

FUNDAMENTAL THEOLOGY/METHOD – TOPIC SESSION

Topic: Freedom
Convener: Mary Beth Yount, Neumann University
Moderator: Nicholas Rademacher, University of Dayton
Presenters: Christina McRorie, Creighton University
Peter Nguyen, Creighton University
Jack Pappas, Fordham University

This session explored interiority, agency, and freedom. In her opening paper, “When Contexts Condition Our Agency, What’s Going on Theologically?”, Christina McRorie considered the possibilities of theologically interpreting experiences of nonvoluntary social conditioning. Research into ways that human actions and character are considered as significantly influenced by social context is wide-ranging, and examples that she used included Jennifer Beste (considering Karl Rahner and spiritual trauma), Leonardo Boff, and others. They consider various views of our understandings of freedom and salvation and their relationship to agency in light of social formation and, as McRorie put it, “malformation.” Social contexts and structures impact agency, and she explored theories about whether, and how, they might impact grace. Often conceptual clarity is prized over acknowledging the complexity of agency, freedom, salvation, and grace. McRorie outlined a “compatibilist” account in which determinants conducive to virtuous formation enhance our freedom, even when causal. The dynamic interplay of social formation and experiences of sin, grace, and redemption is complex and we do not yet have the answers.

The second paper, by Peter Nguyen, was “Edith Stein on the Freedom of the Individual’s Interiority Amid the Threat of Totalitarianism.” For Edith Stein, the establishment of the individual’s interiority, the soul, is the world of truth and freedom unconstrained by the exterior world. Stein’s discourse on individuality and interiority was put in dialogue with Hanna Arendt’s study of totalitarianism. Nguyen suggested that Stein’s discourse of finding one’s interiority is essential for a person’s individuation, and, thus, protective against the concern (raised by Arendt) that totalitarianism’s pervasive terror can result in the individual vanishing within a mass movement.

Nguyen extended Stein’s thought to illustrate how a proper inward turn, wherein one encounters the loving presence of God, can awaken the soul to one’s calling, helping one find the freedom to engage and heal a broken world. The inward turn, wherein one encounters God’s presence, can awaken the soul to one’s vocation, helping a person find the freedom to resist evil. Establishing an interiority gives a person the freedom to take responsibility to suffer for justice in an unjust world without falling prey to anger and grief. Interiority gives one the enduring virtues of faith, hope, and charity that justify one’s anger or grief.

Nguyen detailed three kinds of experience that have an increasing involvement of a person’s interiority: first, sensory, then categorical, and, third, affective (which has an aesthetic dimension). Experienced values are not just motives of actions, but furnish the impulsive powers, and receptive encounters can help one’s affections be trained and developed. Healthy communities with strong values help shape us at the individual level; the more individualized and developed the members are, the stronger the

community is as a whole. According to Stein's thought, the church, if it is healthy, is bound together by the interiority of itself.

This is in contrast to a destructive movement, which, per Arendt's thought, is a menacing force in which each of its members is reduced and no one can be responsible for what is done in the name of the movement. Ideology and terror are linked to loneliness, which helps to sustain the possibility of the movement—loneliness is a wilderness in which people feel separated from others and experience the loss of one's true self. In this case, self and world, thought and experience, are lost. Thinking in solitude can help counter this, it produces ethical subjects, as inner dialogue that allows us to evaluate our own actions.

Nguyen raised the question of whether a damaged community can be restored to health on the basis of self-giving and becoming one with Christ. His conclusion was that the possibility of giving oneself to the other in a mass society requires an inward openness to nourishment by Christ. Self-giving guided by Christ's love—which can be an insertion of one's will into the divine will—helps with restoring community. Stein's notion shows that entrance into one's deepest interiority is what allows one to also be open to others.

The closing presentation was by Jack Pappas, who spoke on "Metanthropology and the Problematic of Freedom in Balthasar and Rahner." This paper was a critical assessment of the respective accounts of divine and human freedom articulated by Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Balthasar. Pappas explored the ways that their diverging notions of freedom shape Rahner and Balthasar's conflicting approaches to revelation, and their related efforts to integrate theological anthropology in Christology. He concluded that Rahner's incarnational approach performs a more thorough integration of divine and human freedoms than does Balthasar's counter-subjective emphasis on divine otherness.

The question-and-answer period was lively, with consideration of, in light of McRorie's paper, whether operative grace might be less dependent on historical conditions than other forms of grace and whether cooperating grace might include, uniquely, our social contexts. Alternatively, the question continued, is operative—converting us, etc.—*more* dependent on historical conditions? Discussion ensued. Another consideration was whether the distinction between the sacred and profane might be false, with the whole thing being God. In that case, we are called and brought to salvation *in* our historical circumstance.

The crowd inquired of Pappas about his thoughts on the correctness of the asymmetry of the human will of Christ across the thinkers he examined and what von Balthasar means when he represents obedience in the life of Christ. The incarnate Christ loves the Father so much that he loves what the Father loves completely, and, when he experiences opposition in the world, he experiences it as part of the will of the Father. Pappas explained that both are neo-Chalcedonian. The difference is at the point of expression—for von Balthasar, there are two wills, with the created will being pulled along by the divine will. The human is pulled along from above by the will of the Logos. That is a problem. The created and divine will are actually a singular will that will the same thing, and in Rahner there is a positive synthesis without an abstract distinction between wills. Both wills are always willing.

Another point of conversation for Pappas's presentation was the irony that von Balthasar wrote on Maximus the Confessor, as for him, virtue and salvation are manifested in the Eastern tradition. For Rahner, freedom cannot account for violence and trauma, but all three papers, a participant pointed out, can help address ways that, in our agency, our vulnerability is acted upon. Sometimes our word play is too quick when we want to conclude about agency and freedom, but it is not the case that sin is stronger. Words are limited—what can we do about that? Answers included (from Nguyen) art is a vessel of healing and can help us be open to healing beyond words. From Pappas: So many things are overwhelming and you can grant validity to the whole human domain of suffering. Any transcendental move cannot drive a wedge between the empirical and transcendental level. How do we work out the sites of resistance to comprehensibility? We can affirm the regional chaos to history without transcending it. How can suffering be redeemed? We can recognize it and we cannot say it is everything. We can bear the paradox because we are confident in grace.

Nguyen was asked about the corollary condition for contemplation according to Arendt. Solitude is the condition of contemplation, as she affirms interior dialogue but really solitude. An advantage to Stein's thought is that contemplation is, for her, transhuman plurality. The answer was that part of Stein's experience is that she was already in dialogue with her friends and so praying before the tabernacle with other people was similar. A comment by an audience member pertaining to his talk was about Arendt and her notion of totalitarianism as moral equivalence. It does not seem that Stein has the same concern in seeing the transcending of the person into the community. Stein has material and formal conditions for leisure and education itself is labor mobility.

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