

CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT—TOPIC SESSION

- Topic: Beyond Personal Conversion: Coercion, Solidarity, and Political Resistance for Environmental Justice
- Convener: Anna Floerke Scheid
- Moderator: Daniel Cosacchi, Fairfield University
- Presenters: Daniel J. Daly, St. Anselm College
Daniel K. Finn, College of St. Benedict/St. John's University

Both Daniel J. Daly and Daniel K. Finn offered interdisciplinary papers that brought theological ethics into conversation with critical realist social theory in order to define more clearly social structures and their relationship to individual choices. In “Assistant Professor: An Ecologically Vicious Position,” Daly began to develop what he called a personalist, theocentric ecological virtue ethics. Using personalist virtue ethics as a lens, Daly examined critical realist theory’s articulation of the relationship between positions and social structures. In critical realism, positions, such as Assistant Professor, are aspects of larger social structures. Arguing that Catholic social thought often uses language about social structures without adequate definition, Daly defined a social structure as a web of related social positions. The position of Assistant Professor exists in a structure, or web of relationships, that includes colleagues, a department chair, a Dean, a Provost, etc. This web of relationships enables and rewards whoever is in the position of Assistant Professor to, for example, fly frequently as s/he presents papers at national and international conferences in the pursuit of tenure. Given the greenhouse gas emissions attached to this travel, Daly argued that the position of Assistant Professor is one that is encouraged by its related positions to act, at times, in ways that are ecologically unjust. For Daly, personalist virtue ethics, which attends to the quality of a person’s relationality, becomes a lens for scrutinizing social positions and discerning their moral character.

Finn’s paper, “Environmental Ethics in a Stratified World: Taking Social Structures Seriously,” dovetailed nicely with Daly’s as he argued that critical realism is the school of social science best equipped to assist theological ethicists in their analysis of social structures. Building on Daly’s paper, Finn argued that social structures have a causal effect on our decisions and actions. He discussed forms of power recognized in critical realism, and how these forms of power influence people’s choices: constrictive power uses penalties to shape our behavior; enticive power presents us with attractive opportunities that influence our decisions; and constitutive power forms our perceptions and preferences in accordance with existing social structures.

Topic Session: Catholic Social Teaching

Both paper presentations were replete with excellent examples that helped ground critical realism for many previously unfamiliar with its terms and concepts. A robust discussion followed the presentations. For example, questions were asked to clarify how the forms of power affect people from various social strata differently, and about how the CTSA itself could be structured so as to inculcate ecological virtues in its members, and also how it might use its power to transform other ecologically unjust structures.

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