

ARTICLE

“Creating Commonplaces”: Value Generalization in the *A Common Word* Dialogue between Islam and Christianity

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Abstract

This article sets out to illustrate how democratic theory can draw inspiration from interfaith dialogue to envision anew the conduct of intercultural dialogues at a transnational level and within pluralistic societies. Against Jürgen Habermas’ neo-Kantian conception of normative universality supplied by a latent, shared, “normative grammar,” this article emphasizes the importance of a critical dialogical encounter between conceptions of the good and the value traditions from which they arise. Specifically, the article shows how the hermeneutical process of question and answer (as theorized by Hans-Georg Gadamer), when joined to an attendant process of value generalization (set out by Hans Joas), allows for the clarification of ethical meanings in their “articulating-constitutive” dimension and the development of new, shared, values across traditions. To illustrate how a hermeneutically rich process of value generalization works to cultivate an appealing form of critical ethical commonality, the article explores the example of the *A Common Word* dialogue between Islam and Christianity, which, it posits, has worked as a “conceptual laboratory” within which ethical meanings grow.

Keywords

Gadamer, Habermas, *A Common Word*, Levinas, hermeneutics, interfaith dialogue, Islam, Christianity, value pluralism, democratic theory

Introduction

A familiar feature of contemporary reflection upon democratic deliberation and intercultural dialogue is the search for normative premises that might ground convergences upon essential or “basic” principles for normative commonality amidst cultural pluralism. To this end, a great deal of analytical effort is poured out on establishing ethically diminutive principles of “the right” that might prove acceptable to consociates holding diverse “thick” conceptions of the good, including those resourced by religious traditions. Insofar as ethical convergence is envisioned without the guiderails of shared metaphysical premises, it tends to feature minimalist agreement upon constitutional essentials cast in a secular and formal mold, or “learning processes” characterized by the progressive secularization of validity claims—what Jürgen Habermas calls the “linguistification of the sacred.” For liberal proceduralists like Habermas, any hope for normative unity across the fissures of contemporary value pluralism lies in “the secularized world of moral and rational-legal universalism.”¹ Thus, as Habermas tells it, “the only unifying context that the sons and daughters of “homeless” modernity still share is the practice of moral argumentation, now conducted with inadequate reasons.” For Habermas, “the store of commonalities has shrunk to the formal features of these [ethical] discourses.”²

Critics of Habermas’ discourse ethics raise a number of now familiar challenges, insisting, for example, that his framework conceals its dependence upon shared social values and common historical memory of past conflicts over the nature of the common good.³ According to this line of criticism, a semantically truncated proceduralism not only obscures its own cultural “thickness” but prevents consociates from cultivating shared values through engagement with ethical worldviews as they undergird political and social hopes. In this vein Charles Taylor, for example, argues that it is a mistake “to believe that there can be some decision whose neutrality is guaranteed by its emerging from some principle or procedure.”⁴ This, he suggests, tends to breed “the illusion that there is no need to negotiate the place of these symbols, and hence to confront the actual substantive differences.”⁵ Similarly,

- 1 Jürgen Habermas, “Israel or Athens: Where Does Anamnestic Reason Belong?”, in *The Liberating Power of Symbols: Philosophical Essays*, trans. Peter Dews (MIT Press, 2001), 88.
- 2 Jürgen Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion: Philosophical Essays*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Polity Press, 2008), 87.
- 3 Martin Loughlin, *Against Constitutionalism* (Harvard University Press, 2022), 107.
- 4 Loughlin, *Against Constitutionalism*, 143.
- 5 Loughlin, *Against Constitutionalism*, 143.

Danielle Allen emphasizes that Habermas “solves the problem of generating agreement only by undoing the need to work hard for it.”⁶ This skepticism regarding the ideal of discursively rational proceduralism stems from a more fundamental rejection of the kind of contemporary neo-Kantianism that entails “the identification of morality with a unified code, generated from a single source.”⁷ Where Habermas insists that “reason, which is always bound up with language, is also always beyond its languages,”⁸ Taylor and Hubert Dreyfus, in particular, insist on the inevitability of working in and through the thickets of natural languages so as to overcome the “jackals and the vultures of partial and...surmountable non-communication.”⁹

The grounding contention of this article is that the “store of commonalities” available to consociates inhabiting a globalized—and locally pluralized—modernity requires tending beyond the minimalist presuppositions of “rational-legal universalism.” The many forms of intercultural impingement generated by globalization, along with the developing cross-disciplinary recognition of “multiple modernities,” suggests a pressing need for translation and negotiation between differing experiences of encounter with the “modern” and between the claims to universality that give shape to these encounters. If, to turn to Sanjay Subrahmanian’s phrasing, modernity is a “conjunctural” phenomenon, rather than a dynamic by which parochial practices are subsumed beneath universal logics, then an account of transnational, intercultural, deliberation must wrestle with the practical conditions of conjunction.¹⁰ Specifically, it must consider how different trajectories of experience, different traditions of generating ethical and political meaning amidst modernity, might overcome mutual inscrutability or suspicion to develop common ethical resources. This article explicates the possibilities for critical diagnosis and the composition of ethical commonality presented by the practice of “value generalization” as articulated by Hans Joas. It weds Joas’ pragmatist account of value

6 Danielle S. Allen, *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship Since Brown v. Board of Education* (University of Chicago Press, 2004), 63.

7 Charles Taylor, “Perils of Moralism,” in *Theology and Public Philosophy: Four Conversations*, ed. Kenneth L. Grasso and Cecilia Rodriguez Castillo (Lexington Books, 2012), 347.

8 Jürgen Habermas, *On the Logic of the Social Sciences*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen and Jerry A Stark (Polity Press, 1988), 144.

9 Hubert Dreyfus and Charles Taylor, *Retrieving Realism* (Harvard University Press, 2015), 112.

10 Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “Hearing Voices: Vignettes of Early Modernity in South Asia, 1400–1750,” *Daedalus* 127, no. 3 (1998): 75–104. Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, Radical Thinkers (Verso, 2011). 163.

generalization to Gadamer's hermeneutical ontology, as well as to his theorization of the "process of understanding," to show that both criticism and transformation may occur with reference to ethical values that call for a specific kind of contextually sensitive understanding and, with it, a more provisional, less finalist, form of politically developed commonality. This form of commonality reflects, I will argue, Emmanuel Levinas' insight that "to speak is to make the world common, to create commonplaces."¹¹

My purpose is to illustrate how democratic theory can draw inspiration from interfaith dialogue to envision anew the conduct of intercultural dialogues at a transnational level and within pluralistic societies. I will draw a connection between Gadamer's hermeneutical ontology and Joas' pragmatist account of "value generalization," which, I will argue, is a practice in evidence in the *A Common Word Between Us and You* dialogue between Islam and Christianity.¹² Taken together, the hermeneutical ontology of Gadamer, Joas' pragmatism, and the example of the *A Common Word* dialogue, enables an account of the conditions and procedures through which the work of "creating commonplaces" across cultural fault lines best proceeds.

The practice of deliberative value generalization as presented here has three purposes that make it distinct from liberal accounts of deliberation in search of agreement on "constitutional essentials" or on a universal normative grammar. First, to allow different conceptions of the good to surface without our pre-emptively consigning their value articulations to the category of "private," "non-rational" or "non-generalizable." Second, to enable the disclosure and comprehension of claims and vocabularies resident within these traditions in their "articulating-constitutive" character, rather than as static representative claims or propositional assertions. Third, to facilitate consociates in developing a self-reflexive diagnostic capacity that unveils the genealogical dependencies of their own traditions, while also discerning whether certain value-articulations might be generalized to form a basis for common action and shared commitment.

The article proceeds in three sections. The first section establishes the theoretical foundations, canvassing the Habermas-Gadamer debate on language and reason. I set out the differences between the Habermasian view of "language as a species endowment," and Gadamer's hermeneutical ontology, which outlines the context "within which language grows" and understanding is developed. Taking up the Gadamerian account, I explore

11 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Duquesne University Press, 1969), 76.

12 Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, *A Common Word Between Us and You*, October 13, 2007, acommonword.com.

its practical application in the second section, through a discussion of the process of value generalization in evidence in the *A Common Word* dialogue. Finally, gathering together the material of the previous sections, the third section highlights the potential for value generalization to move beyond evaluative assessments of static doctrinal propositions, to uncover ethical meanings in their “articulating-constitutive” dimension. This, I suggest, is conducive to a form of dialogical interchange more immune to discursive caricature and more effective in the face of social and ethical inscrutability.

Section 1: Language, Reason and Ontology

I begin by outlining two rival views of the relationship between language and reasoning. One approach (the Habermasian) looks to the formal features of discourse to supply context-transcendent normative principles, while the other (the Gadamerian) considers such principles to emerge only through the meaning-making processes of interpretation and translation. The Habermas-Gadamer debate hinges upon the question of whether reason can establish evaluative standards apart from specific languages in use—that is, specific vocabularies and communities of shared meaning.

Habermas’ Normative Grammar

For Habermas, the philosophical accomplishment of a “principled” morality precedes and facilitates the creation of the emancipated political collective composed of rationally autonomous individuals. Habermas shifts the underpinnings of moral universalism from natural law and metaphysics to the terrain of language assessed formalistically as a “species endowment” structured by pragmatic presuppositions. In Habermas’ view, “reason, which is always bound up with language, is also always beyond its languages.”¹³ Thus, “languages themselves contain the potential for a rationality that, expressing itself in the particularity of a specific grammar, reflects the limits of that grammar and at the same time negates them in their specificity.”¹⁴ Reason is “always beyond its languages” in light of its capacity for objectification, which occurs through the act of reflection. Habermas’ theorization of “reflection” presents the process by which a socially embedded “self-presence” comes to objectify itself or understand itself under a conceptual lens. In the specific sense intended by Habermas, the individual

13 Jürgen Habermas, *On the Logic of the Social Sciences*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen and Jerry A Stark (Polity Press, 1988), 144.

14 Habermas, *On the Logic of the Social Sciences*, 144.

subject develops a self-understanding defined by a certain conceptualization of moral autonomy, which makes the subject's relation to inherited language one to be excavated and potentially overturned.

The intellectual pursuit of the “project of modernity” begins, in Habermas’ vast corpus, with a historical diagnosis upon which the structure of his subsequent moral and legal theory depends. Habermas’ historical story traces a breakage between the social imaginary, moral psychology, and institutional configuration. He warns that morality “withdrawn into the cultural system maintains only a virtual relation to action as long as it is not actualized by motivated actors *themselves*.”¹⁵ Habermas takes a “culturally withdrawn” morality to be motivationally weak and therefore deficient as an integrative force, relying as it does upon subjective will rather than an all-encompassing cosmological imagination and tacit social consensus of the kind that understands the well-ordered political community to incarnate the divine *oikonomia* or economy of grace).¹⁶ He wants instead to develop a moral framework that asserts universal validity while at the same time being immanent to quotidian practices and social imaginaries so as to retain motivational strength. Hence, for Habermas, a principled morality “depends on socialization processes that meet it halfway by engendering the corresponding agencies of conscience, namely the correlative superego formations.”¹⁷ Our conceptions of the good, replete with their claims to truth, are to be directed towards this ever more inclusive “principled morality” through which post-metaphysical “agencies of conscience” are cultivated at the level of the individual subject. By so doing, we in turn revise our conceptions of the good, ensuring their partial refashioning in contact with the epistemological and communicative presuppositions of a post-metaphysical normative culture. To do so is to expand the boundaries of moral consideration by means of non-customary, non-traditional, norms which, though cognizant of their genesis in antecedent traditions, escape their constraints through re-articulation along semantically generalized and metaphysically non-committal lines.

Habermas’ normative system—and its accompanying theory of deliberation amidst value pluralism—relies, therefore, upon a quasi-historical account of the development of “post-conventional” morality and the progressive diminishment of metaphysically laden worldviews as bases for

15 Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, trans. William Rehg (Polity Press, 1996), 113.

16 Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*, trans. Lorenzo Chiesa and Matteo Mandarini, Meridian (Stanford University Press, 2011).

17 Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, 113.

philosophical and deliberative justification. According to the historical story Habermas tells, natural law as articulated by Aristotle and his interpreter Aquinas once offered an all-encompassing societal ethos such that “cultural value patterns and institutions sufficiently overlapped with the action orientations and motives fixed in personality structures.”¹⁸ In a pre-modern context marked by metaphysically thick worldviews, European societies were characterized by a tightly integrated normative, institutional, and motivational web, the elements of which reinforced each other and militated against the critical relativization of tradition by the individual. This integrated “lifeworld” met with fragmentation with the emergence of early modern movements of theological reform and Enlightenment thought, through which religious and ethical practices were assessed, the argument goes, with reference to an ever more highly developed idea of reflexive reason. Action orientations were thus separated from the strong motivational complex of religious belief and the once wholesale imbrication of ethical value patterns and institutional life teased apart. The unravelling of this matrix of belief and ethical consensus constitutes a diachronic process understood by Habermas in terms of “the rationalization of the lifeworld,” where the imbrication of culture, politics, and law is undone and “cultural traditions and processes of socialization came under the pressure of reflection, so that actors themselves gradually made them into topics of discussion.”¹⁹ In other words, actors become capable of objectifying their own commitments in the course of conversation, rather than inhabiting them in the pre-reflective sense that Habermas ascribes to tradition-based practices. Consequently, the commitments and practices inherited via the medium of tradition are “reduced to mere conventions and differentiated from conscientious decisions that passed through the filter of reflection and independent judgment.”²⁰

We therefore encounter a crucial distinction made by Habermas—with obvious descent from the Kantian ideal of freedom as individual self-direction—between “received” convention and the exercise of “independent” and “conscientious” judgment in public discourse, the latter guaranteeing the autonomy of the moral agent by effecting a critical relativization of ethical traditions. Moral autonomy requires reflective agency that “gets behind language,” so to speak, enabling us to bring our commitments and our received values into view, so as to be rationally endorsed or discarded. The primary assumption here is that procedural rationality’s claim is diminutive (and hence culturally or doctrinally non-

18 Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, 95.

19 Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, 95.

20 Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, 95.

intrusive) given that, in this scheme, it rests upon grammatical necessity rather than Kantian noumena or a more assertive metaphysics. As Bernstein suggests, Habermas' primary claim is that amongst the plurality of forms of life rooted in their "unique traditions," "we can detect a gentle but obstinate...claim to reason," a "claim to reason that points to the possibility of the argumentative redemption of validity claims through mutual dialogue and discourse."²¹ This is the "basic intuition" of Habermas' communicative theory as enunciated and amended over his wide-ranging corpus, its "moral-political" intention being to demonstrate that across various communicative action-contexts there are "unifying" presuppositions that orient us to the development of mutual understanding and autonomy.

By extension these presuppositions may be converted into procedures that draw us to eliminate elements that distort our communication so that we better realize an ideal of *reciprocal* dialogue that generates autonomy and solidarity.²² Within Habermas' communicative ethics the diminutive profile of reason, based on its merely "grammatical" character, undergirds procedural principles that draw from the terrain of social reality while remaining independent of its particular ethical vocabularies and the perspectival constraints they impose. Thus, Habermas writes: "[S]pecialized for questions of justice, a principled morality views *everything* through the powerful but narrow lens of universalizability. Its telos consists in the impartial judgment of morally relevant action conflicts, and hence it facilitates a knowledge that is meant to orient one's action but does not thereby *dispose* one to act rightly."²³ Principled morality therefore carries out a clarifying function, rather than a motivational one, requiring the "semantic" (but not cognitive) resources of ethical or religious traditions to add motivational depth to the individual's adherence to principle. The emphasis here upon impartiality foreshadows Habermas' commitment to the revisionist power of a certain kind of autonomous reason—instantiated through processes of reflection—that works to reorder the "inherited" contents of ethical traditions and consequently to shift the adherent's relationship with their tradition to one of reflective appropriation rather than unreflective inhabitation. Habermas gives further characterization of this understanding of critical reason in his critique of Gadamer's ontological prioritization of hermeneutical understanding (*Verstehen*):

Gadamer fails to recognize the power of reflection that unfolds in *Verstehen*. There reflection is no longer blinded by the illusion of an

21 Richard J Bernstein, *Habermas and Modernity* (Polity Press, 1985), 192.

22 Bernstein, *Habermas and Modernity*, 195.

23 Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, 113.

absolute, self-grounded autonomy, and it does not detach itself from the ground of the contingent on which it finds itself. But when reflection understands the genesis of the tradition from which it proceeds and to which it returns, the dogmatism of life-praxis is shaken.²⁴

As this passage illustrates, Habermas' deflationary Kantianism aims to secure a conception of reason as non-transcendental but nevertheless capable of overcoming what Gadamer calls the hermeneutical situation within which the subject's reflective understanding is circumscribed by a finite epistemic horizon. While it may not descend from noumena in the Kantian sense, reflection in the Habermasian scheme produces something like the Durkheimian perspective, operating to objectify ethical life and thus to reshape the premises upon which traditions operate. Put differently, it preserves a cognitive space beyond language, from which philosophical reason may survey the commitments expressed by languages-in-use without being bound to the resources that they make available. For Habermas, then, the particularity of values means the *particularism* of values, such that, in Joas' words, "the only hope of universalization...lies in the spheres of law and normative morality."²⁵

Gadamer's Hermeneutical Ontology

Gadamer, on the other hand, transfers his enquiry into the conditions of human understanding onto an ontological register. His description of the process of understanding avoids the binary validity problematic (of distinguishing valid from invalid argumentation) and instead accounts for the conditions in which understanding is pursued. Gadamer's hermeneutical framework as explicated in *Truth and Method* bears upon both the text and the social world as reservoirs of meanings, leading Fred Dallmayr to note Gadamer's insistence on the "close linkage and even convergence of dialog and hermeneutical understanding."²⁶ Dallmayr frames Gadamer's theory as antithetical to the kind of abstraction pursued by Habermas. Thus, although Gadamer's theory is abstract in the sense that it makes general ontological claims, "hermeneutics is not, and has never been, a purely abstract theory, but is closely linked with lived experience and human conduct."²⁷ Of course,

24 Habermas, *On the Logic of the Social Sciences*, 168.

25 Hans Joas, *The Sacredness of the Person: A New Genealogy of Human Rights* (Georgetown University Press, 2013), 176.

26 Fred Dallmayr, "Hermeneutics and Inter-cultural Dialog: Linking Theory and Practice," *Ethics & Global Politics* 2, no.1 (2009): 23–39, 27.

27 Dallmayr, "Hermeneutics and Inter-cultural Dialog," 20.

one might say that Habermas' communicative ethics are also grounded in human conduct, insofar as they rely upon an internal logic posited by Habermas as inherent in linguistic rationality. So, how does Gadamer's theory characterize the process of establishing commonality, and how does this differ from universalization by law and normative morality?

For Gadamer, all understanding proceeds from a particular perspectival position characterized by "prejudices;" understanding progresses towards an appreciation of "the whole" only via a constitutive relationship with "the parts," and only from within a specific "horizon" that delimits the initial perception of the individual subject.²⁸ This view of the "situation" or ontology in which we are cast includes a conception of consciousness as "being affected by history," so that the reflexivity to which a critical introspection should strive is "primarily consciousness of the hermeneutical situation."²⁹ Reflexive consciousness does not stand outside of particular language contexts in an objectifying stance, but rather entails one becoming aware of the inevitability of expressive and conceptual dependence; it involves recognition of the finitude of consciousness and of understanding. Thus, on the Gadamerian view, "all self-knowledge arises from what is historically pregiven," so that our attempts at reflective "illumination" are destined to fall short of completion.³⁰ This incompleteness is not due to a "deficiency in reflection," but to "the essence of the historical being that we are."³¹ Gadamer's hermeneutic ontology therefore insists upon a view of the subject as historically and contextually embedded, with no way of achieving a perspective that interrupts history or that achieves a "complete" self-knowledge. Instead, the "thinking mind" may gradually expand the range of its vision, "throwing light" upon the situation in which one stands while always falling short of "objective knowledge" of it.³²

This distinguishes the Gadamerian notion of self-knowledge from the aspiration to what Hegel calls "absolute knowledge" by which history, or in the neo-Kantian case reason, becomes "completely transparent to itself," elevating itself to the level of a concept.³³ We are set within a hermeneutical situation, as Gadamer puts it, which reflects the reality that "every finite present has its limitations."³⁴ Accordingly, we may define the concept of a "situation" by saying, replete with ocular metaphor, that it represents a

28 Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 302.

29 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 312.

30 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 313.

31 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 313.

32 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 313.

33 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 312.

34 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 313.

standpoint from which one looks out at a horizon that delimits the extent of one's vision. The concept of the *horizon*, working in concert with that of the perspectival *situation*, refers to "the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point."³⁵ The horizon, therefore both extends and delimits the range of "the thinking mind;" implying an expanse open to view that extends well beyond what is immediately in front of us, it nevertheless suggests that our perspective is embedded in a cultural landscape that offers no prospect of an extra-mundane Olympian viewing platform, so to speak. Joining Gadamer, Habermas also refuses the Olympian viewing platform of transcendental reason, preferring instead to locate an immanent logic inherent in the nature of human communicative practices, from which we might extrapolate an intra-mundane rather than transcendental normative universalism. Unlike Gadamer, however, Habermas strives to protect by means of formal abstraction the decisiveness delivered by argumentative rationality, as distinct from a form of understanding made critically reflexive by knowledge of its own incompleteness and dependence for extension upon encounter with other perspectives.

Habermas famously sets out to preserve a form of prejudice-disintegrating reason through an account of "language as a species endowment," which generates a normative pragmatics that transcend the peculiarities of natural languages. Though Habermas broadly agrees with Gadamer that horizontal movement between languages is intrinsic to linguistic experience, which bears with it possibilities for translation, he preserves a commitment to rational self-reflection as involving a distantiation from prejudices or prior meanings. While Habermas prioritizes "argument," retaining a commitment to the "unforced force" of reason, Gadamer proposes an ontology of dialogue, according to which, as David Tracy puts it, dialogue is ontologically and epistemologically "foundational to all linguistic understanding."³⁶ Where Habermas seeks a secure meta-theoretical scaffolding for a critical theory of argumentation, Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics are "grounded in the ontological, not merely epistemological foundation of dialogue."³⁷ Dialogue is the native medium of human social life, involving interchange between self and other (or text) through the hermeneutical alternation of question and answer. As Tracy puts it, the essence of Gadamerian dialogue is, first, "an alertness to the claim to attention of the other" and, second, "a submitting of oneself to the logic of

35 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 313.

36 David Tracy, *Fragments: The Existential Situation of Our Time* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), 190.

37 Tracy, *Fragments*, 194.

dialogue as a back and forth movement.”³⁸ Crucially, that dialectic of question and answer is a process of self-exposure to alterity rather than a method of enquiry through which the self remains at some formal remove. This depiction of our involvement with language undergirds Gadamer’s argument against Habermas’ theory of “language as a species endowment,” that “language ... is not the finally found anonymous subject of all socio-historical processes and action, which presents the whole of its activities as objectifications to our observing gaze.”³⁹ For, he insists, “language is not only an object in our hands, it is the reservoir of tradition and the medium in and through which we exist and perceive our world.”⁴⁰ Hermeneutical understanding is not, therefore, a method of inquiry that simply disintegrates “substantiality”; it is what is involved in moving through the domain of human meanings, making it, in Heideggerian language, an essential aspect of our “being in the world.”

One of the accusations levelled at Gadamerian hermeneutics, first and foremost by Habermas, is that it opposes hermeneutic experience to “methodic knowledge,” thereby sacrificing the means of reflective critique in favor of the authority of tradition.⁴¹ Gadamer’s characterization of the conditions of understanding and of self-knowledge rejects the structure of Kantian critical reason, along with the notion of an unencumbered rationality that objectifies the inheritance of tradition—thus, “understanding is to be thought of less as a subjective act than as a participating in an event of tradition, a process of transmission in which past and present are constantly mediated.”⁴² Yet the “tradition” to which Gadamer alludes here is not that of the “comprehensive doctrine” that political liberalism sets out to restrain in light of its received structures of authority and its exclusive truth claims. It is, rather, the “situation” in which all stand as subjects attempting to extend our understanding of those who operate out of cultural and historical alterity and, through the comparison this brings about, our self-knowledge. Gadamer insists that this is “in no sense a preference for that which is customary, to which one must be blindly subservient.”⁴³ Rather, it is

38 Tracy, *Fragments*, 196.

39 Hans Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. David E. Linge (University of California Press, 1976), 32.

40 Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 29.

41 See, for example, *Habermas and Modernity*, ed. Richard J. Bernstein (MIT Press, 1985); see also Fred R. Dallmayr, “Borders or Horizons? Gadamer and Habermas Revisited,” *Chicago-Kent Law Review* 76, no. 2 (2000): 825–851, 840.

42 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 302.

43 Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Reply to My Critics,” in *The Hermeneutic Tradition: From Ast to Ricoeur*, ed. Gayle L. Ormiston and Alan D. Schrift (State University of New York Press, 1990), 288.

to characterize tradition as emergent, such that “alteration of existing conditions is no less a form of connection to tradition than is a defense of existing conditions.” Tradition, he emphasizes, “exists only in constantly becoming other than it is.”⁴⁴ With the “pre-judgments” and “fore-meanings” that it affords, tradition is prerequisite for attempts at reflexive understanding for the reason that it supplies the semantic and imaginative resources with which the effort at understanding begins, even where it does so in acts of explorative resistance or counter-action to hegemonic idealizations.

A tradition, as Gadamer addresses it in *Truth and Method*, includes components that are written down as well as being carried by linguistic practices, in both cases taking the form “not of something left over, to be investigated and interpreted as a remnant of the past,” but rather a “continuity of memory” to which new meanings are conjoined.⁴⁵ That we are situated in close relation to traditions out of which we reason is one of the ontological presuppositions of Gadamer’s hermeneutical theory, suggesting, in turn, that “reason exists for us only in concrete, historical terms.” There can be no “reason” without the meanings born out of historical consciousness by traditions, meaning that “reason is not its own master but remains constantly dependent upon the given circumstances in which it operates.”⁴⁶ Enlightenment thought, says Gadamer, bears the conviction that reason may “safeguard us from all error,” yet despite its demand for the “overcoming of all prejudices,” it too proves itself to be laden with prejudices (including the “prejudice against prejudice”) and resources borne by what Habermas calls “ethical” traditions.⁴⁷ The possibility of reasoning with a view to developing a more expansive “horizon” is therefore tied to the resources supplied by traditions, which frame the context in which we pursue knowledge of the hermeneutical situation in which we, and our interlocutors, are set. Hence, “only the support of familiar and common understanding makes possible the venture into the alien, the lifting up of something out of the alien, and thus the broadening and enrichment of our own experience of the world.”⁴⁸

This assertion of dependence upon prior “common understanding” may understandably prompt hesitation insofar as it appears to narrow the routes towards critical re-appraisal of tradition promised by contemporary neo-Kantian critical theory. Critical renewal of understanding, on Gadamer’s terms, does not arise out of a kind of enlightening friction between context-

44 Gadamer, “Reply to My Critics,” 288.

45 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 408.

46 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 288.

47 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 288.

48 Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 15.

independent reason and lifeworld practices. Indeed, Gadamer resists any default association between “understanding” and the “unmasking” of unreflective dogmatism, rejecting the assertion, which he lays at Habermas’ feet, that “reason and authority are abstract antitheses.”⁴⁹ However, he offers full throated recognition that the forms of authority that reside within traditions exercise “an essential dogmatic power in innumerable forms of domination.”⁵⁰ With this acknowledgement, he seeks to prize apart the analytical interweaving of “authority” with unreflective dogma, introducing instead the question of legitimacy and the prospect of “true authority” that is accepted through an obedience that is “neither blind nor slavish.”⁵¹ Disclosing the structure of pre-judgements that constitute the “understanding” borne by a tradition does not inevitably lead to the disintegration of received authority. Authority, insists Gadamer, should not be associated inevitably with dogmatic formulations and unreflective adherence, but potentially also with “insight as a hermeneutical process.”⁵²

Acknowledging that tradition may in many imaginable instances incorporate “reasonable” authority does little to assuage concerns about the conservatism of defaulting to “common understanding” mediated via established avenues of interpretive power. And indeed, Gadamer’s rendering of tradition is, as David Tracy rightly notes, vulnerable to the charge of being too sanguine about the restrictive conservatism of authority and the narrowing of resources of emancipatory transformation.⁵³ But also embedded in Gadamer’s ontological hermeneutics is the means to recast tradition, an essentially linguistic phenomenon, as performing a far more capacious role than binding its adherents to static meanings. In the very same movement from “familiar and common understanding” to encounter with “the alien,” meanings are destabilized and renewed and alternatives brought into use. Just as speech depends upon an existing semantic field, it equally moves to constitute new meanings via the slippages and modifications made through elucidation, interpretation and narrative with its metaphorical and metonymic richness. Ethical and normative renewal is realized in and through language; meanings are adjusted as speech is retrained upon newly discerned problems, generating new values in turn. The emergence of transformed meanings (and with them values) is therefore akin to, as Taylor puts it, the “open-ended process of extension and alteration” central to the life of a “language-in-use,” by which we are

49 Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 33.

50 Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 33.

51 Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 33–34.

52 Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 34.

53 Tracy, *Fragments*, 194.

constantly “straining the limits of expression.”⁵⁴ Thus the scope for a more or less unlimited linguistic innovation within ethical traditions; a wide range of subtle adjustments, stimulated by the act of speech, can be made to meanings. Given this dynamism, it is impossible to be made a “prisoner of language,” locked inextricably within existing patterns of use. So, argues Taylor, “our language is always more than we can encompass; it is, in a sense, inexhaustible.”⁵⁵ It can, in Taylor’s Gadamerian rendering, only be deployed against a “background which we can never fully dominate” but that never fully dominates us either, given our capacity for expressive and interpretive creativity. Or, as Gadamer himself puts it, “while we live wholly within a language, the fact that we do so does not constitute linguistic relativism because there is absolutely no captivity within a language.”⁵⁶

The development of a “critical” or reflexive form of understanding, which includes “self-knowledge,” occurs in and through these conditions in which we are “situated.” Yet Gadamer’s conception of reflexive self-knowledge keeps open room for a critical stance towards the tradition(s) in which the individual subject is set, or upon which they depend for their initial “fore-meanings.” Moreover, by accepting perceptive finitude and the ongoing and unfinished nature of self-knowledge, this self-reflexivity contravenes attempts at philosophical and political finalism (the post-ideological “end of history”) and the Enlightenment’s “abstract contrast between myth and reason.”⁵⁷ Gadamerian self-knowledge seeks out a reflexive alertness to the nature of the “hermeneutical situation,” an alertness that, although it is self-reflexive, does not thereby overcome contextual limitations or dependencies. Crucially, says Gadamer, “the consciousness of being conditioned does not supersede our conditionedness.”⁵⁸ With this in mind, developing a critical self-consciousness that registers the hermeneutical situation and that mediates intelligently between its own perspective and the ethical alterity it encounters, “means acquiring the right horizon of inquiry for the questions evoked by the encounter with tradition.”⁵⁹ To suggest that the priority assigned by Gadamer to tradition requires a relinquishment of critical aspirations would therefore be to miss the critical possibilities inherent in the dialogical exchange between worldviews in which perspectives drawn out of different

54 Charles Taylor, “Language and Human Nature,” in *Human Agency and Language* (Cambridge University Press, 1985), 232.

55 Taylor, “Language and Human Nature,” 232.

56 Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 16.

57 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 286.

58 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 448.

59 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 313.

situations develop a shared understanding that is inter-perspectival. This inter-perspectival stance is drawn out of the dialogical exchange, rather than being theoretically mandated in the manner of the egalitarian universalism to which Habermas attaches “only a formal-pragmatic meaning.”⁶⁰ Nevertheless, it does not relinquish “cognitive purpose” or critical potential by detaching itself from theoretically mandated formalism: rather, its ends are set and its critical aims renewed through dialogical encounter. The hermeneutical understanding developed here requires a horizontal movement that either picks up or sheds ethical material as it moves towards new ground—it is one of translation and modification rather than disaggregation and subsumption. I mean to refer here to what Dallmayr calls the “border crossing quality of hermeneutics,” which entails “the readiness of the understanding to be ‘addressed’ and possibly transformed by multiple domains of experience.”⁶¹ Hermeneutical understanding, as Gadamer formulates it, proceeds by “working out” or “working through” (*Ausarbeitung*) encounter with alterity rather than via the methodical objectivization of experience.

The outcome of this process of understanding is what Gadamer terms a “fusion of horizons,” which entails an act of transposition through which the particularity of another’s identity remains fully particular and free from the imposition of external standards or rubrics imposed under the guise of neutral arbitration. Thus, Gadamer writes on the historicity of understanding, that “transposing ourselves consists neither in the empathy of one individual for another nor in subordinating another person to our own standards; rather, it always involves rising to a higher universality that overcomes not only our own particularity but also that of the other.”⁶² The “higher universality” involved in the fusion of horizons does not abandon consciousness of the limits of one’s view—the notion of a horizon entails both expansiveness of vision and its limitation. What Gadamer calls “hermeneutical understanding” aims towards the development of a “superior breadth of vision,” which entails a specific kind of development of one’s sensitivity to the alterity of one’s interlocutor; as Gadamer puts it, “to acquire a horizon means that one learns to look beyond what is close at hand, not in order to look away from it but to see it better, within a larger whole and in truer proportion.”⁶³ A process of value generalization that seeks to generate an expanded horizon for its participants entails creative exegesis and reworking of the ethical traditions so engaged; this, in turn, can

60 Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion: Philosophical Essays*, 49.

61 Dallmayr, “Borders or Horizons,” 848.

62 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 305.

63 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 305.

be expected to stimulate conceptual modification and ethical renewal in the face of newly considered dilemmas and newly developed relationships. Such a process moves with one eye to the past, the other to the present and its contingent details—it entails “reinterpretation of historically embodied meaning” paired with a simultaneous diagnostic move by which such meaning is refitted in accordance with the details of the present. Hence, doing justice to those values that we wish to assert as universal in their relevance depends upon achieving “a realistic picture of present conditions for the realization of historically generated ideals and their unfulfilled potential.”⁶⁴

Gadamer’s conception of the fusion of horizons has attracted well known criticisms, which, from different directions, raise the concern that it may amount to the “submission of one horizon to another.”⁶⁵ R.J. Bernstein, for example, using Derrida’s concern for the indissolubility of otherness as a prompt, questions whether Gadamer’s fusion of horizons violates the alterity of the other. He asks whether, by involving the interpretation of the other through the foregrounding of pre-judgements and the projection of the interpreter’s own horizon, processes of understanding that tend towards a Gadamerian “fusion” have the effect of “reducing the other to the same because understanding necessarily involves my horizon and the horizon that I project on behalf of the other.”⁶⁶ As Gadamer puts it in *Truth and Method*, a person who is trying to understand a text “projects a meaning for the text as a whole as soon as some initial meaning emerges in the text.”⁶⁷ But, this “fore-projection” of meaning is “constantly revised in terms of what emerges as he penetrates into the meaning, in understanding what is there.”⁶⁸ This corrective process seems adequate when the hermeneutical activity entails the relation between reader and text but encounters more pitfalls when countenancing hermeneutical conversation between persons.

The most obvious such problem relates to adverse conditions for sincere dialogical interchange, such as relative imbalances in hermeneutical power. This leads Bernstein to ask whether Gadamer’s “fusion” concept underplays the demanding conditions for “genuine” dialogue, ignoring the prevalence of what Habermas would refer to as distortive communication based upon

64 Joas, *The Sacredness of the Person*, 135

65 Erdal Yilmaz, “The Fusion of Horizons: The Possibility of a Genuine Ethical Dialogue,” *South African Journal of Philosophy* 41, no. 3 (2022): 229–239, 230.

66 Richard J. Bernstein, “The Conversation that Never Happened (Gadamer/Derrida),” *The Review of Metaphysics* 61, no. 3 (2008): 577–603, 593.

67 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 279.

68 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 279.

“perlocutionary” rather than “illocutionary” speech acts.⁶⁹ These are important criticisms to leave in place as warnings against the fore-projection of meanings morphing into a forced homogenization on terms set by the stronger party to the conversation. Challenges certainly arise where hermeneutical understanding pertains to dialogue between persons, where, as Gadamer insists, “reaching an understanding on the subject matter of a conversation necessarily means that a common language must first be worked out in the conversation.”⁷⁰ To take up a Levinasian theme, the search for initial commonality, or for the common “object” of dialogical interchange, requires caution against overwhelming the alterity of the other, so diminishing the “astonishment” brought about by the other as the source of revelatory difference. This is conceivable where “commonality” is associated too closely with “coherence” on terms that lack openness to genuine hybridity and self-revision. As Levinas puts it, the revealing function of language is not limited to its coherence. Were it to be so limited, “the function of language would amount to suppressing ‘the other,’ who breaks this coherence,” the outcome being that “language would consist in suppressing the other, in making the other agree with the same!”⁷¹

I lack adequate space to address these tensions at any length here, given the array of interesting questions they pose. But if Gadamer’s hermeneutical ontology offers the seeds of a response, we might locate them, firstly, in his prioritization of the “question” in the process of understanding, which involves the dialectic of question and answer. For Gadamer, “discourse that is intended to reveal something”, which is to say dialogical discourse, “requires that thing be broken open by the question.”⁷² But the act of posing questions, pedagogical, interrogatory, or otherwise, requires an explicit acknowledgement of guiding presuppositions, such that it retains a “state of openness” as a question from a specific origin addressed to a particular subject. The logic of the question, insists Gadamer, is embedded in experience and particularly in the encounter with difference, which culminates, through the “dialectical negativity” of experience, in “the knowledge of not knowing.”⁷³ One consequence of this self-knowledge is the kind of “hermeneutical consciousness” that “culminates not in methodological sureness of itself, but in the same readiness for experience that distinguishes the experienced man from the man captivated by

69 Bernstein, “The Conversation that Never Happened,” 594.

70 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 386.

71 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 73.

72 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 371.

73 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 370.

dogma.”⁷⁴ Hermeneutical consciousness therefore preserves a strong form of self-reflexivity and a state of epistemic openness generated by the dialogical conditions of language use.

Secondly, “successful conversation,” in Gadamer’s account, is not a process of mutual adaptation between interlocutors (with all the potential for asymmetry), but rather involves the generation of an altogether “new community” of common concern. As with the openness involved in the structure of question and answer, “genuine conversation” proceeds without finally established controlling presuppositions: we do not “conduct” a conversation as much as “fall into conversation” or “become involved in it,” without directorial power over the understanding that eventuates.⁷⁵ Conversation, in other words, has a constitutive and revelatory dimension beyond programmatic control. “Successful conversation” within a community of concern therefore shifts the stance of the interlocutors from one of mutual observation to one of proximal solidarity, by which the viewpoint of the other is apprehended and its cultural and experiential moorings brought into clearer view. Hence, “the person who is understanding does not know and judge as one who stands apart and unaffected but rather, he thinks along with the other from the perspective of a specific bond of belonging, as if he too were affected.”⁷⁶ This leads Monica Vilhauer to insist that Gadamer’s “fusion” be understood in the larger context of understanding as a “play process” in which participants are engaged in “the sharing of a common game—a game of articulating a common subject matter together.”⁷⁷ Indeed, this vision of “successful conversation” between interlocutors draws closer to establishing what Levinas calls an “ethical” relation, which entails a discursively constituted, hermeneutically informed, kind of social solidarity that departs from the ideal of “rational-legal universalism.” Accordingly, to use Levinas’ formulation, intercultural dialogue does not represent “the unfolding of a prefabricated internal logic” but “the constitution of truth in a struggle between thinkers, with all the risks of freedom.”⁷⁸

74 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 370.

75 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 401.

76 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 333.

77 Monica Vilhauer, *Gadamer’s Ethics of Play: Hermeneutics and the Other* (Lexington Books, 2010), 51.

78 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 73.

Section 2: Value Generalization in the A Common Word Dialogue

Building upon this ontological portrait drawn by Gadamer, I will now develop an interpretation of the *A Common Word* dialogue as an undertaking that fused Gadamer's insights into the "process of understanding" with Joas' pragmatist theory of deliberation as "value generalization." My joining of these two elements is in response to a prompt by Linda Zerilli, who asks what it would mean "to take the contexts of local particularity as a starting point for a critical political encounter in which the universal criteria for cross-cultural judgements could be articulated rather than assumed?"⁷⁹ Any response to this question will, quite clearly, require a non-ideal theorization of practices in which participants are dealing with claims made under contingent circumstances and out of specific histories. Registering that such contingency presses upon how we theorize cross-cultural dialogue, Joas insists that engagement across value difference will always fall short of the "purely rational discourse" envisaged by Habermas as an orienting ideal for deliberation.⁸⁰ If, as I join Joas in assuming, such a "pure" discourse is both impossible and of limited practical guidance as an ideal, then the question arises of whether the only alternative is unmoderated decisionism and antagonism.⁸¹ These, of course, are constitutive of the "risks of freedom" to which Levinas refers.

The answer that I propose, in conversation with Joas, is that we can overcome this paralyzing bipolarity by preparing to deliberate about values in the politically tense, interpretively contingent and power-laden contexts in which they are mobilized and articulated. Value generalization offers an opportunity to evaluate and negotiate the values—including claims to universality—operative in contexts of value pluralism; to see where they may intersect and promise commonality or to address injustices they may have produced. It is, in Joas' words, to move beyond a paralyzing historical relativism "without breaking with the insight that even universalistic validity claims are not founded in "reason" as such, but have a contingent history of emergence that is not irrelevant for their evaluation."⁸² Value generalization, says Joas, is "neither a consensus achieved through rational argumentation" nor an agreement to tolerate differences registered as insurmountable. Rather, it is at once "more and less than rational discourse," being oriented

79 Linda Zerilli, *A Democratic Theory of Judgment* (University of Chicago Press, 2016), 171.

80 Joas, *The Sacredness of the Person*, 175.

81 Joas, *The Sacredness of the Person*, 175.

82 Joas, *The Sacredness of the Person*, 175.

toward the achievement of a “dynamic mutual modification” of different traditions along with the development of sources for their transformation and renewal.⁸³ Because it engages values in their cognitive *and* affective dimensions, along with the histories out of which they develop, it is distinct from the rational procedure envisioned in Habermas’ theory of discourse ethics. Moreover, value generalization aims at a provisional understanding between ethical subjectivities and the traditions out of which they speak; it aims less at the formation of an “overlapping consensus” or a “multivariate” convergence upon liberal constitutional premises, than at generating a shared exegesis that leads to mutual hermeneutical adjustment. In this sense, its aims are less to do with convergence upon a principle of structuration or a principle of authority, than the formation of new ethical resources.

But how does value generalization work in practice? Joas notes that between a “purely rational” discourse and arbitrary decisionism lies a “third way,” which forms the basis for “the praxis of interreligious dialogue.”⁸⁴ As an example of this third way in which to establish shared ethical premises and more refined hermeneutical engagement, I wish now to offer an assessment of the *A Common Word* dialogue between Christian and Muslim scholars, initiated in 2007 and continued through various avenues since. This dialogue, I argue, achieved three things: It diagnosed the nature of contemporary tensions between Christians and Muslims against the backdrop of raised tensions and inflammatory public discourse that resounded with commentary on the “clash of civilizations” and the incompatibility of Islamic and Western values. The process charted here entails the identification and development of values that, rather than excavating minimalist universal principles posed as latent in the confrontation between different cultures, exemplifies the process outlined by Linda Zerilli of “a political practice of making cross-cultural judgments and claims in an idiom that others can come to recognize as shared.”⁸⁵

In 2006 Pope Benedict XVI gave a lecture in Regensburg, Germany, on “faith, reason and the university,” in which he quoted the medieval Byzantine emperor Manuel II Palaiologus. The quotation, from Palaiologus’ famous *Dialogue with a Persian*, provoked widespread discord and unrest in Muslim communities across the world. The offending paragraphs of the speech referred to a Platonic dialogue composed by the Greek emperor in the late fourteenth century, while Constantinople lay under siege by the Ottomans. The dialogue is between the emperor and an “educated Persian,”

83 Joas, *The Sacredness of the Person*, 181.

84 Joas, *The Sacredness of the Person*, 176.

85 Zerilli, *A Democratic Theory of Judgment*, 171.

who remains unnamed. In following the dialogue format it can be situated within a tradition, alive also throughout the early centuries of Islam in Syria, Iraq and Egypt, of dialogical disputation between Muslims and Christians (with Zoroastrians and other sects playing a role) over Christological ideas and the supersessionist nature of Islamic claims.⁸⁶ The dialogue presents both a polemic and an apologetic. Integrating theological, philosophical, and political themes, it unfolds in keeping with prior literary treatments of Islamic conquests of formerly Christian territories and the theological divergence of traditions, penned by writers grappling with the shifting boundaries of empire, from John of Damascus to Gregory Palamas and the emperor John VI Kantakouzenos. Within this literary setting, the *Dialogue* makes a scriptural and theological argument for the truth of Christian teaching and against conversion by force.

Pope Benedict deployed excerpts from the emperor Manuel's text as part of an academic discussion of the way in which violence was antithetical to a reason-oriented religious faith. The Pope took the medieval emperor to be making a decisive statement against forcing religious conversion through violence, a position based on the belief that "not to act in accordance with reason is contrary to God's nature."⁸⁷ In his exegesis of the text of the dialogue between the emperor and the unnamed Persian, Pope Benedict cited one particular statement, made by the emperor, against the convergence of religion and violence, a statement made with reference to Islam: "show me just what Muhammed brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached."⁸⁸ The Pope qualified this citation by referring to it as "forceful" and expressed with a "startling brusqueness, a brusqueness that we find unacceptable."⁸⁹ He proceeded to a citation of Lebanese theologian Theodore Khoury, which compared the integration of Greek philosophy and Christian theology to a reading of Islamic theological tradition in which "un-reason" does not contradict God's nature or commands; even if divine command were deeply unreasonable, it would nevertheless demand adherence.⁹⁰ Pope Benedict followed these citations with a lengthier discussion of the vital convergence of reason and faith,

86 See Sidney H. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam* (Princeton University Press, 2008).

87 Benedict XVI, "Faith, Reason and the University Memories and Reflections," Lecture of the Holy Father, September 12, 2006, University of Regensburg (Holy See, 2006), <https://www.vatican.va/content/vatican/en.html>.

88 Benedict XVI, "Faith, Reason and the University Memories and Reflections."

89 Benedict XVI, "Faith, Reason and the University Memories and Reflections."

90 Benedict XVI, "Faith, Reason and the University Memories and Reflections."

which would characterize “that genuine dialogue of cultures and religions so urgently needed today.”⁹¹

The aforementioned citations, in particular the citation of Manuel Palaiologos, provoked profound anger in Islamic communities across the world, drawing condemnation from governments and religious leaders. The lecture elicited responses from the Palestinian Authority and the Egyptian, Pakistani, Indian, Malaysian, Indonesian, Turkish, Iraqi, and Iranian governments, amongst others. In the course of this reaction, it became clear that, for many, the words of Manuel Palaiologos had been taken to express the Pope’s own views, a misreading that led to particularly strong condemnations and anger. Protests were held outside Westminster Cathedral in London (at which violently anti-Christian slogans were employed), mass protests were held outside Al-Azhar University in Cairo, German, American and Israeli flags were burnt in Basra, Iraq, and an apology was demanded by various governments and Islamic community organizations.⁹² Some translated their anger at the Pope’s reported views into violence, with Christian churches being fire-bombed in Iraq and the Palestinian Territories and an Italian nun being murdered in Somalia.⁹³ In response to this widespread unrest, the German Chancellor Angela Merkel defended the Pope’s lecture, which she argued had been misinterpreted; then Italian Prime Minister Romano Prodi emphasized the lecture’s theme of “dialogue” and the European Commission warned against reading quotes in isolation from their context in the speech as whole. Moreover, the Commission stated that “reactions which are disproportionate and which are tantamount to rejecting freedom of speech are unacceptable.”⁹⁴ Thus, as with recent debates triggered by the murder of Charlie Hebdo cartoonists in Paris, the public exchange—local and trans-national—crystallized around the conceptual tension between “free-speech” and “respect.”

The larger arguments, on faith, reason and violence, present in Pope’s lecture were subsumed beneath serious, widespread, and in some corners willful, misinterpretation of his citation of the Byzantine emperor. Whereas Pope Benedict had deployed Manuel’s text as part of a reflection on the peaceful coexistence of religious traditions and communities, the citation was read in isolation and its sentiments attributed wrongly to the Pope.

91 Benedict XVI, “Faith, Reason and the University Memories and Reflections.”

92 See Melanie McDonagh, “The Pope’s Message of Greater Dialogue Achieves the Opposite,” *The Telegraph*, September 16, 2006, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/us/>.

93 “Violence Against Christians Grows in Iraq,” *Ekklesia*, September 29, 2006, <https://www.ekklesia.co.uk/>.

94 Lucia Kubosova, “Brussels Defends Pope’s Freedom of Expression,” *EU Observer*, September 18, 2006, <https://euobserver.com/>.

Nevertheless, there may well be a critical point to be made about the Pope's use of a fourteenth-century source in the contemporary context, as the popular "clash of civilizations" thesis reduced the encounter between traditions to caricature and affirmed insoluble differences. The absence in the Pope's lecture of strong and empathetic qualification suggested blindness to the possibility of the lecture communicating a reductive account of Islamic tradition and its relationship to the idea of "reason." Similarly problematic was the construction of a binary opposition between reason and its opposites. Whereas medieval Christian scholastic and theological traditions were positioned as accommodating of reason in their theological methods, the operation of Islamic tradition was posited as prone to the exclusion of reason (with its "unforced force") and the deployment of its opposite, brute force. This was on any reading a gross reduction even if a merely insinuated one. It represented a failure to acknowledge the poly-vocality of Islamic traditions and their multiple forms of reasoning.

Additionally, the speech did not offer interpretive attention to detail in its treatment of the Islamic concept of "jihad," making reference to Islam in order to support a tendentious argument of immediate political resonance (the year being 2006, with violence surging in Baghdad), but without making counter-observations about the diversity of interpretive traditions within Islam, which complicate the application of Sura 9:5 in the Qur'an, the Sura concerned with "spiritual struggle" and violence. As such, although much of the reaction to the lecture was based on misreading (or lack of reading the text altogether), the text was nevertheless alienating in its failure to demonstrate interpretive sensitivity to the complexity of another tradition. In September 2006, Pope Benedict issued an apology in which he stated that he was "sorry" for the offence that the lecture had caused, and that the citation of Manuel Palaiologos was in no way designed to express his own views.⁹⁵ His apology, though accepted by many, including for example the Muslim Council of Britain, was considered to be insufficient by others, considering the deep feelings of alienation that the Pope's lecture, and the public reporting of it, had caused. The lingering anger and resentment implied that a more sustained engagement was required, not only in order to assuage the immediate alienation felt in many Muslim societies, and amongst Muslim citizens of Western democracies, but to set in train more durable and sensitive relations between religious traditions.

One year after the Regensburg lecture, such engagement was initiated from within Islam, and it is this engagement that offers a case study for the

95 "Muslim Body Welcomes Pope's Apology," BBC News, September 17, 2006, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/>.

illustration of the practice of value generalization and the commonality that it forges. In October 2007 one hundred and thirty eight Muslim scholars penned a letter to Christian leaders, entitled *A Common Word Between Us and You* (ACW) in which they called for dialogue based on the recognition of two core principles operative in the lives of both religious traditions: love of God and love of neighbor: “[T]hus in obedience to the Holy Qur’an, we as Muslims invite Christians to come together with us on the basis of what is common to us, which is also what is most essential to our faith and practice: the Two Commandments of love.”⁹⁶ These two commandments amount to value articulations with scope for transfiguration into shared principles for common action; in both traditions, the principles of “love of God and love of neighbor” uphold the moral equality of one’s contemporaries by acknowledging them as “neighbors.” At the same time, they direct subjects toward the practice of “neighborliness,” making this moral status into something that calls for respect and consideration. The principles for common action so generated depend upon paradigm instances resident within each tradition, along with stories, images and the detail of each tradition’s history of self-interpretation. They therefore require interpretive and translational exchange in order for the contours (and limits) of their commensurability to unfold.

The original letter has a strong scriptural emphasis, seeking to trace in the written sources of the two traditions commensurable themes that might underwrite the pursuit of shared understanding and common action on the part of Christians and Muslims. The letter elicited a variety of responses including from the Holy See’s Secretary of State, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, and from a group of over three hundred Christian scholars who cooperated to write what became known as the “Yale Response.” The Yale Response, written in November 2007, begins by asking forgiveness from “our Muslim neighbors” for any historical mistreatment of Muslim communities by Christian populations.⁹⁷ The Christian scholars then proceed to join their Muslim counterparts (the signatories to the original ACW letter) in asserting that *political* concord—peace between peoples and within societies—will be easier to attain if “religious peace” is achieved.⁹⁸ The letter then acknowledges and endorses the “common ground” identified by the Muslim scholars and leaders, based on the two principles of love, while at the same

96 “A Common Word Between Us and You,” in *A Common Word Between Us and You: Five Year Anniversary Edition*, 51–101 (The Royal Aal Al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, 2012), 54.

97 “The Yale Response,” in *A Common Word Between Us and You: Five Year Anniversary Edition*, 143–162 (The Royal Aal Al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, 2012), 144.

98 “The Yale Response,” 144.

time recognizing significant differences: “that so much common ground exists...gives hope that undeniable differences and even the very real external pressures that bear down upon us can not overshadow the common ground upon which we stand together.”⁹⁹ A longer, more detailed and more critical response was penned by the then Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams after consultation with Christian leaders and scholars from across the different denominational traditions.¹⁰⁰ Williams’ response written in a more reserved tone than the Yale Response, engaged in a closer reading of the details of the ACW letter, as well as a more detailed explication of Christian theology and Christian perspectives on the relationship between the two traditions. Christian leaders from a range of denominations endorsed his response; it was therefore taken to offer a Christian voice drawing insight from beyond the Anglican Communion.

The initial exchange that gave rise to the continuing ACW dialogue featured an interchange of letters that pay close attention to the sources within each tradition that might underwrite concord and collaboration. The letter from the Muslim scholars entails textual citation from the Qur’an and from the Bible as a means for establishing the commonly held “two principles” of love, thereby enacting interpretive discernment of commensurability. The citation of the “alien” text is generally qualified, and the tone is exploratory; phrases such as “as we understand it,” or “perhaps” invite response, or correction, where necessary. The resources of Islamic scripture and interpretive tradition (*hadith*) are then related to those tenets of Christian religious tradition that appear to offer scope for commensurability. Notably, the focus of the initial ACW letter is primarily on the resources for commonality offered by sacred texts (rather than lived experience), which may in part be due to the different roles of authoritative texts within the two traditions. As Williams points out in his letter of response, the Qur’an is understood by Muslims to contain the words of God, received by Muhammed. This may be one explanation for the strong textual focus of the letter from the Muslim scholars and leaders and its deployment of scripture as a means of identifying channels for co-existence and co-operation. In contrast, the various traditions of Christological thought understand the figure of Jesus Christ to represent the *logos*—or Word of God—made incarnate, the New Testament acting as the authoritative witness to Christ’s life and the transformations in human possibility that, according to the Christian imagination, it effected. By highlighting in his written response to

99 “The Yale Response,” 144.

100 Rowan Williams, “A Common Word for the Common Good,” in *A Common Word Between Us and You: Five Year Anniversary Edition* (The Royal Aal Al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, 2012), 187–212.

the original letter this distinction in the operation of sacred texts, Williams offers the kind of corrective note that assists the process of mutual learning—he addresses perceived deficiencies in the mode of interpretation used by the authors of the original *A Common Word* letter.

Behind the formal exegetical element with its scriptural reasoning the initial ACW exchange exhibits the attempt to discern and clarify the intentions of the letter writers, and to establish relations of trust in a context of political tension and widespread interpretive reduction—that is, desire for mutual understanding and peace unaccompanied by a proselytizing or self-valorizing agenda. In responding to the original letter, the staff of the Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies emphasized that they were “pleased to see that the biblical and Gospel quotations used in this document come from the sources and that explanations given are on occasion based on the original languages: Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. This is evidence of deep respect and genuine attentiveness to others, while at the same time of a true scientific spirit.”¹⁰¹ For the members of the Pontifical Institute, such attentiveness to interpretive complexity demonstrated sensitivity to their tradition and its linguistic diversity (even if only at the textual level). It acknowledged that learning through translational and interpretive activity, though arduous, is essential. The openness to engaging in difficult interpretive activity on the part of the Muslim letter writers, and the significant explanatory discussion in their own text, where scriptural and interpretive reasons are given to clarify the resources that they rely on to substantiate their commitment to the “principles of love,” acts to develop trust.

Note, here, the reciprocal interpretive movement beginning with scriptural reference—both to Islamic and Christian texts—and interpretation. This is followed by response, in this case from Christian leaders, which clarifies possible deficiencies in the interlocutor’s interpretation before posing new questions or setting out different perspectives. This quite clearly reflects a process close to the Gadamerian view of hermeneutical understanding; the interlocutors first pose their “prejudgments”—the way in which the other tradition’s commitments appear to them from within their own hermeneutical situation—which are then subjected to correction or adaptation, before new questions or interpretive issues are posed. The outcome is the establishment of what Bohman calls an “inter-perspectival stance,” which is “fully dialogical, giving

101 Staff Members of the Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies of Rome, “Appreciation of An Open Letter and Call from Muslim Religious Leaders,” *Chiesa*, November 25, 2007, <https://chiesa.espresso.repubblica.it/>.

inquirer and agent equal standing as agents in a shared practice (whatever the goals of that practice may be).¹⁰² Or, to use Gadamerian language, it establishes a “specific bond of belonging” by which participants “think along” with each other from a stance of shared responsibility.

Section 3: The Problem of Understanding and the “Articulating-constitutive Dimension”

Hermeneutically grounded value generalization as practiced in the *A Common Word* dialogue has a further goal that goes beyond either establishing the equal standing of agents or nurturing a “specific bond of belonging.” It works also to cultivate critical understanding of ethical meanings as they function within the traditions of those engaged in dialogical interchange. Gadamer’s explication of the “process of understanding” offers a rich account of the linguistic and hermeneutical functions by which this occurs, supplying a frame for assessment of the *A Common Word* dialogue’s pursuit of shared ethical premises. Crucially, it moves beyond treating value statements as formal “truth claims”—propositional assertions that are only doctrinal in nature—towards pursuing a more textured form of understanding, which I will now briefly explicate.

For Gadamer, “the real problem of understanding obviously arises when, in the endeavor to understand the content of what is said, the reflective question arises: How did he come to such an opinion? For this kind of question reveals an alienness that is clearly of quite a different kind and ultimately signifies a renunciation of shared meaning.”¹⁰³ There is no simple methodological formula that might be applied to develop this understanding—yet as Taylor and Dreyfus remind us, the one indispensable ingredient is engagement with those who deploy the terms in question, or for whom the terms articulate a horizon of concern. In order to “penetrate their discourse, we simply have to begin by holding discourse with them,” one which will be, at first, elementary—focused on “equally accessible things”—but will then move towards the development of more sophisticated exchanges that disclose how their ethical meanings are constituted.¹⁰⁴ In its identification of the two “principles of love,” the *A Common Word* project exemplifies a process by which generalizable values are identified, alongside

102 James Bohman, *Public Deliberation: Pluralism, Complexity, and Democracy* (MIT Press, 1996), 95.

103 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 187.

104 Dreyfus and Taylor, *Retrieving Realism*, 124.

the explicit acknowledgment of difference and incommensurability: “whilst Islam and Christianity are obviously different religions—and whilst there is no minimising some of their formal differences—it is clear that the Two Greatest Commandments are an area of common ground and a link between the Qur’an, the Torah and the New Testament.”¹⁰⁵ The same recognition is offered by Williams, who states that those on whose behalf he speaks—other Christian leaders across the denominational spectrum—had read the original letter as an invitation towards finding “a way of recognising that on some matters we are speaking enough of a common language for us to be able to pursue both exploratory dialogue and peaceful co-operation with integrity and without compromising fundamental beliefs.”¹⁰⁶

In identifying values that might be generalizable across traditions, the participants in the ACW dialogue had first to overcome the problem of understanding the meanings operative within another tradition, without assuming conceptual transposability. To assume the transposability of key terms is to read them in a representative sense, as “corresponding” to phenomena, which they then reflect in language. Yet this would be to overlook the way in which a “language in use” constantly works to generate new meanings; thus, says Gadamer, “from language we learn that the subject matter is not merely an arbitrary object of discussion, independent of the process of mutual understanding, but rather is the path and goal of mutual understanding itself.”¹⁰⁷ Gadamer’s point here is that language does not operate in a merely descriptive sense by corresponding to mind-independent phenomena, but rather works in an “articulating-constitutive” manner, which generates and mediates new possibilities of expression and, with them, ways of seeing and understanding.¹⁰⁸ Language is “the medium of hermeneutic experience” and the medium, as McLuhan’s phrase goes, is inseparable from the message.¹⁰⁹ Consequently, to grasp what terms mean in their representative function—in their reference to phenomena—we have to understand what they mean in what Taylor calls their articulating-constitutive function.¹¹⁰ That is, what meanings the terms are articulating and what frameworks of meaning they (re)constitute by doing so.

105 *A Common Word between Us and You*, 68.

106 Williams, “A Common Word for the Common Good,” 188.

107 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 187.

108 See Taylor, *The Language Animal*.

109 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 401.

110 Taylor, *Retrieving Realism*, 124.

To illustrate, take the term “conscience.”¹¹¹ Our understanding of “conscience” as a noun draws, rather like “soul,” upon a background understanding and vocabulary that refuses thoroughgoing materialism in its ontology of the individual subject. Understood according to its “representative” meaning, “conscience” would be taken to correspond to a spiritual reality, which those moving in lockstep with scientific or philosophical materialism might wish to deny. Even when taken in a more secular sense, it depends upon an “inside-outside” structure according to which the innermost sanctum of selfhood is associated with a site of interiority to which the individual mind may remove itself for reflective purposes.¹¹² But whether or not we accept an account of human reality inclusive of a spiritual dimension that surpasses material causality, we might wish to understand *how* the term “conscience,” so central to contemporary moral and political language, functions, along with the background against which it is intelligible. This background includes a range of assumptions about the structure of human cognition and the metaphysical context in which mind, body, “soul,” “conscience” and, indeed, “self,” play their parts. Taylor calls this a “footing” on which speech proceeds under certain assumptions. These may be assumptions about the kinds of relations established by certain forms of expression. So, for example, the nature of the term “oath” or “promise” suggests a footing upon which statements such as “I will return the book to you undamaged” amount to a commitment that cannot go unmet without social consequences (which Taylor thinks of in terms of shock or violation).¹¹³ Or, alternatively, they may be assumptions about the kind of function performed by a particular form of statement or concept given the background against which it works.

When it comes to discerning whether values or meanings might be shared across traditions in such a way as to form generalizable values, the challenge is most fundamentally to understand terms in their articulating-constitutive dimension. Consider Paul Heck’s exploration of whether something akin to “conscience” is operative within both Christian and Islamic traditions and to gauge whether this concept functions in a similar or commensurable manner within each tradition. The question is whether two different terms communicate the same meanings—do, “conscience” and the Arabic term “*ḍamīr*” refer to the same kind of moral dimension, with the

111 Paul Heck, “Conscience Across Cultures: The Case of Islam,” *The Journal of Religion* 94, no. 3 (2014): 292–324, 293. Paul Heck turns his attention to conscience in light of a dialogical encounter with Moroccan Muslim students.

112 Charles Taylor, *Self Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge University Press, 1989), 111.

113 Taylor, *The Language Animal*, 267.

same cognitive and affective structure? Heck begins by asking whether the “dynamics of conscience,” so different across the Christian denominational traditions, are equally diverse across Sunni, Shī‘a and Isma‘īli Islam, finding, perhaps predictably, that there are a great many descriptions and imaginative understandings of conscience within Islamic tradition.¹¹⁴ He finds that the concept of “*ḍamīr*” may indeed be commensurable with Christian conceptions of conscience in the sense of “the psyche being exposed” to external judgment or scrutiny, but that it is “not a voice admonishing you in advance to adhere to moral truths written on the human heart” as described by St. Paul in his Letter to the Romans.¹¹⁵ That is, *ḍamīr* may well *function* differently from “conscience” by depending upon different tacit meanings and assumed structures, cognitive, metaphysical or otherwise. After a substantial comparative examination of “conscience” and “*ḍamīr*,” Heck concludes that across the two traditions broadly conceived—the Christian-Kantian and the Islamic—there is shared recognition of “a mechanism that exists within humans to compel them to adhere to moral duties.”¹¹⁶ Across Islamic and Christian traditions there are various linguistic and expressive resources for describing a moral functioning that holds the individual in interrogative relationship with the divine and with the demands of moral duty as understood by their respective tradition.

The differences at work here are important and need to be taken into account so as to avoid an over-hasty assumption of commensurability, particularly of the kind that Ahmed warns us against, which inappropriately applies a Protestant Christian view of “the religious” to other traditions, such as Islam.¹¹⁷ While recognizing the significant divergences between the two tradition-based languages with which “conscience” and *ḍamīr* are articulated, Heck asserts that the overlap between the traditions is such that Muslims and Christians can “recognise the importance of conscience for the moral good of society even when disagreeing about the content of the moral good and even when conceiving of conscience in language specific to their respective traditions.”¹¹⁸ Conscience and *ḍamīr* are not commensurable in the sense that the terms represent or designate precisely the same object, made intelligible against the same set of background assumptions. Yet they nevertheless offer scope for generalizability across traditions because of the dynamics that they

114 Taylor, *The Language Animal*, 315.

115 Taylor, *The Language Animal*, 315.

116 Heck, “Conscience Across Cultures,” 322.

117 See Shahab Ahmed, *What Is Islam?: The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton University Press, 2016).

118 Heck, “Conscience across Cultures,” 324.

introduce, by which subjects are made answerable to a source of authority that stands outside, but acts upon, the individual will.

What is clear, therefore, is that in discerning the scope for value generalization we ought to begin by pursuing an understanding of available principles and meanings as they function within the tradition with which they are engaged. For value generalization to be possible, we must be able to develop an understanding of meanings in their articulating-constitutive function, rather than in their static or codified form. This implies treating meanings not as single axioms that might be apprehended by means of correspondence with meanings available in one's own tradition, but rather, as Wittgenstein puts it, as "a system in which consequences and premises give one another *mutual* support."¹¹⁹ Reflecting this insight in his contribution to the initial ACW exchange, Williams urges further examination of the extent to which "the Christian conviction of God as Love and the all-important Islamic conviction that God is 'the Compassionate, the Merciful' (*ar-rahman ar-rahim*) represent common ground, and to what extent do differences need to be spelled out further?"¹²⁰ If articulations of the envisaged nature of God amount to premises, this meaning must be spelt out so that its implications may be clarified—that is, the value commitments such premises may bring into being. In the initial ACW exchange, the search for generalizable values begins, then, not with the location of common propositional commitments but with an examination of the language employed to characterize the nature of divinity, the "hypergood" that Islam and Christianity pose as the source of all other goods.¹²¹ It represents an effort to understand the range of meanings available in the moral imagination of another tradition, where the defining reality is the individual subject's and the community's relation to the divine. This is, necessarily, an entry into the domain of theological reflection, but it is also to enter an interchange of historical and ethical meanings with which efforts at theological articulation are interwoven. Where these traditions present ethical life as, fundamentally, an effort at participating in the economy of divine love through mimetic and ritual enactment, interpreting values demands attention to ritual and narrative practice and to the background this gives to linguistic meanings. Such complexity reflects Joas' argument regarding the comparative sophistication of value generalization—the ACW exchange entails engagement with values

119 Ludwig Wittgenstein, G. H. von Wright, and G. E. M. Anscombe, *On Certainty* (Blackwell, 1974), 145.

120 Williams, "A Common Word for the Common Good," 197.

121 The term "hypergood" comes from Taylor's account of the valuing of goods in a moral framework. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Harvard University Press, 1989), 63.

articulated in non-propositional form, in terms of allowing for expression of affective attachment and narrative power.

For the purpose of understanding *how values function* in the ethical life of another tradition, exploration of values in terms that extend beyond their propositional format is vital. As Joas points out, our commitment to values stems from more than a cognitive recognition of their validity claims. Rather, we have values and live them as commitments, in such a way as to make them more than mere assertions.¹²² We do not arrive at a deeply held attachment to values through a process of rational discursive persuasion, but rather are constituted cognitively and affectively by the hermeneutical situation in which we move—thus, “values cannot simply be discussed in an atomistic way, as if they were no more than discrete, self-contained opinions.”¹²³ Rather, value judgments point to histories, as Joas insists, having been constituted out of past experience as well as the languages by which these experiences are mediated. Hence “biographical, historical, and mythological narratives are no illustrations to didactic ends but a necessary feature of communication about values.”¹²⁴

Recognizing that value articulations are developed at different levels and by various means within a tradition, Williams insists that a dialogical exchange that seeks to understand, and to develop shared value commitments, cannot remain a merely intellectual enterprise. His insistence here fuels the diagnostic perception that the ACW exchange is fundamentally political, with political ends in sight—those of sustaining a space of common ground otherwise threatened by certain strains of political discourse and theological controversy. Thus, Williams suggests that “opportunities for lived encounter with people of different faiths, both within and across national boundaries, need to be multiplied and developed in an atmosphere of trust and respect.”¹²⁵ In so doing he echoes the original ACW letter in which the engaged scholars emphasize the urgent political nature of developing “meaningful peace” between the world’s two largest religious traditions, where “our common future is at stake.”¹²⁶ The ACW letter urges that in securing a “common future” amidst social conditions that intertwine Christians and Muslims everywhere, dialogue between Christianity and Islam cannot be confined to a formal interchange between scholars: “[F]inding common ground between Muslims and Christians is not simply a

122 Joas, *The Sacredness of the Person*, 177.

123 Joas, *The Sacredness of the Person*, 179.

124 Joas, *The Sacredness of the Person*, 178.

125 Williams, “A Common Word for the Common Good,” 17.

126 “A Common Word Between Us and You,” 15.

matter for polite ecumenical dialogue between selected religious leaders.”¹²⁷ Rather, dialogue as they envisage it requires mutual learning taking place at various levels of engagement and certainly beyond scholarly textual exegesis.

In order to retain a non-esoteric social and political relevance, value generalization ought to entail discerning novel ends established with reference to the specificities of political and social context. In practice, following the Gadamerian description of the conditions of understanding, ACW participants operate out of distinct hermeneutical horizons—locational, political and ethical—though they are, from different angles, commonly exposed to specific meta-discourses (the “clash of civilizations” or Christian/Muslim antagonism). In the case of the ACW dialogue, methodologically refined textual exegesis becomes politically purposive when set in train alongside a diagnostic effort that foregrounds and acknowledges political context. In so doing it establishes a deliberative encounter that registers the pressure placed upon traditions and their adherents not at a formal theological level but at the level of social and political exclusion or everyday reduction to caricature; it implies attention not only to esoteric Christological or Qur’anic arguments, but also to the political and social circumstances that led to the original dialogical outreach by the authors of the *A Common Word* letter. This includes the recognition that peace and concord in contexts where traditions rub up against each other requires the adaptation of values to new circumstances, thereby suggesting the importance of diagnostic practices to the process of value generalization.

The diagnostic practices illustrated here include the identification and description of both the contemporary and historical circumstances that establish the need for a new articulation of values. To this end the ACW participant parties each give an account of the political background against which a new value horizon is to be formed. Implicit in the address of the Muslim scholars to their Christian counterparts is the urgency of new political imperatives—namely, the political and social cross-pressures of the “global war on terror” and the reductive construal of Islam. The Christian respondents equally diagnose the imbrication of theological hermeneutics with political imperatives—particularly those of sustaining ethical commonality or “common ground” upon which relations of equal agency may be maintained. Thus, the Christian scholars who responded to the *A Common Word* letter note the complex interweaving of political and religious influences in the history of Christian-Muslim antagonism: “[T]hough tensions, conflicts, and even wars in which Christians and Muslims stand against each other are not primarily religious in character, they possess an

127 “A Common Word Between Us and You,” 72.

undeniable religious dimension.”¹²⁸ With this diagnosis in mind, the ACW dialogue is, on the view of these scholars, called to address the religious dimension of conflict *in concert with* an awareness of its imbrication with ostensibly secular political and social discourses; the dialogue resists the conceptual positing of “religion” as an independent variable while also asserting the need for the adherents of the involved traditions to take responsibility for the manner in which their resources are mobilized. It therefore answers the challenges of hermeneutical reduction—the essentialization of religion by the secular or Protestant understanding, or the reduction of either Islamic or Christian tradition from a hermeneutical standpoint that conceals their multivalence. At the same time, the ACW exchange renders a portrait of contemporary social and politically inflected antagonisms as more complex than allowed for by the readily available designation of “religious extremism,” or the discourse of “irremediable civilisational conflict.”

In openly acknowledging the backdrop of discursive antagonism, reduction and mistrust against which it works, the ACW exchange sets out the importance of reconstructing what Bohman calls a “*political* relationship of equal agency” between alienated subjects.¹²⁹ The agency in this case is interpretive rather than assertoric. There is an interpretive mutuality at work here that allows space for difference, disagreement, and correction, while nevertheless orienting all of these towards the search for common ground; the different participants are able to propose their own particular readings of the contemporary conjuncture and the “ends” to which it should orient interlocutors deliberating with goodwill. In the case of *A Common Word*, “mutuality” is developed through the forging of relations of reciprocal attentiveness that allow individual subjects—citizens—to *appear*, as Arendt would put it, through the articulation of their histories, ethical sources, and diagnostic perception of the present moment and its political salience.¹³⁰ In this sense, mutuality retains a commitment to reciprocity, but avoids indexing deliberative interchange to the practice of “methodologically neutral” argumentation.

That the relationality thereby established between participants remains *political*, drawing upon an undiminished particularity, is demonstrated by the assertion of difference throughout the exchange—the ongoing registration of particular, rather than formal, subjectivity. In general, the Christian

128 “Yale Response,” 144.

129 Bohman, *Public Deliberation: Pluralism, Complexity, and Democracy*, 95, italics mine.

130 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (University of Chicago Press, 1998), 77.

respondents enthusiastically accept the claims by the Islamic letter writers to some commensurability between Islamic and Christian injunctions to neighborly care and concern.¹³¹ But, as Williams makes clear, the possibility of discerning common ground depends upon the exploration of difference; hence, in the initial ACW exchange there is the recognition that subjecting each other's traditions to an ongoing process of reciprocal translation and interpretation will be vital in developing an understanding of distinct descriptions of superabundant divine love and of the meanings that lend the values of "neighborly" consideration their intelligibility within each tradition. Intelligibility, an important precursor to discerning shared premises, is therefore intimately tied to an acknowledgement of difference, of the reality of "hermeneutical situations" beyond our immediate grasp and therefore accessible only through an interpretive unsettling of our own horizon.

The *A Common Word* dialogue arguably satisfied the pragmatic presuppositions asserted by Habermas as necessary for a practice to "count seriously" as argumentation. It (a) practiced publicity and inclusiveness, (b) gave all who wished to the opportunity to speak, (c) ostensibly excluded deception and illusion, the participants having "meant what they said."¹³² In place, however, of referring to the an latent "normative grammar" and its attendant "rules of egalitarian universalism," the participants foregrounded contextually formed principles of neighborliness that mandated not only equal consideration, but that offered the affective and motivational depth to generate dialogical commitment under adverse circumstances.¹³³ The ACW dialogue represents a deliberative process that sets aside Habermas' dichotomous assertion of "the difference between the certainties of faith and publicly criticizable validity claims" (the inter-subjective markers of egalitarian universalism), so as to assess politically resonant values in their "articulating-constitutive" dimension.¹³⁴ In Hans Sluga's terms, a "conceptual laboratory" is established, in which we "achieve new interpretations" through "an interpretive, hermeneutic enterprise."¹³⁵ In more socially immediate terms we might also think of this "laboratory" as a dialogical community: that is, a community formed out of those processes of attention to values and meanings (translation and critical interpretation),

131 See Williams, "A Common Word for the Common Good."

132 Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, 50.

133 Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, 50.

134 Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, 143.

135 Hans Sluga, *Politics and the Search for the Common Good* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 35.

which in turn acts as a context “within which language grows.”¹³⁶ In its attention to its own constitutive differences it works to establish a common world of shared meanings in which reciprocal acts of acknowledgement and attention prise open the values of one’s interlocutors, making them legible against the backdrop of both “old” tradition and “new” experience. As evinced in the ACW dialogue, value generalization models a form of deliberative interchange that critically mines the genealogies that stand behind value articulations, that accepts perspectival finitude and that acknowledges value articulations as potentially persuasive in their affective, narrative and expository capacity, rather than in their cognitive power or decisive validity. It undergirds the Gadamerian vision of hermeneutical conversation, where “to reach an understanding in a dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one’s own point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were.”¹³⁷

Conclusion

This article has offered an initial exploration of how, by integrating the insights of the “pragmatic turn” in critical social theory with the ontological commitments of Gadamerian hermeneutics, we can develop an account of democratic dialogue that involves the critical disclosure of ethical identities (such that critique may be refined by encounter with cultural detail), and the reflective reconstruction of shared values. I have emphasized the need for a hermeneutically rich account of deliberative practice amidst value pluralism, which, I argue, need not necessarily be tied to a traditionalism that seeks to defend received practices from critical destabilization or transformation. If one aim of democratic theory is to envisage ways of nurturing shared values and ethical commonality across traditions, then the kind of critical dialogue explored here models practices by which that may be realized. It illustrates the methods by which co-citizens, consociates and transnational interlocutors might “create commonplaces” and so “make the world common” as a precursor to pursuing shared action and as a bulwark against reduction and caricature. Rather than positing value generalization as a replacement for liberal theories of deliberation on “constitutional essentials” within states, we might see it as part of a multidimensional framework of critical argumentation, of relevance to the tensions that arise within the

136 Charles Taylor, “Language and Human Nature,” in *Human Agency and Language* (Cambridge University Press, 1985), 234.

137 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 387.

transnational public sphere facilitated by communicative globalization in the digital age. These tensions are present across civil jurisdictions, in keeping with the trans-societal extension of culture and religious tradition. They highlight the need for the methodical nurturing of shared normative premises at a social level, and for democratic theory to take seriously the task of cultivating motivationally strong forms of ethical commonality. This is not, as I have emphasized, a matter of suspending critical engagement between traditions, or overthrowing evaluative standards for critique in favor of a thoroughgoing relativism. Rather, it is to supplement critical evaluation with the hermeneutically developed understanding of meanings, which works to overcome caricature and inscrutability and better grounds public interchange about values. At a time when the “clash of civilizations” thesis imprints itself discernibly upon public discourse across Western democracies, value generalization offers a means of conducting inter-cultural dialogues oriented towards the critical appraisal of self and other, of “creating commonplaces” and thereby developing of solidaristic communities of understanding.



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