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Obstacles to moral articulation in interreligious engagement

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ABSTRACT
The purpose of this paper is to confront a well-known problem in interreligious engagement in European institutions, namely the tendency to exclude contributions that do not conform to certain European expectations. It diagnoses problems produced not only by the problem but by certain solutions to it, and to propose in outline an alternative approach. Chief among these problems is the imperative that members of traditions articulate their deepest moral commitments, in order to secure a common moral ground. This imperative has the unintended but drastic effect of excluding important voices in dialogue. Drawing on the figures of Cordelia (in Shakespeare's King Lear) and Antigone (in Sophocles' Antigone) it is argued that forced articulation distorts its objects. The theoretical framework of discussion is drawn from Hegel, Schelling, and Adorno as in interpreted by Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor, and Andrew Bowie. The originality of the argument is the use of aesthetic theory in German philosophy to inform a critique of attempts to make morality central to interreligious engagement.

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The purpose of this paper is to confront a well-known problem in interreligious engagement in European institutions, to diagnose problems produced not only by the problem but by certain solutions to it, and to propose in outline an alternative approach.

The well-known problem is the tendency of interreligious engagement to exclude contributions that do not conform to certain European expectations, and thereby to exclude participants whose contributions cannot reliably be expected to conform. These include contributions in which a participant might declare another tradition to be heretical and participants who say openly that their tradition, or sub-tradition, is the only reliable path to the truth.

The familiar solution is to seek common ground: 'if we can find things upon which we agree, then we have a basis for tackling more difficult ground where disagreements lie.' In the arena of plural religious life, which is now the normal state of affairs in most large European cities, this often means seeking a focus on moral issues. Such an approach is often believed to have two virtues: first it draws attention away from theological claims, which are irreducibly particular to traditions, in favour of ethics, where there is more chance of practical agreements; second it lowers the temperature of discussion and

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furnishes the conditions for a more civilised or polite discourse, perhaps even suitable for academic conferences and publications.

The many problems with this solution are well-established. It tends to divorce ethics from theology (meaning here habits of religious life and thought); it tends to privilege ethics above many possible religious discourses (which might include worship, prayer, contemplation, philosophy, education, political participation, or traditional practices surrounding birth, marriage, and death); it tends to favour general principles over engagement with specific histories of practice and thought; it can sometimes tend to favour discussion of imaginary scenarios over grappling with specific texts and practices (which is what normally takes place within religious traditions); and it tends to cast certain contributions as not merely minority positions but as immoral.

Two further problems are arguably less well-established. It tends to exclude contributions that do not conform to particular European standards of academic integrity; and it tends to exclude persons who are considered impolite. Because such contributions and persons thus do not appear in contexts of dialogue, or in print, they tend to become invisible and forgotten, even if they have a considerable following (and indeed a following much larger than that of those who are invited to participate in interreligious engagement).

The impetus for this paper is three questions raised by colleagues as intellectual challenges: 'Can we still have meaningful conversations about matters of morality? Is there a shared moral language between representatives of opposing positions? Is there a shared "moral compass" that could guide conversations about morality?'[1]

The discussion is structured as follows. First, an interpretation of Shakespeare's *King Lear* and Sophocles' *Antigone*. Second, a correlation of themes from these plays to the quest for a moral common ground. Third, proposals for an alternative to seeking moral common ground.

Articulation

The idea of moral common ground is familiar to anyone working in the theatre of interreligious engagement. Its core idea is this:

> We may not be able to agree on theology, which in any case is a matter for experts, but we can perhaps agree on ethics, on moral practices which we share, which are a matter for everyone, and not just experts.

This common-sense view is widely held, and is often particularly valued in dialogue between Christians and Muslims. But it is threatened by a paradox:

> Moral 'ground' is implicit: it is something a community already holds, is already committed to, before one investigates it to make it explicit. But typically in discussions of this kind one begins by making it explicit, and then one insists that communities should commit to it.

This is arguably a version of the paradox of ethics itself, which has been a topic in philosophy at least since the time of Hegel:

> The power of moral commitments comes from their being unspoken, taken for granted in a community. But ethics is a matter of articulating them, often at a point when moral

> commitments are in question and no longer taken for granted. Ethics is often the articulation of commitments as they they break down.

This idea is also present in the paradox of anthropological fieldwork, as articulated by Pierre Bourdieu. It can be briefly summarised:

> The community studied by the anthropologist takes things for granted: its practices are generated – and often improvised - by its habitus, which operates in advance of articulation. But the theorist only has language, articulation, and so tends to ask questions, and tends to privilege the answers given by informants. The theorist thus falsifies a community's practices by turning a set of unarticulated generated improvisations into a set of articulated general rules. And the informant collaborates in this falsification by agreeing to talk to the theorist, using the categories in which her questions are posed.

These are not three separate paradoxes, which just happen to resemble each other. They are historically linked. The paradox of ethics is articulated in a philosophical literature that is known – directly or indirectly – to anthropologists. Scholars of religion in turn are the heirs to both the philosophical and anthropological literature.

These ideas are developed in German philosophy, and especially those figures like Schelling and perhaps Schleiermacher, who recognise that the ground of being is not accessible to articulation in the same way as things in the world, and that the ground of thinking cannot itself straightforwardly be thought.[2]

Consider Act 1 Scene 1 of Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Lear summons his three daughters, Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia. He explains that he is close to death, and rather than risk the outbreak of war over the division of his kingdom, he proposes to divide it up now and give a portion to each daughter. He asks them a question, in public: which of you loves me the most? To that person he proposes to give the biggest portion:

> Which of you shall we say doth love us most,
> That we our largest bounty may extend
> Where nature doth with merit challenge

Lear stages a contest of love between his three daughters. The first daughter, Goneril, begins by saying that she loves her father more than words can say, promptly belied in her pretty speech about how much she loves her father. The second daughter, Regan, says that her love is like her sister's, but stronger. And so to the third daughter, Cordelia. But first, Lear says that he will give two big portions to Goneril and Regan, and that there is a third portion even bigger. All Cordelia has to do, to win it, is to say something even better:

> What can you say to draw
> A third more opulent than your sisters? Speak.

And here is Cordelia's famous answer:

> Nothing, my lord.

Cordelia has a problem: she loves her father, but she will not, cannot, put it into words. And when Lear puts pressure on her, her words are inadequate. They are not merely inadequate, in fact, but appear insulting. We might say: the requirement to make it explicit falsifies it, because what is said falls far short of what exists in advance of articulation. Cordelia really does love her father more than words can say. But her father wants words. Like an analytic philosopher untrained in the

continental tradition, he cannot imagine there can be a 'more' than what appears in propositions.

We might cast Lear as anthropologist and Cordelia as informant. Lear's only access to Cordelia's heart is language. He assumes that for something to be real is for it to be articulable. And so, when faced with her love's inarticulacy, he assumes it to be unreal, and he disowns her. Catastrophe follows for King and country.

Shakespeare's *King Lear*, from the early 1600s, might seem quite an early source for this insight into the modern problem of the paradox of ethics. There is a much earlier one: Sophocles' *Antigone* from around 441 BCE.

Oedipus' sons, Eteocles and Polynices, had fought bitterly for the throne of Thebes, and died in battle. King Creon gives a royal order: Eteocles is to be honoured in his burial. The corpse of Polynices is to be left for the dogs and birds. Anyone who tries to bury Polynices will be executed.

Antigone – the sister of Eteocles and Polynices – finds herself caught between the law of the gods, which demands that she honour her brother by burying him, and the law of the king, which demands that she dishonour her brother by not burying him. She resolves this conflict in a 'divine' way by burying her brother. She is sent away to be buried alive, and kills herself. Catastrophe follows for King and country.

Antigone stages the clashes of two laws – the divine law and the royal law – and as they both break down, their authority becomes a topic of discussion: it becomes articulated. As Creon articulates the power of his authority, he loses it: Antigone defies it, and he is subsequently forced under pressure from his religious officials to withdraw his decree. Antigone and her sister Ismene deliberate over the gods' authority and its extent: Ismene refuses to help her sister, and thus rejects the power of the gods. She – defiant of the gods – is one of the few to survive in the play.

King Lear and Antigone nicely display our ethical paradoxes. The point at which ethics becomes explicit is at the point of challenge, when things are no longer taken for granted, and when they are breaking down.

The paradigmatic discussion of this in the German philosophical tradition is found in the Preface to Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*: 'when philosophy paints its grey in grey, then has a shape of life grown old. The owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the coming of the dusk'.[3]

Hegel's interest lies in identifying the conditions for philosophical reflection and articulation. This can be seen more clearly in the full quotation from *Philosophy of Right*:

> A further word on the subject of *issuing instructions* on how the world ought to be: philosophy, at any rate, always comes too late to perform this function. As the *thought* of the world, it appears only at a time when actuality has gone through its formative process and attained its completed state. This lesson of the concept is necessarily also apparent from history, namely that it is only when actuality has reached maturity that the ideal appears opposite the real and reconstructs this real world, which it has grasped in its substance, in the shape of an intellectual realm. When philosophy paints its grey in grey, a shape of life has grown old, and it cannot be rejuvenated, but only recognized, by the grey in grey of philosophy; the owl of Minerva begins its flight only with the onset of dusk.[4]

This is typical Hegelian prose, posing challenges to the skilful translator (here Barry Nisbet) who wishes to keep close to the 1820s German. It can be paraphrased more dynamically as follows:

> Philosophy cannot change the world: its business is making sense of things. Things take their course and become intelligible only when that process is more or less complete. Concepts are formed when what they capture (the root of *Begriff* is *greifen*, to grasp) has reached a point where it is developed enough to be captured: something real becomes available intellectually. Philosophy deals in things that have lost their initial intensity, and it cannot restore that lost intensity. Its wisdom is visible only as the light fades. (my paraphrase)

Hegel's claim is interesting not just for what it says about the limits of philosophy, but for what is implied about what he calls 'actuality', which we might interpret as 'things happening in the moment'. Hegel says it has a 'formative process' and that at a certain point it reaches a point of maturity. But what about the earlier point, when it is in the middle of that process, before that stage of maturity? Hegel implies that here 'things happening in the moment' are not so readily available conceptually. They are not so decisively grasped 'in the shape of an intellectual realm'.

Hegel claims they are not available to philosophy. But that does not mean they are unavailable in any form at all. After all, in a sense things happening in the moment are the most available things there are. We are living in the middle of them, right now.

Hegel's remarks are from 1820. That is quite late on in the adventure of German Idealism and its cousins in Early German Romanticism, for which the theme of articulation is a major topic.

Schelling had even suggested, at the end of *System of Transcendental Idealism* of 1800, that the conscious expressions of philosophy are produced out of an unconscious ground, and that this unconscious source appears supremely in art not philosophy.[5] Later, in his so-called 'positive philosophy', he explores in stronger terms the ways in which the ground of thinking cannot be thought, the way in which what makes articulation possible cannot itself be articulated. It must be approached obliquely. A ground may show up in various ways but not 'as' ground, for the only things which 'show up' are things produced by it.[6]

Hegel is more confident than Schelling about what philosophy can achieve, but even he acknowledges its limitations. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit* he insists that most forms of thinking 'at the time' are matters of representation: of narratives, of images, of things that can be sensed. Philosophy is the subsequent business of rendering 'picture thinking' in 'conceptual' forms. It is subsequent both logically and temporally.[7] Religious life, for example, is a realm of picture thinking, for Hegel.

There is thus in this tradition a noticeable reserve. While it is the business of philosophy to articulate things conceptually, there are limitations. For Schelling, the ground of articulation cannot itself be conceptually articulated. Even for Hegel, a form of life has to have 'grown old' for it to be available to articulation.

Schelling and Hegel do not say what happens if a form of life is forced into articulation before it has grown old, before it has matured, before it can be painted 'grey on grey'. That is our concern here.

The consequence of premature articulation may be that what is articulated is falsified: love for Lear is falsified in his demand to have it articulated. Creon's authority is falsified in his determination to articulate it. Even the gods' authority is falsified at the moment it is articulated in the argument between Antigone and her sister Ismene.

Hegel draws attention to this aspect of *Antigone* in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*.[8] For Hegel, there is no question of finding one party in the right and the other party in the wrong. The genre is tragedy, not morality play, and the catastrophe that befalls both Antigone and Creon is a sign of irreconcilable forces: Antigone 'must' bury her brother, and Creon 'must' condemn treason; Antigone and Creon are nonetheless each 'guilty', the one for breaching the human law, and the other for breaching the divine.[9] There are some complexities here that cannot be properly pursued for reasons of space. Briefly, Hegel desires to apportion guilt equally between Antigone and Creon, in order to show the need for a 'higher' resolution in which divine and human law do not appear in binary opposition, and he quotes from the play to support his contention that suffering expresses guilt. Unfortunately for this argument, Hegel mis-quotes the relevant line, and ignores the obvious fact that Antigone's guilt is not a result of an existing binary opposition between divine and human laws, but of Creon's wilful production of this opposition. Creon is punished by the gods for not listening to Antigone, who after all speaks 'for' the gods.[10] This failure to listen is relevant to our discussion of failures of articulation. Creon forces an opposition of divine and human law, which produces the conditions for a breakdown, which produces the conditions for a kind of articulation. We might say there is altogether too much articulation and not enough listening. It is fatal.

Hegel is followed by our older contemporaries Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor, both students of Hegel, who are gripped by his engagement with Sophocles' play. In MacIntyre's improvisations on these themes in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, he is concerned with *Oedipus Rex* (the first of the Theban plays) and with *Philoctetes*, more than with *Antigone*.[11] But his purpose is Hegel's: to show how Greek tragedy displays new (at that time) ethical conflicts and makes them available for philosophical analysis, in this case, his own. MacIntyre is not concerned more narrowly with questions of articulation. Taylor's are explored in most detail in *Sources of the Self*, in a section significantly titled 'The Ethics of Inarticulacy'.[12] Taylor's argument is not that ethical commitments cannot be articulated at all, but that that they operate 'prearticulately' as 'intuitions'. His view, echoing Hegel in the *Philosophy of Right*, is that under certain conditions they become available to articulation, for example when moral deliberation is required. Taylor does not connect this availability to breakdown: his targets are ahistorical or 'naturalistic' moral theories which refuse to consider the possibility that moral consciousness is a matter of development, of conflict, or particular occasions for moral deliberation. He thus emphasises the historical, and in that way echoes certain history-oriented patterns in Hegel's reasoning. I wish to draw attention to the further, more contentious (and arguably more Hegelian) possibility that the occasions for revealing moral reasonings may also undermine their ability to function 'prearticulately', and that this has costs.

It is wise to limit the scope of what is being claimed. It is not claimed here that articulation is intrinsically impossible, or that it always and necessarily falsifies what is articulated. That would be to overextend a good, limited argument. After all, from the facts that Cordelia and Antigone cannot be heard, and Lear and Creon are ruined, one is not entitled to infer that everything is inevitably and always inarticulacy and catastrophe. People manage to articulate their love in ways that are considered adequate. Many men in positions of power manage not to hear the voices of women without their lives falling apart. Quite the opposite: they are often rewarded for it. I thus offer two qualifications. The first is that the cases of Cordelia and Antigone are different in instructive ways.

The second is that their cases may be of a particular kind that is resistant to over-generalised claims.

Both Cordelia and Antigone are not heard by men in power. Beyond that, there are significant differences. For example, Antigone's obligations become prohibitions whereas Cordelia's freedoms become obligations. There are others.

Cordelia is inaudible because she does not wish to speak, and indeed resists speaking: this is the force of her 'nothing'. Her problem is not that she is speaking and no-one is listening. It is that her father has opened his ears in a way that intimidates and appals her: she will not speak. It is not that she has nothing to say, but that what she has to say cannot be said, and so she says, 'nothing'. Her love is intimate, precious in part because it is not available to others. Outsiders have no business with it, no right to see or hear it. For her father to force it into the light, before a public, and even worse in a competition, is to deny what makes it what it is, to annihilate its intimacy, its modesty. And so whatever is said will inevitably lack intimacy, will lose its precious privacy. Lear, for his part, is attentive to her speech, and indeed so attentive that he dismisses her. There is nothing wrong with his hearing; what's wrong is his insistence that for something to be valuable it must be heard.

Antigone's case contrasts strongly. Where Cordelia does not wish to speak and Lear is all ears, Antigone has plenty to say and Creon will not listen. Catastrophe follows in both cases, but the dynamics are different. Lear forces articulation by commanding Cordelia to speak. Creon forces articulation in a quite different way: by forbidding the burial of Polynices he manufactures an opposition between divine law and human law. This is not an opposition which timelessly exists, and which he accidentally exposes. It is a new opposition brought about by decree. Two social facts which, following Taylor, we might assign to the ethics of inarticulacy, are the authority of the gods and the authority of the king. These do not require or invite reflection. A sister acknowledges the gods by doing what is required. A subject obeys the king by obeying commands. Creon obstructs Antigone's taken-for-granted duty of burial. By doing so he creates the conditions for a new question: should the gods be obeyed? What was previously an unutterable necessity is transmuted into an articulated possibility. But Creon also creates the conditions for a further question, one which he surely could not imagine: should the king be obeyed? Both of these questions, and the articulations they conjure, play out twice at the opening of the play: first in the discussion between Antigone and her sister Ismene, in which the command of the king is pitted against the laws of the gods, and second in the chorus which follows, in which the struggle between brothers is recalled, a clash of two conquering spears. Two struggles, identical outcomes. Antigone anticipates her own death: 'in that world I shall abide forever'; and the chorus summarise the fate of the brothers: 'sharers in a common death'. Following Hegel, himself a student of Sophocles, death is the condition for and outcome of articulation.

To the first qualification, that the cases of Cordelia and Antigone are instructively different, I offer a second. These are particular cases resistant to overgeneralisation. There is nothing intrinsic to Cordelia's love for her father that renders it inarticulable. It is enough to say that this person, Cordelia, is unable to articulate this love, her love for this person, her father. When this love is forced into articulation by a particular person, her father, under particular circumstances, the competition for inheritance, a particular catastrophe unfolds. There is nothing

intrinsic to Antigone's obedience to the gods, or to Creon's regal authority, that render them inarticulable. On the contrary, there are many possible conditions that might lead to reflection. It is enough to say that this regal command, under these circumstances, encountering this pious sister, and her embrace of death (not shared by her sister), forces this particular articulation and opposition. There is a contingency to them.

Taking these two qualifications together, I offer not a universal claim that articulation equals catastrophe, but an interruption to a universal claim, namely that in a plural society one should seek to articulate moral common ground. The interruption takes this form, and has limited force: there may be cases where the demand for articulation causes the falsification of what is articulated (as in the case of Cordelia) or the break-down of the authority of what is articulated (as in the case of Antigone). This is an invitation to reconsider the wisdom of seeking to articulate moral common ground in all circumstances, as a solution to the general problem of religious plurality.

Moral common ground

I draw attention to two features of the opening paradoxes and consider their implications for the search for common ground.

The first feature is the familiar theme of articulation. A significant condition for articulation is a challenge to what is taken quietly for granted, what passes unnoticed, what is implicit. The power of ethical life is often its unspoken hold on us, our unspoken commitments, an unspoken source of possibilities which generate our actions, our words, our improvisations as new situations arise. When that ethical life is challenged, perhaps through encounter with another culture, perhaps through crises that force us to rethink what we thought we knew, it loses its taken-for-granted hold on us. It becomes available for articulation at the point it becomes an option for us, rather than something we simply do. What appeared necessary now appears merely possible. This, very roughly, is one of the animating ideas in Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*. For Taylor, to live in a secular society is, in part, to be able to choose to be religious, rather than find that one already is, as might have been the case for previous generations.[13] In such a view, a secular age is not one in which there is no religion or less religion, but one in which being religious is now a possibility rather than an actuality. The cases of Shakespeare and Sophocles as teachers shows that even in previous generations the transformation of necessity into possibility is not only present but is an urgent topic of reflection displayed in drama.

Possibilities are in many cases more readily amenable to articulation than actualities. Many of our habits, our actualities, are undertaken unconsciously passing without commentary or even remark. Taking a small child to school; waiting for a bus; chatting to friends, washing one's hands before a meal, sending a birthday gift. These might all involve talking to a greater or lesser degree. But for the most part one is not talking about what one is doing. It does not call for comment. It passes unnoticed.

But possibilities, by contrast, may invite deliberation and conversation. 'Do you want to talk?' 'May I help to wash the dishes?' 'What shall I teach?' Possibilities often require decision; and decision often requires articulation.

To live in a secular age is thus, in part, a kind of modal alchemy, where actualities are transformed – by occult processes we do not understand – into possibilities. We

understand the processes of articulation, and we understand that where there were necessities there now are possibilities. But the link between them is obscure, and some thinkers, perhaps sensing a challenge to Enlightenment freedoms, attempt to argue that articulation strengthens the force of possibilities.[14] Even those who make this argument do not attempt the impossible: to suggest that possibilities can be transmuted back into necessities.

Part of this alchemy is to transform the unspoken, and perhaps unspeakable, into the speakable, and perhaps the spoken.

If the first feature is articulation, the second is time. The decision of kings Creon and Lear begins, and signals, a catastrophic chain of events in each case. Relationships are exposed to new pressures and become buckled and twisted as various forces are exerted. Panic sets in. And finally the kings try to undo what they have done: attempts are made to rescue Antigone and Cordelia from the threat of death.

They fail. It is too late. There is not enough time. What is said cannot be unsaid.

The arrow of time is inexorable. Speech cannot be taken back. There is no 'undo'.

Women's bodies, the cost of articulation, lie strangled. They, at least, have no more words.

As well as the arrow of time, there is the deeper matter: articulation is retrospective. What is articulated is often what has already passed, already lost its power, its life, as Hegel says.

This is not a universal law. It is itself a possibility, which may become actual under particular circumstances. Hegel's insight can be contested. 'Surely one can be conscious of something as one does it and not only after it has been done.' That is obviously true. I can walk down the street and be conscious of doing so. Hegel's Owl of Minerva insight is arguably overstated or overextended. Hegel's point is that if we are to grasp something's significance, or give an overview of it, in a philosophically satisfying way, then it is already 'old', already passing away. This overextension can be corrected without losing its force: under certain conditions, articulation becomes possible because something is passing away. Perhaps Hegel was thinking of large scale things like (in his words) 'a shape of life' more than small scale everyday actions. In that case, the 'certain conditions' may relate to scale.

A good practical example – a less philosophical example – of this is a road atlas, which gives an overview, with maps, of a country's road system. As soon as it is published, it is out of date. Its maps are a reliable guide to how the roads used to be. It is still useful for navigation today, but all the same: one is using a map of the past as a guide to action in the future.

Articulation may be like that: but not only does it orient itself to the past, like a road map; it also in some sense makes something 'past'. It is not just a report: it is an action with effects of its own. That is precisely the lesson of Antigone and Cordelia, as I have presented them.

As Bourdieu says in *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, local people need no map. Strangers need maps, and strangers plot places on a map. The production of a map may be a sign of estrangement, treating the landscape as alien territory, and not the innocent act of bringing to light what is already operative. A local who draws a map is not

revealing an existing representation, but producing a new one, under new circumstances, for a new purpose.[15]

The second aspect, time, thus shows up in two ways: in a chain of events that cannot be undone, and in an inevitable orientation to the past, to something potentially breaking down, even to something about to be lost.

Sophocles and Shakespeare are arguably doing a certain kind of philosophy. Their plays enable the audience to confront certain urgent matters, to 'follow' what unfolds in a way that leads to new insight. This way of interpreting works of this kind is outlined in Andrew Bowie's *Aesthetic Dimensions of Modern Philosophy*.[16] In the previous section there was a certain tacking between drama and philosophy, between Shakespeare and Hegel. It is perhaps better, however, to overcome this dualism and say that drama can be philosophy, which requires explicitly philosophical analysis, and that philosophy can be dramatic, which requires attending to the artistic qualities of the text. This way of reading might rescue Hegel from appearing to generalise too exuberantly from particulars, and might enable the reader to discern in Shakespeare a concern with generalisable phenomena, and not just the irreducible particularities of a fictional father and daughter. This way of attending to the need to operate at the right scale is outlined in Timothy Jenkins' *An Experiment in Providence*.[17] Taking Bowie and Jenkins together, I suggest that reading drama as philosophy enables one to bring things to light and to operate on a human scale, between the irreducible particular and the overgeneralised universal.[18]

The philosophy of *King Lear* or of *Antigone* might be this: the condition for articulation is often pressure, and perhaps even break-down, caused by challenges to existing networks of obligation and relation. Creon and Lear are to an extent embodiments of wider cultural phenomena. Creon wants to render his thinking transparent in a set of publicly visible decisions. The people are not just compelled to obey but to understand. Creon has reasons and he shares them. We might call him an embodiment of a certain kind of rationality: one that reasons. Lear wants to enjoy the love of his daughters in a form that is publicly declared. The daughters are not just invited to articulate their love but to compete with it. This competition produces speech of a particular kind: lies and distortions. They are lies for the two elder daughters who, in fact, view their father with disdain. They are distortions for Cordelia who does not know how to articulate her love and, when commanded to, says quite literally 'nothing'. Lear longs to possess what is in fact already his. He wants what is intrinsically elusive – love – to be made present, available to him, even to the point of being able to measure it and compare it. Lear too is an embodiment of a certain kind of rationality: one that measures.

Here is the horrible philosophical lesson, which perhaps contributes to what makes *Antigone* and *King Lear* of enduring significance: things may become available to speech at the point when they are under pressure, and perhaps only when they break down. At the moment of articulation Creon does not merely find his authority slipping away, but causes it to do so, and Lear finds himself squandering the love he so deeply desires. These forces name what I called at the start the paradox of ethics.

The power of moral commitments comes from their being unspoken, taken for granted in a community. But ethics is a matter of articulating them, often at a point when moral commitments are in question and no longer taken for granted. Ethics is often

not only the articulation of commitments at the moment they break down but may itself be a force which causes them to break down.

The implications of this for deliberations about a shared moral compass are severe. We can consider three emblematic questions. Can we still have meaningful conversations about matters of morality? Is there a shared moral language between representatives of opposing positions? What are the prospects of finding shared values?

These are good common-sense questions. They partially conceal a significant presupposition: it seems that there is a close link between 'matters of morality' and 'shared values'.

This discussion has focused so far on the question, 'what are the costs of forcing the articulation of our deepest values?'. To this can be added a second: 'are our deepest values best classified as moral values?'

This recapitulates an opening core idea: we may not be able to agree on theology, which in any case is a matter for experts, but we can perhaps agree on ethics, on moral practices which we share, which are a matter for everyone, and not just experts.

This idea is often simply obvious to many parties in discussion. Two forces make it not just obvious but deeply attractive. The first is a significant strand in the Christian tradition which casts religion as a matter of moral consciousness and moral action.[19] The second is the attraction of avoiding theological disagreement in favour of ethical consensus.

I suggest that the close proximity of 'fundamental values' with 'moral grounds' in part reflects this heritage, heavily inflected by Kantian and post-Kantian philosophy. Drawing attention to this can help to pry them apart a little. What if fundamental values are not moral grounds, but other things like love for one's aging father, or duty to one's dead brother? These are not exactly moral. But classifying them is a challenge. Earlier periods might call them matters of 'piety', but that word would today be rather misleading. They are related to matters of kinship, of family, of ties of various kinds. It is difficult to find modern words for them. It is not only Cordelia who struggles to speak.

The 'moralisation' of Christian thought helps explain why some Christians might be attracted to a vision in which fundamental values and moral grounds are brought close together, and even identified. It does not explain why some Muslims might be expected to be attracted to it. The history of Christian pietism will not furnish a genealogy for their systems of classification. This must be left here as a question for investigation: it would be worth asking why the idea of moral values appear to some Muslim participants, as it does, a fruitful Islamic approach to common ground.

I wish to return to what lies behind the questions of meaningful conversations, shared language, shared values, about what prompts them, and what they imply.

Two things seem to make these questions urgent. First, there is a nearly overwhelming plurality of religions, of forms of life, of ways of thinking, in our contexts, and especially in our cities. Second, there is the question of scale. There is no shortage of lofty or aspirational talk: questions of human rights, of human dignity more widely, even of forms of rationality that transcend particular traditions, as theorised by Jürgen Habermas and others. And there is no shortage of practical talk, closer to the ground: access to education, to healthcare, to legal services. As education becomes ever more commodified and as higher education becomes colonised by money and debt, especially in the UK, the

question of how and what to teach is increasingly urgent. It is fascinating and perplexing to wonder how lofty aspirations might meet practical measures and budgetary planning.

The question of scale is at the heart of any inquiry into fundamental values. Whereas individual cases invite small-scale attentiveness whose particularities may resist generalisation, fundamental values invite larger-scale ambition which might yield principles that cover a multitude of local actions. Consider the following question:

> How can we, in the face of the morally relativistic climate of the day, treat the transcendent character of the good in a way that is not absolutistic, but does justice to the particularity of the good in concrete human experiences and situations?

This is a nice statement of a familiar contradiction, namely between large-scale generalities which subsume particulars under concepts and small-scale particularities whose individuality is irreducible. This is a familiar issue in twentieth century philosophical aesthetics: 'it cannot be the task of a philosophical interpretation of works of art to produce their identity with the concept, to consume the former in the latter'.[20] It applies just as much to ethics.

If the intellectual task is taken to be one of operating on a grand scale, of imposing concepts, then works of art, and indeed ordinary everyday local particularities, cease to be the significant things that originally attract our attention. They become mere species of a genus. But that is only one way to see the task. As Andrew Bowie indicates, the issue is in part a matter of resisting this logic of domination and repression, and more positively, in commentary on this passage from Adorno, understanding philosophy as a practice that 'brings things to light'.[21]

The question of scale is linked to questions of domination and repression in the cases of Antigone and Cordelia. The problem for Cordelia is not only or even primarily that what she says distorts the matter being said, but that the truth and her agency are simultaneously repressed. She perceives her problem to be that she is being forced to articulate what cannot be articulated. She has good reason to see things this way. But the audience watches something worse: what cannot be articulated is not merely distorted in its forced articulation, but is violently disarticulated, dismembered. She does not cease loving her father, but that love becomes hopeless, a liability, and in the end a fatal threat to her.

These are two important dimensions of our questions: how do we negotiate plurality, and how do we negotiate scale? What kind of conversation is possible? What kind of talk? And how can these negotiations and possibilities avoid the threat of domination and repression?

Scriptural reasoning

The repressive effects of seeking moral common ground are discernible in its accompanying requirements. If the purpose of a public activity is to achieve a particular aim, then the only permissible contributions are those which share that aim.

In academic theatres in which interreligious dialogue takes place, a further restriction is placed. Not only must contributions share its aims (common moral ground, social harmony, combatting extremism), but the forms of articulation must conform to its academic protocols. There is in Western scholarship a well-developed policing

structure whose function is to permit and publish work that conforms to these protocols, and to exclude work that does not. The problems with this are well known: very few pieces of work published before 1970 conform to these protocols and would probably not be considered publishable today. And very few pieces of work are permissible if they adhere to other protocols, for example the Arabic-language traditions of Qur'anic exegesis and jurisprudence, or the Chinese-language traditions of intellectual inquiry classified in the Shiji at least one of which, Confucianism, is pursued today, or popular vernacular journalism. 'Scholarly' increasingly means 'in English' in many contexts.

In academic theatres funded by governments, inter-governmental bodies, or large foundations, yet another restriction is imposed. Because religion is often cast as an arena of conflict (as it typically is when studied in departments of politics and international relations), or constantly under the threat of extremism (as when it is considered in United Nations or World Bank convocations), those who wish to participate must declare their determination to end conflict and to renounce extremism. Those perceived as conflictual, extremist, or even impolite, are excluded.

Interreligious engagement in European and North American contexts tends to restrict participation to those who are polite, who explicitly affirm a certain commitment to social harmony, and who ideally can produce work that satisfies certain *wissenschaftlich* conditions. By contrast, gatherings in Egypt, Jordan, and the UAE might tend to favour participation by those who have the relevant scholarly credentials (judged by local standards), those who occupy leadership roles in religiously significant institutions, and those who have influence (often many millions of followers). The contrast is marked in my experience.

There is, however, at least one practice in Europe and North America which does not impose such restrictions: scriptural reasoning (www.scripturalreasoning.org). Unlike most practices of interreligious engagement, it did not develop out of Christian roots. It began as an experiment between scholars of Talmud and Jewish philosophy and Christian theologians, almost immediately joined by scholars of Islamic intellectual traditions. Its focal practice is the study of short texts from each tradition, interpreted side-by-side, with multiple languages, in relation to each other, around overlapping themes.

There is not space here to discuss it at length. A brief sketch must suffice. Scriptural Reasoning has protocols and rules. But finding out what these are is itself an instructive process. The Society for Scriptural Reasoning is a worldwide association of scholars. It produces the *Journal of Scriptural Reasoning* (https://jsr.shanti.virginia.edu/about/) Twenty years ago, as the practice spread slowly across the globe, a journal issue devoted to 'The Rules of Scriptural Reasoning' was published.[22] No single voice from a single tradition was permitted to declare unilaterally what the rules of the practice were. Instead, one of its founders produced a substantial set of reflections (over 11,000 words), 'The Society of Scriptural Reasoning: The Rules of Scriptural Reasoning'.[23] This was then followed by eleven responses by Jewish, Christian, and Muslim practitioners. Most of these responses also carry the title 'The Rules of Scriptural Reasoning', indicating that each author accepted the invitation to articulate the rules. Four years later, the (Christian) journal *Modern Theology* published a special issue on 'The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning' in which a dozen substantial articles, authored by members of

different religious traditions, explored what scriptural reasoning is, and what rules guide it.[24] This brief historical detail conveys something seemingly central to the practice of scriptural reasoning: to any question posed, the answers will be drawn from across the participating traditions, with no single voice or tradition claiming an overview.

Scriptural Reasoning does not aim to produce agreement. Its participants are not required to affirm any goals beyond a commitment to studying the texts. Its outcomes rarely include consensus.[25] It has been practised in Australia, Britain, Canada, China, Dubai, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Israel, Nigeria, Pakistan, Palestine, South Africa, and doubtless others. From time to time it includes participation by religious leaders with substantial followings numbering many millions, although these are relatively rare owing to the expensive provisions required. The largest of these gatherings I have attended, which included scriptural reasoning, was held in Cambridge in 2008, and which produced an unusual communiqué.[26]

The practice of scriptural reasoning does not resolve the paradoxes of moral common ground or avoid the tragedy of articulation. Its interest does not lie primarily in its refusal to seek moral common ground. What makes scriptural reasoning unusual is that it is not goal-oriented at all. It has no aims. Or rather, most experienced practitioners would say that its aim is to read texts together and for participants to study with and learn from each other. Any particular meeting tends not to leave a textual trace: texts are studied, interpretations are offered, but few merit a record. For the most part it does not and is not designed to deliver any persistent wisdom: its figures are for the most part drawn in the sand.[27]

Scriptural reasoning is nonetheless practised by scholars and often stimulates sophisticated discussion published in peer-reviewed journals.[28] But it does not require its participants to share in any common aim beyond the aim of shared study. It does not police its discourses by excluding those that are insufficiently academic, a fact that sometimes leads to a suspicion that it is intellectually unserious. It does not even discourage the participation of those who view traditions other than their own as error and heresy. Preaching and teaching are discouraged, but not because they are religiously offensive, or because a monopoly on truth is claimed. After all, some claims within traditions are religiously offensive to others, and some traditions openly claim a monopoly on truth. These forms of articulation are discouraged where they inhibit study, the one thing indispensable for scriptural reasoning.

The articulation that appears in scriptural reason is of a more modest kind. Its mode is possibility, its presumption hypothetical, its mood subjunctive.[29] Rather than uncovering a hitherto hidden common ground, which is nonetheless presupposed in advance, it is typically a matter of multiple traditions reaching into a ground that does not itself appear, in order to generate patterns of reasoning within a particular group, or to discern patterns of reasoning displayed in the texts.[30] Mind is in the world, in the scriptures, in the group, in the flow of conversation. It is fleeting, sometimes hilarious, always temporary. It is not that there is no ground. There are many: the indeterminacy of each text, each tradition's habits of interpretation, openness to new possibilities of meaning; but no ground appears as itself. A ground does not appear at all: it is already there, always generating but never itself generated, always producing but never itself a product.

Like Cordelia's love it resists articulation. Like Antigone's duty it compels and attracts, defying instrumentalisation, embracing its own fragile temporality, hospitable even to conflict and extremes.

Notes

1. MCP, The Search.
2. Fackenheim, Schelling's Conception; Bowie, Schelling; Crouter, Introduction; Frank, Metaphysical Foundations.
3. Hegel, Philosophy of Right, 23.
4. Hegel, Philosophy of Right, 23.
5. Schelling, System of Transcendental Idealism.
6. Bowie, Schelling.
7. Hegel, Phenomenology, the latter section on Spirit.
8. Hegel, Phenomenology, §445–472
9. Hoy, Hegel Antigone, 175.
10. Hoy, Hegel Antigone, 180–181
11. MacIntyre, Whose Justice Which Rationality, 58–63
12. Taylor, Sources of the Self, 72–79
13. Taylor, A Secular Age, 20–22
14. e.g. Habermas, Discourse Ethics.
15. Bourdieu, Outline, 2.
16. Bowie, Aesthetic Dimensions.
17. Jenkins, An Experiment in Providence, 103–116
18. Bowie, Aesthetic Dimensions, 202; Jenkins, An Experiment in Providence, 103–104
19. Kant, Religion within the Boundaries, 6: 61.
20. Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, 23.
21. Bowie, Aesthetic Dimensions, 19, 202.
22. SSR, Journal of Scriptural Reasoning.
23. Ochs Rules of Scriptural Reasoning.
24. Modern Theology.
25. Adams, Making Deep Reasonings Public.
26. CIP, Communiqué.
27. Ford, An Inter-Faith Wisdom; Ochs, Religion Without Violence.
28. SR, Scriptural Reasoning Bibliography.
29. Ochs, Philosophic Warrants; Ford, An Inter-Faith Wisdom; Higton and Muers, The Text in Play.
30. Adams, Scriptural Difference.

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