) that *invites* a different form of conversation. This does not mean that participants must self disclose in deeply personal and self-interested ways. Nor does it mean that difference of opinion, conflict or discord of any kind must be suppressed. This also does not imply that differential power positions are ignored nor that professional expertise is put aside. Rather, to be in dialogue is to engage in the tensionality produced when one holds one's own position while simultaneously remaining open to the (often very oppositional, contradictory) position(s) of the other(s) (Stewart and Zediker, 2002).

This understanding of dialogue is significantly different from the "happy talk, no conflict" interpretation so many hold. The risk of holding one's own position while allowing others – often with diametrically opposing views – to do the same, and to be open and curious about the *coherence* of those very different positions, creates a very unique relational context. It is a context, I believe, that is more democratic and concerned with broader issues of human and social wellbeing. It is, in other words, a useful process for public deliberation, policy formation, and social equity – not to mention daily conflict resolution. While dialogue may not place primacy on immediate resolution, it is a process that facilitates eventual decision and action in a humane and collaborative manner.

In closing, I would like to offer some resources for action that can assist us in creating the very different conversational space of dialogue; a space that opens possibility for new understandings while simultaneously not terminating with easy answers about what is moral and what is not. In other words, these resources for action remind us that diversity of moral orders is part of the human condition and engaging diversity with respect and curiosity helps us appreciate the power

we each have to construct liveable futures together. In what follows, I suggest a set of conditions that I believe direct our attention to the process of constructing bridges among competing moral orders. This is not to suggest that all moral orders are acceptable, viable, or in any way condonable. It is simply to refocus our attention on *how* a moral order emerges and in focusing on this process, creating the opportunity for a conversation where new understandings – that is, new meaning and action – can be generated. Let me suggest, as you read the following resources for transformative dialogue, that you continue to reflect on the moral issues about which you are passionate and frequently find yourself challenged to consider alternative perspectives.

Resources for Transformative Dialogue

First, I propose that we avoid speaking from abstract positions when encountering the "other." While I can disagree with your opinion, your beliefs, your values, I can not tell you that the story you tell about your life is wrong. When we confront animosity and difference, we most often resort to defending our position "on principle." These principles, however, are abstract. The warring principles of "right" and "wrong" beg the question: *whose standards are we using?* And since we understand that values, beliefs and realities are built from coordination within relationships, we can now anticipate some very different and often incommensurate values and beliefs will be housed within any one group or relationship. Inviting a person to tell a story about who in her life influenced her to honor and value certain beliefs does not make the conflict go away, but it does significantly transform the nature of the interaction and, by extension, the nature of the relationship. I might disagree with the ultimate belief you are supporting but I now understand how it is that you have come to support this belief. I no longer see you as crazy or evil or out to get me. I see you as having a different story, a different rationale, a different history. I am much better equipped to continue our conversation with this form of understanding.

Second, I encourage self reflexive and relationally reflexive inquiry. Here the attempt is to entertain doubt about our own certainties. We can invoke our inner voice of skepticism about our own strongly held beliefs. *Can I be so certain that there is absolutely no other way to look at this situation?* We can also invoke the doubtful voice of a

friend, colleague, or mentor. *How would my mother, my colleague, my friend think about this?* This self reflexive inquiry opens us to the possibility of alternative constructions thereby transforming the nature of the interaction. Similarly, to pause and inquire about how "our" interaction is going recognizes that the meaning that is emerging in a particular interactive moment is a byproduct of "us," not of "you" or "me." Thus, to ask, *Is this the kind of conversation you were hoping we would have? Is there another way we could or should be doing this? Are there questions I should be asking you but I'm not?* acknowledges that we only have "power with" or "power to" and not "power over."

Third, we might focus on the coordination of multiplicities. When we confront the challenges of difference, our tendency is to find any means to move toward consensus. Yet, consensus has its problems. Frequently, consensus is reached by conflicting parties removing from consideration the issues about which they are most passionate (and by association, the issues upon which the conflict is centered). The "common ground" or consensus that emerges from the process of negotiation most often focuses on smaller, less significant issues and thus, issues with which participants have little investment. To this end, consensus works to accelerate distrust and conflict rather than dissolve either.

Rather than approach conflicting moralities as opportunities to develop consensus, in transformative dialogue we attempt to coordinate multiple discourses. The challenge is to become curious about all forms of practice and to explore the values and beliefs that give rise to them without searching for universal agreement. Can we create dialogic opportunities that invite *generous listening*, *curious inquiry*, and *a willingness for co-presence*?

A fourth resource we might explore is the use of our familiar forms of action in unfamiliar contexts. Often when we are stuck in conflicts that seem impossible to transform, we search for *new* tools or strategies that will create the desired change. In fact, one of the reasons consultants and mediators are in such high demand is because culturally we believe that experts can teach us successful strategies for change. Yet, I would like to suggest that learning *new* strategies for coordinating conflict might not be necessary. Gregory Bateson talks about "the difference that makes a difference" (1972, p. 272) and Tom Andersen sees this difference as introducing "something unusual but not too un-usual" (An-

dersen, 1991, p. 33). Here, I am suggesting a variation on this theme.

We all carry with us many voices, many differing opinions, views and attitudes - even on the same subject. These voices represent the accumulation of our relationships (actual, imagined, and virtual). In effect, we carry the residues of many others with us; we contain multitudes (McNamee and Gergen, 1999). Yet, most of our actions, along with the positions we adopt in conversations, are one dimensional. They represent only a small segment of all that we might do and say. The challenge is to draw on these other voices, these conversational resources that are familiar in one set of relationships and situations but not in another. In so doing, we achieve something unusual.

Using familiar resources in contexts where we do not generally use them invites us into new forms of engagement with others. If we think of all our activities as invitations into different relational constructions, then we can focus on how utilizing particular resources invites certain responses in specific relationships and how it invites different responses and constructions in others. All represent various attempts to achieve coordinated respect for the specificity of a given relationship and situation. If we can encourage ourselves (and others) to draw broadly on the conversational resources that are already familiar, perhaps we can act in ways that are *just different enough* to invite others into something beyond the same old unwanted pattern. To the extent that we can invite the use of the familiar in unfamiliar contexts, we are coordinating disparate discourses. What we are avoiding is co-opting one discourse as right and another as wrong. The novelty of enacting the old in a new context becomes, I believe, fertile soil within which to craft generative transformation.

Finally, we might focus on the future. If you examine problem-solving talk, you will note that a good portion of what we think we "should" be doing, as we attempt to solve problems and negotiate competing moralities, focuses on the past. We explore the history and evolution of a moral conflict. When did the conflict begin? How long has it been a difficulty? How have participants come to understand (make sense of) the problem? What do they think is the cause of competing moralities? What do others say about it? What have those involved done to try to solve this problem? The questions we ask direct our conversation to the past, as do the expectations of all participants (i.e.,

if we don't talk about what caused the problem, we'll never resolve it).

With such an emphasis on these past-oriented questions, there is little room for imagining the future. The potential to sediment the past, to reify the story, and thereby make it static and immutable is tremendous. Probably more important is the logic inherent in the focus on the past. By focusing on what has already transpired, we unwittingly give credibility to causal models that are the hallmark of modernist science. We privilege the logic that claims that what went before causes what follows.

I do not necessarily want to argue for a disconnection between past, present and future. I simply want to raise the issue of narration. The past is always a story. And we all know that there are many ways to tell a story. Not only do we harbor many voices, each with a different set of possible narrations, but others involved in the same "history" will very likely narrate it differently. Thus, the causality of past to present (and implied future) will take different turns, highlight different features, and pathologize or celebrate varied aspects depending on which story is privileged.

One reason that future-oriented discourse can enhance the coordination of conflicting moralities is because we all understand that we do not yet *know* the future. We have not embodied it yet. And thus, to the extent that we engage *with others* (our enemies) in conversation about the future, we underscore the relational construction of our worlds. We fabricate together the reality into which we might collaboratively enter.

This is not to suggest that talk of the past is wrong or emblematic of simplistic views of conflict and communication. I am proposing a collaborative, situated creation of possibilities and *one way* to achieve this is with future-oriented discourse. In our talk of imagined futures, we invite coordination of many convergent and divergent understandings of the past and the present. Again, this form of relational engagement moves toward coordinated respect for multiplicity and difference.

Closing Remarks

The challenge we face when confronted with conflicting moral orders is the challenge to keep the conversation going. In keeping the conversation going, we connect with diverse others in ways that are, as Rorty (1979) says, "more humane, enlightening, and respectful (Rorty, 1979, p. 394). To me, the only hope for sustaining ourselves is to recognize the power of dialogue – that is, the power of what we do together. In

our very ordinary activities with others we are creating moral orders and these moral orders, if confronted from that stance of moral superiority and Truth, generate oppression and violence. Dialogue offers us a way to coordinate these moralities and craft livable futures together.

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