

PANEL: POWER AS PERSUASION IN PROCESS THOUGHT

This theme was explored by a panel of three presenters. Dr. Jane Kopas from the University of Scranton began by relating Loomer's essay to the notion of person, with special attention given to the ego. Dr. Robert Kinast from the Catholic University of America followed, drawing out the implications of Loomer's position for pastoral theology and pastoral care, noting the congruence between Loomer's relational power and standard descriptions of pastoral care. Dr. Joseph Bracken, S.J., from Xavier University concluded the presentation by using Loomer's view of relational power to explain God's response to evil (active suffering) and to interpret the doctrine of the Trinity and the Trinity's relation to the world. The text of the three presentations follows.

POWER AND SELFHOOD

Bernard Loomer's article, "Two Kinds of Power," crystallizes some significant aspects of the contribution of process-relational thought to our understanding of person. If we understand person to be the human being in his or her relationships to other persons and to the world, then the full dimensions of personhood can begin to be appreciated only through a fuller appreciation of the character and effects of relationships. That is to say, we do not come to an adequate understanding of person by studying the individual in isolation or abstraction. We begin with relations that form the person rather than with individuals whose identity overflows into relations. One does not develop the self and then become more related; one develops relations and then becomes a larger self.

This starting point lies at the heart of Loomer's approach to power whose full implications are evident only as we explore several aspects of the constitutive role of relations in establishing a self. In presenting a picture of the distinctions of unilateral and relational power, Loomer contrasts the relational approach to self indicated above with that of a substantive view. In a substantive view the self has relations with others but is not constituted or formed by the relationships. In other words, the relations are external, important and enriching, and perhaps even necessary for the full expression of the self, but not elements in the character of the self. In a relational perspective the self is constituted by internal relations. As Loomer puts it, the self doesn't have experiences (relations)—the self is its experiences (relations). All the person encounters in his or her world enters into its constitution (being). Since some aspects of the world are more fully accepted and assimilated than others, it is important to see the notion of power in connection with feelings or prehensions. Positive prehensions contribute most directly to the constitution of the self as they represent the values that are assumed as one's own, those things that are accepted as having power to move us and shape us and become part of who we are. Negative prehensions or the feelings of exclusion represent those things that are not al-

lowed to enter into a person's constitution of self, those things that are perceived to be incompatible with one's essential valuing. Nevertheless, they too exert a constitutive influence by the fact that when they are excluded or relegated to lesser importance they thereby give witness to what shapes one's character somewhat as negative space gives character to a painting or a sculpture. The issue at stake in the constitutive role of relations is that one does not have a choice whether or not to be relational. To be is to be related. Likewise, since relations bear power, one does not have a choice as to whether to exercise power but only as to how one exercises power. This itself is a moral and religious issue.

While Loomer does not discuss the role of ego in the two forms of power, the form of its functioning in either mode can be drawn out. Ego is generally understood to be the center of consciousness, the "I" from which one acts and influences the world, though unconscious elements flow in and out. The ego is also the structure by which one defines oneself. As we apply the expression of ego to either form of power we find significant differences. In the exercise of unilateral power the ego is to be the sole master of its decisions and its relations though perhaps with input from others. Nevertheless, whatever input is processed by the ego as a center of control is not understood as part of the fabric of one's own existence. Unilateral power at its best represents the ego operating out of a desire to promote the good of the other, the ordering of relations for the common good, as the agent perceives it. Unilateral power at its worst is the tyranny of ego, the ordering and controlling of one's world without regard for the claims of others or for one's responsibility to and interdependence with others. But in either case, it fails to acknowledge a level of relationality in which the values, needs, claims, as well as the beauty, goodness, and truth of the other transforms the ego into a self capable of forgetting its control and acknowledging indebtedness to others as the basis for action.

A relational model of power, on the other hand, assumes the ego is an emergent from the self which is itself constituted by its relations. The self includes the power of the unconscious as well as conscious derivatives from relationships. One is never quite in control or independent of one's world because the world is a network of relationships that are constantly exercising influence. One may be selective in what is allowed to influence as well as in what one tries to influence, but selectivity itself is a relational activity conditioned in part by the appeal of values inherent in one's world. Where we begin and end, where the world influences who we are and where we extend our influence to others can never be precisely stated even when we consciously seek to identify the limits. We can and do set limits all the time especially when faced with conflicts that force us to define the direction of our relationality. But our decisions are not out of context. We are part of others and they are part of us.

While the boundaries between the self and the world are not sharply delineated, neither is the boundary between ego and self and the boundary between unilateral and relational power. When ego consciousness surfaces not primarily to direct or integrate one's relational response but to protect itself, resistance arises to the relational power of others. When one perceives that the ego will be diminished, rather than transcended, by taking account of the feelings and values of others, the tendency is to block out what threatens ego. Unless one refuses to regard the ego as exclusive territory and finds a way to identify a larger basis for self, the threat evokes the need to exercise unilateral

power. The threat blocks the ability to see the possibility of transformation to a larger, more mutually relational self and to see the call of God in relationships. The notion of boundaries is also relevant for two other elements of a process-relational model of self, persuasion and mutuality.

Relational power is often equated with persuasive power as opposed to coercive power. Persuasive power implies the ability of one entity to attract another toward the realization of wider sensitivities and is especially applicable to the final causality of God. Loomer acknowledges at the outset that probably neither form of power exists in its purity. Both are intermingled with one predominant. Yet a word of caution is in order, for the subtleties of persuasiveness in particular as well as the persistence of substance habits of mind can easily lead one to treat persuasion as an ego operation and to lose touch with the unmanageable elements of relationality.

Persuasion is not simply a variant of unilateral power that is exercised gently in a velvet glove that conceals a predetermined purpose. Nor is it the power of receptivity that yields an emotive appeal such as descriptions of the feminine often suggest or such as the appeal of the "powerless" to one's sympathy. Persuasion is inherent in relations themselves. The ego does not exercise persuasion according to a relational model of power. The constitutive character of relations embodies a persuasiveness that transforms the entity where there is not an undue exercise of negative prehensions. Persuasion and coercion are both possibilities at any level of development but the tension between the two and the need to protect the ego while guarding the social acceptability of the protection can lead to rather subtle forms of the exercise of unilateral power under the guise of persuasion.

Furthermore, relational power implies a mutuality which further clarifies our conception of the ego and persuasion. Mutuality is a quality of relational influence that signifies a recognition or acceptance of the give and take of life. Given the inequalities of life, mutuality is never equal or perfectly balanced. Neither is it simultaneous as interactions occur. Mutuality is contextual, reflecting both a style of relating and a rhythm of relating in which the contributions of persons to one another are appreciated as crisscrossing in enrichment, challenge, and responsibility. The absence of mutuality suggests the absence of growthful humanity as well as a lack of intimacy with divinity. It means that one is dealing with I-It relation rather than an I-Thou relation.

These considerations are applicable to a variety of theological concerns. For one things mutuality is especially important in the way that Christianity expresses itself. When the Church adopted a monarchical structure of authority it created a climate that makes it difficult to foster relational power, although the surprising thing is that individuals have so often managed to transcend this conditioning. These conditions of power are also a challenge to the way Christians respond to problems of social justice and the way the oppressed may or may not be seen as part of the body of the Church and as empowered to elicit a response, not as objects of charity. One could identify many other areas of applicability, but for our purposes here we might simply take these considerations as an invitation to further explore a framework that gives coherence to Bernanos' claim that everything is grace.

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