

Chapter 10

The Relational Basis of Agency: An Integrated Psychological/Theological Approach

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Agency has become an important theme in recent psychological literature, and debates have sparked over the source of agency and the capacity for agency in the face of seemingly deterministic social limits. In this chapter, I examine how agency fostered across the life span should be a *shared* agency by exploring a theology of agency.

Agency—the feeling that one can do something to influence the world¹—arises from experiences of being seen and of witnessing one’s own actions mirrored in another’s response (Ellison 2013). First, God is known most fully in relationships in which people exert their agency on behalf of each other’s flourishing: indeed, God *is* the care exhibited in such relationships. Second, consistent empathy, in which God is revealed, becomes the ground out of which agency is formed. Using recent developments in attachment theory and neurobiology, I will argue that agency is indirect since it comes through the experience of consistent mirroring. Agentic relationships both reflect God’s presence and impact God.

To claim that agency is important is not to claim that it is of central importance. Indeed, agency seems important to those who are not able to express agency directly or who have their agency circumvented. Some of the most significant contributions to the theological discussion of agency come from feminist theologians, frequently responding to issues of trauma and violence against women, who are attentive to the diminished agency of women in many cultures (Beste 2007; Hoelt 2009; Suchocki 1994).

The capacity to witness oneself acting with agency is not equally available across the life span: Young children and older adults have less agency than middle-aged adults in many societies. In this sense, young children and older adults often need

¹ The primary difference between *agency* and free will is that in the psychological literature agency is often linked with the capacity to develop and attend to goals, whereas the concept of free will is often posited as a philosophical or even ontological issue, having to do with the capacities or the traits of the person with a spirit or soul.

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advocates with more agency. Persons with less agency, at any given time, depend upon others, leading to the conclusion that agency must be shared with those who have the least agency at any given point (see Fig. 10.1).

Fundamentally, agency is not the only “good” and not the sole “virtue” that is significant to human life. Other important goods include community and connection, acting in a trustworthy manner, and the capacity for reasonable self-sacrifice.

Nevertheless, shared agency should be included among the “goods” that are available to persons since the capacity to act with agency is, at least for Christians, an important part of their capacity to participate in God’s purposes. From a Christian theological standpoint, shared agency is rooted in the image of God although separable from it. Persons participate with God when they use their agency for the well-being of others, yet those who are no longer able to participate explicitly in God’s purposes are still bearers of the image of God (Swinton 2012). In these cases, shared agency must be used by others to help those whose agency is diminished to fully participate in lives of service, worship, and vocation.

In psychology, there is a current controversy between what has been termed top-down and bottom-up agency (Prinz 2012). A top-down notion of agency assumes that people are able to develop goals and work towards them; bottom-up agency assumes that people are determined by factors beyond their control, operating within systems that constrict agency so severely that it renders agency nearly unintelligible.

In this chapter, I maintain that top-down agency is a possibility for some, but, paradoxically, it arises from a complex set of bottom-up interactions and is thereby fragile, contested, and malleable. Additionally, I argue that God is intimately connected to the human struggle for agency so that this discussion is not strictly a psychological discussion, but also has theological ramifications with God working alongside persons for the sake of their agency as they use their agency for the well-being of communities.

My own approach to agency appears to resemble bottom-up agency but is actually more complex than this: Persons act with agency based on early and ongoing experiences of empathy, but this capacity for agency can also surprise and overturn systems where empathy has not been accorded. This capacity for agency—when one would have expected none—arises itself from relationships where there have been signs of care and mirroring. Understanding the interpersonal formation and maintenance of agency through activities of empathy is thus crucial to fostering agency.

10.1 Shared Agency in Hebrew Scriptures and Christian Theology

Christian theology offers a distinctive vision of the human person known as theological anthropology. In theological anthropology, *agency* is frequently described with the term *freedom* or *free will* and is thereby at the center of a range of complex debates; nevertheless, there is a paradox in this accent on freedom. For many

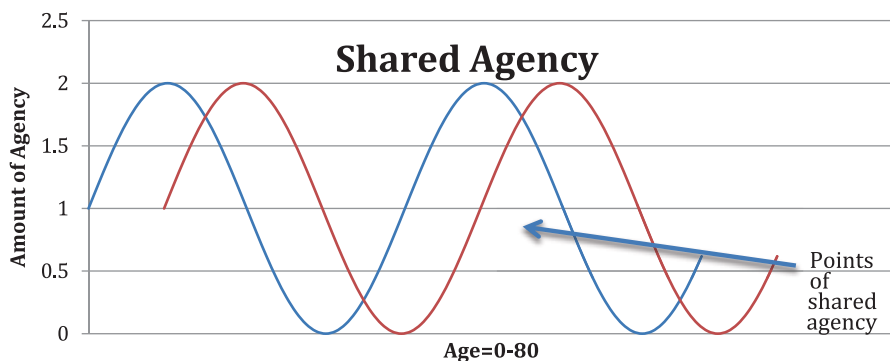


Fig. 10.1 Sharing of agency between person over life course

Christian theologians, freedom, or personal agency, is directed in service to others. In this succinct chapter, I will explore only Christian theology and leave other religious perspectives for others' analysis.

Drawing on the traditions of the Hebrew Scriptures, in which Israel was depicted as having agency apart from God, the agency of persons as a capacity has been seen to be a key constituent of the human person, but this was not agency for its own sake. Rigby (2001) indicates that in the Hebrew Bible text of the Psalms, brief poems or hymns sung in worship, “double agency” is at work in which both God and persons contribute to their deliverance from trouble. For the ancient Israelites, agency was fulfilled in worship to God and service to their neighbors, especially the ones who were marginalized.

Christian theologians have followed these Hebrew traditions of seeing human agency as most completely fulfilled in the service to God and to others, thereby accenting shared rather than personal agency. Catholic theologians, in the virtue tradition, have linked the concept of agency to the capacity to live out the virtues of faith, hope, and charity (Hollenbach 2002). Pope John Paul II, (1981) in his encyclical on meaningful work, suggested that personal agency was part of God's image in humanity:

as the “image of God” he/she [Man] is a person, that is to say, a subjective being capable of acting in a planned and rational way, capable of deciding about him/herself, and with a tendency to self-realization. (*Laborem Exercens*, 6.2)

In this quote, the image of God in humankind is closely linked with agency. Nevertheless, in a Catholic framework, there quickly needs to be a statement about the direction towards which one's agency is aimed. Indeed, in the Catholic social justice teaching of *subsidiarity*, social relationships exist for the purpose of helping persons “in their free but obligatory” exercise of self-realization (Iber 2010). Catholic theology has traditionally claimed that God enables people to participate with God through *operative grace* (Stump 2010). Since grace adds to nature, in the thought of the influential Catholic theologian Thomas Aquinas, Catholic theologies

are more likely to emphasize a person's natural capacity for agency as a reflection of God's goodness, pointing to a God who wants a person to be a steward of God's good creation. From this standpoint, and in consonance with the Catholic social teaching, we can see that God wants agency to be used on behalf of those lacking it at any given point.

On the other hand, Reformation theologians highlighted the limitations of personal freedom and emphasized God's grace at each juncture. In the starkest Reformation polemics, agency nearly disappears. In this view, agency is preceded by God's initiative. Despite this emphasis, the Reformers were also concerned with the individual's volition. God first gave persons the free gift of faith through grace; and actions undertaken with personal agency, what these theologians called "works," are considered an outpouring of the life of service in gratitude for the gift of faith. Paradoxically, freedom is achieved as the result of willing service to God. As Reformer Martin Luther put it, "Insofar as [a person] is free [they] do no works, but insofar as [a person] is a servant, [they] do all kinds of works" (Luther 1970). Luther described the transformation of will into servitude before God, with the stress throughout on the unmerited gift of faith. My view of this leads to a certain paradox: Although the agent was free, the person was also deemed incapable of acting with freedom, bound as they were by sin.

Continuing the Reformation era emphasis on individual authority in matters of conscience, in modern times a distinctly personal framework began to dominate theological reflections on freedom. Neoorthodox theologians of the twentieth century, such as Emil Brunner, Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, Reinhold Niebuhr, drew from existentialist thinkers to describe a situation where personal agency was in the forefront. For these theologians, persons confronted a radical choice to make meaning of their lives before a God who desired to be in relationship with them (Chopp 2007). Each person was confronted with a unique choice—a choice that was not transferable to any other person or entity—of either using his or her freedom in relationship to God or rejecting freedom for the meaninglessness of an existence apart from God. Real choice was possible, and this condition could provoke anxiety. The emphasis among these thinkers was different, but in the foreground was an individual "subject" in a personal relationship to God. This distinctive angle left aside important social dimensions of agency, leaving the individual largely alone with God. This personalist framework still influences theological thinking.

A personalist framework for human freedom would not suffice in situations of extreme poverty and marginalization since it seems too individualistic. Liberation theologians from Latin America challenged the privatized framework of twentieth-century existentialist theology since they maintained that true agency proceeded from proper positioning in society: Persons become agents when they participate with God's "preferential option for the poor" (Gutiérrez 1973). A person was truly free only in shared agency when that person used their freedom in "solidarity" with the marginalized in the two-thirds world (Ashley and Metz 2007, p. 212). For too long, theology had been done from wealthy Western contexts that maintained social power and privilege (Johnson 1992; Ashley and Metz 2007; Gutierrez 1973). In my estimation, liberation theology succeeded, through a Marxist critique, in locating the

material conditions of the living world as the foreground for God's action, and this constitutes an important revision to a realm of inquiry that has been too otherworldly.

Feminist theologians continued the critique of neoorthodox theology by reclaiming agency within a particular framework: the distinctive and contested experience of fostering women's well-being and justice. In recent decades, feminist theologians have challenged the concept of free will as being too individualistic and only referring to men. Drawing from women's experience of embodiment, suffering through domestic violence or sexual assault, and social marginalization, these authors foregrounded the concept of personal agency as a vexed issue in situations of gender oppression (Hoefl 2009). Women had been denied agency, and this was an injustice, not an abstraction. Here, agency was as important as empowerment. Rather than abandoning one's will in order to regain it in Christ—as Luther put it—feminist theologians argued that women first needed an opportunity to *have* a self (Jones 2000). A crucial question among feminist theologians was “Whose agency are we fostering?” with the implication that we should be fostering the agency of those pushed to the margins. Feminist theologians highly prized agency but discovered it in a community inspired by feminist concern for the full equality of women, protection of their bodily integrity, and the wholeness of creation, all of which were seen as flowing from the Divine Spirit that inspired creative freedom. In my work on gender roles, I have argued that gender roles operate as “injunctive norms” that rely on the belief that the biological factors predispose a person to a certain experience of the world and that persons are sanctioned when they violate these expectations based on biology (Browning Helsel 2009). Feminist theology thus helpfully indicates how women have been denied agency based on arbitrary and socially constructed categories, such as gender and sexuality.

One of the most important recent developments in theology has been process thought, which, although densely philosophical at times, actually has quite promising practical contributions to pose to the question of agency. Process theology attempted to address the theological difficulties posed by an image of an all-powerful God—often described with monarchical metaphors—and proposed that God is immanent to creation and working within it. In the mid-twentieth century, process theologians, influenced by the work of mathematician Alfred North Whitehead, argued that God should be understood as that force *within* creation that influences all creation towards becoming (Hartshorne 1948). Within a process framework, agency is important but from the standpoint of relational experience. Rather than individuals acting with personal freedom (yet in a process framework such freedom inevitably existed, even in the most extreme situations), there were *webs of being* through which people reached freedom through *connected acts of becoming*. Since God was not seen as omnipotent but described more as operating within creation as a force for good, the traditional problem of suffering—*How could a good God and all-powerful God allow bad things to happen?*—receded, and in its place there was an emphasis on cooperation with the *processes towards goodness* that God influenced into being (Hartshorne 1984). Process thought showed how natural ecosystems were linked to human systems and how persons existed in webs of experience even before their birth. A person's agency came through analyzing and changing

these webs of relationships. Rejecting traditional metaphysics that posited isolated individuals and an all-powerful God, process theology depicted an interconnected and interpersonal reality through which God influenced persons.

A process theological framework is among the most promising theological perspectives through which to view agency because it shows how God works fruitfully alongside creation, assisting a person's own freedom to lead to well-being. Within a process framework, the universe is truly free to respond to God's initiative. Yet, this agency is appropriately complex because it is situated in webs of social and natural relationships. A critique of process theology that suggests that it does not accord God enough agency has a place. Even if a person lacks relational mirroring in life, it is possible that God may act with agency in relationship to that person in order to foster their sense of personal agency. Nevertheless, process theology helps us understand the theological and social dimensions of the relational development of agency.

Several key insights emerge from this exploration of agency in Christian theology and in Hebrew Scriptures. First, freedom and agency have consistently been affirmed by Hebrew Scriptures and Christian theologians but with a *telos*—or goal—in mind. The capacity for agency reflects God's image, but persons do not always have equal agency. If personal agency is diminished in one's life span—as a result of illness, debility, violence, or misfortune—this does not mean that a person is *less human* or less of a person, or reflects less of the image of God, as a result. Rather, persons require shared agency with others who will empower their own expressions of agency.

In theological terms, it matters a great deal what use agency is put towards. In contrast to Enlightenment thinkers who praised autonomy for its own sake, Christian theologians have consistently valued freedom *in relationship* to others, namely, in relationship to God and to other human beings. Catholic theologians maintained that people were “naturally” able to respond to God when empowered by God's operative grace, and Protestant theologians implied agency as an aspect of the turning of the will over to God in service based on God's initiative of relationship. While neoorthodox theologians assumed a sense of agency in relationship to a personal God, liberation, feminist, and process theologians have affirmed the inherently social nature of agency. Freedom is meant to link a person to others in relationships of justice, challenging oppressive systems. In each case, agency has been an important issue. Recent developments in theology are especially promising because they suggest that agency is not only effective in the interpersonal sphere but also has an impact on God.

10.2 A Constructive Contribution to a Pastoral Theology of Agency

God operates to engage with and transform a person's life by using human agency. At the end of a developmental process through which agency is fostered, God can be seen as the force that makes agency possible. Given our exploration of agency

within the Hebrew Scriptures and Christian theology, agency emerges as a real but limited ethical good; it is most salient when it is expressed as shared agency devoted to both the good of oneself and the good of the community. It does not define one's worth or dignity: The amount of agency a person has may vary across one's life span (see Fig. 10.1). Nevertheless, agency is an important good since persons are meant to participate with God in the establishment of a just and caring society and in the stewardship of God's creation.

Agency is a shared interpersonal good rather than an individual achievement. Agency does not imply autonomy but is the effect of a network of relationships. A pastoral theological approach to agency addresses some of the conflicts in psychology about whether agency is the personal capacity, almost like a possession, of someone able to achieve goals (top-down agency) or is largely subject to deterministic social forces (bottom-up agency). As I suggest, top-down agency emerges through a series of interactions with bottom-up forces, confirmed and realized in relationships in which agency is affirmed or denied. Shared agency, the responsibility to use agency for the fostering of those who have been denied agency or who lack agency at any given point, is an important social responsibility (see Fig. 10.1).

This chapter also seeks to make theological claims: God wants persons to be able to balance agency with a variety of other goods and experience more agency at certain times in the life span; nevertheless, the systematic denial of agency for some is a denial of the goodness that God wishes for the human community. Using a process theological approach to agency will help explore how, if people are systematically denied agency, this violates God. When a person honors another's agency and fosters a society where agency is shared, this contributes to God's well-being. In other words, it is necessary to offer an ethical framework—here rooted in feminist process theology—in which the goals of agency are more clearly defined. Otherwise, agency risks becoming a somewhat empty conceptual category. This attention to agency should be fostered especially on behalf of those whose agency is not likely to be considered. The well-being of the world and God's well-being are intimately connected in a process framework.

10.3 Process Theology and Relational Agency: Why a Violation of Another's Agency Constitutes a Violation of God

In this section, I will explore one of the most promising recent arguments for how God is connected with human agency. Using this resource will help me explain how violations against the agency of persons constitute a violation of God. Given our review of Christian theology in the first section, this approach is situated within the feminist process theology. Feminist process theologians have challenged classical notions of sin, arguing that sin is interpersonal and it is environmental, considerably broadening the individualistic focus of theology. In what follows, I offer a detailed description of agency in the thought of a recent theologian in order to explain how agency impacts God.

Theologian Marjorie Suchocki (1994), in her book *Fall to Violence: Original Sin in Process Thought* revises the concept of original sin by showing how sin is rooted in interpersonal violence. Original sin is the classic notion that, through the Fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, persons have been in a state of sin, alienated from God, and are in need of redemption.

She critiques and builds upon the example of Reinhold Niebuhr, a mid-twentieth-century neoorthodox theologian, who maintained that persons were capable of “self-transcendence.” For Niebuhr, persons were both “Nature” and “Spirit,” that is, they both belonged to the created order as creatures and were able to reflect on their existence, even the totality of their existence. “Spirit” was the capacity for reflection, and this ability to review the totality of one’s life led to existential anxiety—questions about the meaning of life and fear of death—which led, in turn, to a desire to repress that anxiety. Niebuhr maintained that once persons felt the existential anxiety of being a limited person, they chose through a variety of means to secure themselves against this anxiety, and the chief of these means was pride. In Niebuhr’s formulation, pride was “the desire to be like God,” and Niebuhr, following an Augustinian line of thought, saw pride as a primary sin from which all other sins, such as violence, flowed. Securing oneself against anxiety by pride was the basic sin for Niebuhr (2004). As we saw from a feminist perspective, it was necessary to “have” a self before giving that self away; the sin of pride is but one form of sinfulness along a continuum of self-forgetfulness and self-sacrifice.

Suchocki objected to Niebuhr’s individualistic rendering of sin as pride since it downplays the systemic and structural violence towards which women are routinely subjected. Rather than pride, she maintains that violence against the well-being of others is the primary sin. She maintains that a kind of interpersonal violence surrounds persons before their birth and thus could be considered a form of “original sin,” in that it is a form of violation of others that precedes personal responsibility. Fundamentally, the conditions that foster violence against others are well established before persons enter into them socially as fully cognizant members of society. For example, a person is born into a particular social identity that confers privilege or marginalization—at times based on external appearances—without choice. In this context, agency becomes an important act of resistance against the pressure for social conformity or identity expectations, an opportunity to use one’s social role more flexibly and challenge the conditions that lead to marginalization.

The systemic nature of violence makes it difficult to notice and resist, but it is nevertheless real in its effects. As “rebellion against the well-being of the world,” stripping away the agency of others, violence renders some incapable of truly thriving. Suchocki argues that people are formed in relationships that foster interpersonal violence and violence against the Earth (Suchocki 1994, p. 60). Just as the notion of agency does not develop as the innate property of a particular individual but rather within a set of relationships, theological notions of sin and salvation that focus on an individual’s relationship to God alone are inadequate because they do not grapple with the real harm that persons do to each other and to their environments. Suchocki invites us to broaden our notions of agency to include interactions with the natural

world, as well as social world, in order to understand how these relationships, and the patterns through which they are negotiated, can be severely harmful.

She argues that traditional doctrines of original sin are not relational enough: They tend to emphasize an isolated God and isolated individuals. By contrast, God exerts agency *in relationship* with creation, influencing creation towards “interrelated communities of well-being” (Suchocki 1994, p. 60). God is not separate from creation, influencing it from the outside, but continues to care for creation through God’s influence. At the same time, God is dependent on the agency of creation to respond to the concerns of a suffering world. Profoundly empathic, God feels the experiences of the world along with the world so that agency is more squarely set within the framework of creation rather than on God’s side, acting outside or beyond creation.² From this perspective, God is the one who feels, along with creation, all the suffering that creatures endure.

Original sin is that disruption of God’s communion of care that involves “unnecessary violence.” It precedes persons so that they are born into communities that foster such violence and are educated into it and yet they are also capable of resisting it through cooperation with God towards well-being (Suchocki 1994, p. 57–58). Since God is intimately connected to the world’s well-being and the well-being of all those in the created order, God’s well-being is tied to human agency. At the same time, God influences agency and cooperates with it without taking it over, which thereby gives agency to individuals. Given a process theological framework, God instantiates new possibilities for action in a person’s life but does not control the outcome. “The integrity of the world’s self-creativity in response to the creativity of God is the real freedom, to whatever degree, of how it responds to all the forces, including God, that impinge upon it” (Suchocki 1994, p. 58).

Suchocki argues that freedom is contested and contextual yet is real. Persons have a “response-ability” that “is at the core of every moment of [their] lives” (1994, p. 132). By this, Suchocki means that we are meant for relationships with God, humanity, and creation; my argument extends her insights further to suggest that relationality itself is a gift that comes, paradoxically, from first being in relationship with others. In process theology, freedom is real and constrained so that the exercise of one’s freedom is a central task that has an impact on others and on God.

Nevertheless, this response-ability is not merely given; it is structured in networks of power that significantly shape the range and scope of this response. “Freedom is indeed conditioned ... If [freedom were not limited] relationality would be

² Suchocki (1994) does believe that redemption of structural sin happens through Christian faith and argues that Christianity provides a specific saving knowledge of God. She maintains that persons can know God through Jesus Christ, but this is particular knowledge rather than universal knowledge: It is known through a certain kind of “perspective” (p. 53). Since it argues that God became a person in a particular time and place, Christianity affirms the creation as the space in which God exists. On the other hand, God’s perspective is broader than God’s incarnation in Jesus Christ, so that God’s knowledge encompasses all cultures and religions rather than being limited to one, allowing the provisional revelation of the Christian faith to be experienced in a variety of contexts without eliding the distinctiveness of other forms of knowledge. Suchocki maintains that it is through incarnation that God is linked to creation, moving with agency towards the well-being of all.

meaningless. One does not have a set amount of pure freedom ... rather, the influx of relation that goes into our moment-by-moment creation forces a response that is yet paradoxically free” (Suchocki 1994, p. 132). Suchocki shows how freedom is real even while it is limited. Freedom is fragile, tenuous, and relational, depending on both human action and divine intervention. The agency that a person exerts does not occur outside of social constraints or embodiment, but occurs within the web of relationships in which a person finds themselves.

In Suchocki’s feminist process approach, God is involved in the ongoing progression of relationships between human beings, creation, and Godself. Ethically, this means that people are meant to foster the development of agency between each other and to violate this agency amounts to a violation of God. God’s possibilities are tied up in the relational possibilities of creation, even while God continues to influence creation towards greater well-being. For good or ill, a person’s actions make an impact: “Apart from a response to relation, there is no coordination of relation, and hence no coming to be of the relational reality” (Suchocki 1994, p. 132). Agency is found in and through relationship—it is difficult to separate out the agent as a “subject” that acts on “objects” outside the self.

In process theology, God is not over/against creation but rather within/alongside creation, so that God is that force that allows creation to reach its full potential. Indeed, in process theology, God can be identified with relationality—that energy that exists when communities are working together for the well-being of the earth and for the flourishing of themselves and other communities. While process theology gives you a sense of God’s intimate closeness with human agency, it lacks the depiction of God as a separate being towards which one could direct one’s prayers (Phillips 1965–2014).

How does this look on a practical level? Putting process theology to work in the context of this chapter, I maintain that we should explain God as existing in the nexus between creatures rather than outside of them as an overpowering alien force. God assists persons to use their agency to cooperate with others for the good of creation and indeed, in a process sense, God *is* this spirit of cooperation existing in the connections between persons. In other frameworks, this could be described through *pneumatology*, or the language of the “Holy Spirit,” the third person of the Trinity. The consequence of this argument theologically is that when people violate each other’s agency, they violate God, who exists at the nexus between creatures, in the webs of relationality in which they operate.

How does this change our view of agency? Suchocki argues that transcendence needs to be revised in a horizontal direction. If a person’s sense of self, including the development of agency, is linked with all other creatures in a process of becoming, this relational emphasis seems to be justified. We will explore this point further in the next section. She argues that the infinite is not found beyond time, but is experienced in the progression of time and in the context of the natural world. Therefore, “If infinity is no stranger to nature, then one can develop a ‘horizontal’ notion of self-transcendence, such that it is gained through a certain ‘with-ness in’ the world, not an ‘over and above’ the world” (Suchocki 1994, p. 35–36). She describes these

capacities for horizontal self-transcendence as pertaining directly to the experience of time, being manifested in “memory, empathy, and imagination” (1994, p. 95).

Although she does not make this claim, in my own view as a pastoral theologian, I see these three aspects—memory, empathy, and imagination—as logically ordered. If the past is dominated by violence, then empathy will become difficult and imagination dangerous, if not impossible (Ellison 2013). While empathy provides a powerful capacity for connection, people cannot always realize this connection because of violent self- or other-experiences that shape them. If transcendence can be experienced in the relationality of human persons in these three areas, then it can also be lost or violated in each of these areas.

While persons seem capable of self-transcendence through memory, empathy, and imagination, they are also born into webs of relationships that allow and condone violence against others and against the earth. This has a central impact on one’s experience of time of oneself as a person with a past, present, and future. “One can roughly correlate a failure of transcendence through memory with the perpetuation of the past as violence; the failure of empathy has a correlation with violation mediated through the solidarity of the human race; and the failure of imagination relates to violence perpetrated through social structures” (Suchocki 1994, p. 36). Not naïve optimism, a process viewpoint shows the enduring and embedded nature of structural violence because it highlights how actions undertaken in a web of being spread out to influence others.

Shifting the focus from the vertical-God relationships to the horizontal-human relationships allows agency to emerge as a theological concern in horizontal self-transcendence. Suchocki argues that the relationality through which response-ability develops is by no means a given. Through relationships of empathy early in life, and through the fostering of such relationships across the life cycle, people can experience freedom and imagination; they sense the promise of the future. Each relationship contributes to a sense of agency, those with early caregivers, the created world, and God. Since God exists in the nexus between all these relationships, each person’s sense of agency impacts God.

For Suchocki, agency is a central theological category that not only makes guilt and sin possible but also makes freedom and liberation possible; nevertheless, it is essential that this capacity or freedom not be understood in autonomous terms, but be described as inherently relational, since human persons are necessarily connected in webs of relationship to others, to the natural environment, and to God. While each of the modes of self-transcendence through relationship can be violated, it is essentially some form of agency that allows a person to challenge this violence and redeem the situation. “The ontology of relationships maintains that the very possibility of relationships depends upon the ability to respond to relationships, and that this ‘response-ability’ is at the core of every moment of our lives” (Suchocki 1994, p. 132). Freedom is real.

Although she critiques Niebuhr’s notion of “nature” and “spirit,” Suchocki allows for the capacity of self-reflection, a “spirit,” though which one, is able to evaluate the consequences of one’s actions. She considerably broadens the notion of sin beyond Niebuhr’s narrow view of pride and she also envisions persons as

responsible for sin and capable of change, able to exercise memory, empathy, and imagination on behalf of others. Response-ability is no mere academic exercise for Suchocki; it is vital to the flourishing of oneself, others, and creation.

Since God is not an alien force or distant power, but is seen precisely where people use cooperation with each other to foster well-being, the violation of a person's agency constitutes a violation of God. As we have seen, agency is real in a process framework, and this means that God does not control the outcome of human relationships, but rather influences them and activates their possibilities. From whence does the capacity for self-transcendence come? According to Suchocki, it comes from one's experiences within the web of relationality—despite conditions of violence, there may be a sign that provides a basis for agentic action on behalf of memory, empathy, and imagination.

Next, I will explore the developmental progression that allows for personal agency and show how God exists in the connections between persons as agentic relationships are formed. This requires bringing to the foreground some of the promising research at the intersection between attachment theory and neurology. This research confirms and extends Suchocki's thesis. We must revise personal or self-contained notions of individuality and perceive the horizontal dimension of relationships: Agency is shaped in relational forms through practices of other witness, and for this reason, the development of agency is a theological and interpersonal concern. If, as process theology suggests, God exists at the linkage points between individuals, the interactions between individuals and their environments take on increased significance.

10.4 Agency through Empathy: The Psychological Debate

In this section, I will explore how agency is a relational development and explain how God is found in the midst of this development towards agency. The research in this section is drawn from attachment theory, attachment theory being a psychological model, which presupposes that people seek a connected and secure base of support from their earliest years from primary caregivers. It was developed from psychoanalyst John Bowlby's (1969/1982, 1973, 1980) work on loss among children, this is an important model for explaining the development of agency. Bowlby supposed that attachment experiences coalesced into a certain self-states based on experiences in early infancy. And attachment theory has recently been researched in relationship to neurobiology (Siegel 1999/2012). Bowlby revised psychoanalytic drive theory—the metaphor that people were driven through a hydraulic system of tension and release—towards a relational model that proposed that persons were first of all relationship seeking and that warmth and connection could be even more valuable than food or shelter. Care, rather than food or sex, was now seen as the fundamental need.

The first through the third years of life is especially important in attachment terms. Bowlby theorized that attachment coalesced into certain “self-states” based

on experiences during this period. Self-states are different from feelings or emotions because they come to be organizing principles that seem to speak to “reality.” He labeled distinct self-states as “secure, avoidant, ambivalent, and disorganized.” Persons whose caregivers were withdrawn may have experienced “avoidant” attachments, persons whose caregivers were threatening could experience “ambivalent” attachment, and so on. This was tested by several experiments that measured an infant’s emotional reactions to a caregiver’s leave-taking. For strict attachment theorists, these models of attachment remained fairly stable across the life span. Attachment theory shows the importance of empathy in early life.

A close look at attachment research indicates that one’s sense of agency develops early in life through relationships with other persons (Fonagy and Target 1997). This is important because understanding the empathic and interpersonal roots of agency helps us foster agency in personal relationships and across society. First, I claim that the brain’s mirror neuron system—housed in the secondary motor cortex and responsible for reflecting the actions of others within the brain—prepares persons to interpret intentions in others and that this plays an important role in the development of agency (Klein and Thorne 2006). This research indicates, at the level of scientific analysis, what Suchocki suggested was theologically sound—that people are profoundly shaped by their relationships. Second, I maintain that agency develops indirectly. One sees one’s actions mirrored in another’s behavior and then agency is attributed to oneself.

As noted in the introduction, the controversy in psychology about top-down versus bottom-up agency has proved to be a contentious issue, and my contribution shows how the capacity for top-down agency is actually the result of bottom-up processes and is thus fragile and malleable. Top-down agency approaches emphasize how a person is goal directed and able to act in accordance with certain values and intentions; bottom-up agency emphasizes how persons respond to stimuli in a role-determined fashion and underscores how agency is heavily determined by environmental factors (Prinz 2012). The distinctive argument of this section is that bottom-up stimuli are very significant, but that these bottom-up stimuli are personal rather than impersonal forces.

The stimuli that infants experience in relationships with primary caregivers—stimuli here being understood as the inherent drive towards relationship that exists within persons—provides the basis for later top-down agency. Top-down agency in a person is formed by a community or network of persons engaging in top-down agency with a person who is not able to engage in top-down agency on their own behalf (e.g. an infant not yet able to speak), highlighting the shared nature of personal agency. Agency is thus, from inception, a shared phenomenon built on relationality. Top-down agency has a developmental history in relationships of care.

Developments in neuroscience have further confirmed the interpersonal nature of agency, as described by attachment theorists. While attachment describes the capacity for agency as a form of “joint attention” that develops from particular relationships, neuroscientific findings describe how this capacity for agency is rooted in the brain’s neuronal wiring (Siegel 1999/2012, p. 322). This helps explain the very early phenomenon of “mind reading” in which infants and young children

seem capable of not only seeing a person's actions but also intuiting the intentions behind a person's actions. The discovery of the mirror neuron system by a team of Italian scientists in the 1990s heralded a sea change in our consideration of what was happening in cognitive processing. Recent research in the cognitive sciences on empathy has built on these findings (Stueber 2006, p. 132). Specifically, mirror neurons contribute strong evidence for how our lives are linked with the lives of others through the inherently empathic capacities of our brains.

Mirror neurons are those parts of the brain that are able to witness another's facial expression and instinctively respond similarly. Capacities rooted in the mirror neuron system seem to take us a long way towards explaining how infants imitate facial expressions. An infant seems to mirror another's face without necessarily knowing of their own (Stump 2010).

In other words, the mirror neurons in an infant's mind fire almost automatically as they witness another's behavior; they do not seem to fire by accessing similar memories and attributing intention to another through comparing their inner states with the inner states of another. Mirror neuronal capacity seems more basic than cognitive processing. Mirror neurons thus appear to be nearly reflexive responses. "John grasps Mary's action because even as it is happening before his eyes, it is also happening, in effect, inside his head ... mirror neurons permit an observed act to be directly observed by experiencing it" (Stump 2010, p. 69). Experience seems to *happen* in a child's mind before it becomes the object of observation, so that early shared experience could be described as preconceptual. Although it is difficult to describe how this interpersonal, second-person knowing is created through mirror neurons firing, it seems that infants reflect in some significant ways the minds of others. Perhaps the best that can be said at this point is that their minds respond to the minds of others by using the mirror neurons to create similar states in their own minds.

The discovery of mirror neurons has contributed significantly to our understanding of the capacity for social behavior and how this capacity is provided for in what seems to be the brain's structure. Specifically, recent research shows how this area of the brain functions in understanding the intentions and emotions of others. Research on neurological damage in which mirror neurons have been obliterated indicate that a person's capacity to understand the significance of another's actions is severely compromised (Preston and de Waal 2002). These persons can see others acting but cannot make accurate inferences about their intentions from observing their actions; a crucial "mind-reading" capacity seems to be missing.

The discovery of mirror neurons seems to indicate that the conceptual capacity for interpretation is built upon early aspects of the brain's functioning as it attributes intentions or emotions to others, intuiting the significance of their actions preconceptually. Mirror neurons explain why attachment is a more basic biological process than language acquisition and is more central to survival. This also accounts for why top-down agency is the result of bottom-up processes of interaction and imitation.

Mirror neuronal capacities challenge older cognitive and conceptual models based on meaning making. A meaning-making approach divides the self from the other and insists that interpretation is crucial. Mirror neuron research shows that

such self/other understandings are based on earlier self–other experience. Before meaning making, there is shared experience. When two persons are attending to the same thing, they are linked at the neuronal level even though they may not be consciously aware of it. This is not adequately explained by either first-person pronouns (the language of the “I”) or third-person pronouns (the knowledge “that” something is the case). Suchocki’s description of the web of human relationships indicates the profoundly connected interpersonal reality that is not completely captured by typical dualistic language for “subject” and “object,” for self-experience and other experience.

This research indicates that “self” experience is based on “other” experience; we come at a self indirectly through the repetitive engagement with others who reflect ourselves back to us. As we have seen, recent discoveries in brain science suggest that persons engage in relationships at a preverbal level and that this capacity to match what is happening in another person’s mind is an early precursor to the development of the self. Witnessing the actions and responses of others before having a knowledge of oneself as a separate entity, the preverbal experience of the mirror neuron system within individuals provides the substrate for the later development of what might be called a self. This matters for the debates about agency because it indicates that later top-down functioning is built on bottom-up phenomena in early life: through neuronal registering of the feelings, emotions, and self-states of others, one builds self-understanding.

Therefore, a practical and pastoral concern arises from this reflection: It matters a great deal whether we believe that others have agency, because, in believing this, we communicate this reality through our relationship to them. If persons first experience the faces of others and interpret their actions almost automatically based on the firing of their mirror neurons, they are inextricably bound into networks of shared experience. These networks of shared experience first offer certain kinds of self-states to a person and then later are used to construct meaning, convey values, and express sentiments. Expressions that affirm agency have the capacity to create the self-perception of agency within a person.

Recent psychological research links agency, top-down processing, and the development of goal-directed action with the experience of mirroring, suggesting that, from its inception, agency is inherently social. A joint achievement, agency develops through a process of mirroring and thus occurs indirectly rather than being a property of an individual. This suggests that what might have been previously considered as a trait or possession—the capacity to act with agency—is now seen as having a developmental basis. Furthermore, this developmental achievement is rooted in the brain’s capacity for relational knowing seen in the mirror neuron system.

Although the primary developments in this line of thought have occurred in attachment theory, influenced by neurobiology, its results are starting to impact cognitive psychology as well. For example, the cognitive psychologist Wolfgang Prinz notes how persons observe each other’s behaviors and notice not only the actions but implicitly come to conclusions about the reasons for and intentions behind them (Prinz 2012, p. 108).

Prinz ponders the origin of goals, which he calls “representations” in a person’s goal-directed actions (Prinz 2012, p. 207). Asking a series of probing questions, he wonders how it is possible to have a goal in a horizon beyond oneself (Prinz 2012, p. 126). How do we “form explicit representations of events that are independent from the configuration of currently given circumstances?” (Prinz 2012, p. 126) In giving answers to these questions, he reserves a strong place for stimulus-based responses in shaping the world but does so without being reductionist. Although he writes in functionalist metaphors, he gives a surprisingly personal account of the development of “representations” from the stimulus of their lives. Bottom-up stimuli are the detour through which top-down agency is developed.

Prinz argues that agency begins with “perception” and develops in relationships (Prinz 2012, p. 136):

Individuals indeed develop and implement top-down control from outside to inside, going from interpretation of ... action [outside of themselves] (perception) to selection of their own action (production). First, they attribute agency and agentive control to others whom they see acting, and then, upon seeing others mirroring their own actions, they appropriate agency for themselves, attributing agentive control to their own actions. Eventually, these intuitions of agency lay the foundations for mechanisms of agentive (top-down) control of their actions, thus turning perception of agency into the production of goal-directed action. (p. 136)

Prinz describes a highly subjective process through which a person first experiences “intuitions” of agency by seeing his or her actions mirrored by others, and these later develop into the goals that shape goal-directed actions. The capacity for action is thus a fragile, contested, and interpersonally complex event. In this sense, agency is the result of stimuli, but stimuli that are inherently relational, the same that seek connection and warmth in patterns of attachment. In his analysis of the development of goal-directed behavior, he highlights how agency develops through the perception of others.

The mirror neuron system allows for second-person knowledge. Prinz shows how this system of witnessing another person’s experience as if it were one’s own is at the root of the development of personality and the capacity for developing goals that can lead to goal-directed action. “Individuals become willing agents by appropriating for themselves what they have first attributed to others” (Prinz 2012, p. 137).

Agency, goal development, and goal-directed action come from witnessing others witnessing oneself. Indirectly, the person comes to believe they have the power to act as they see their actions affecting the world. If their actions do not affect the world, they do not attribute agency to themselves. As neuroscience and attachment theory each indicate, the split-second processing of both action and intention is deceptively simple since it arises from a complex process of self-development.

When people are capable of top-down agency, or acting with intention, it reflects an interpersonal reality. Mirror neurons fire almost automatically in response to others and this sets up the conditions through which persons witness cues of safety and reliability in the faces of others from a young age. This perception includes the relational experience of agency: Another person confirms that they see us acting with

intention and according to certain values or desires. When this happens, we can begin to experience what Prinz calls “representations,” or goals (Prinz 2012, p. 207).

I claim that the mirror neuron system helps explain how this works at a preverbal level: The infant witnesses cues in the faces of persons close to them and interprets the clues to develop a sense of safety. These cues include reflecting an infant’s behavior, conveying to the infant a sense of self-reality and developing the capacity for action that later develops into the perception of agency. This early experience is thus a relational experience; people come to self-definition through connections with others. Over time, this consistent set of responses develops into a form of patterning that seems to appear fairly stable and allows for a platform from which a relational sense of self—a person acting with values and intentions—is first experienced. Agency depends upon those who witness our lives and behaviors and mirror back to us that what they see us doing is meaningful (Stern 1985/2012).

In this section, we have explored how relationships are fundamental to what could be called the development of “self,” especially as it regards the self-perception of agency. Indeed, it matters a great deal whether we believe other persons have agency because in holding that belief we communicate that to them through the shared experience that we have with them.

10.5 Conclusion

Persons are connected in multiple relationships from before birth, and it is primarily in these relationships that they develop a sense of agency. In the previous section, we have explored how what we consider a “self” is actually born out of relationships of mirroring in which another reflects one’s actions and that the mirror neuron system allows this action to be reflexive—to be interpreted by the self. From this perspective, agency is seen to be inherently relational. Although this occurs foundationally in infancy, it also occurs across the life span as relationships of attachment can change through the course of the life span, with persons coming to have increasing agency. Suchocki highlighted how there are systems of bonding that nourish us before and after we are born, long before we can use the name “I” to describe ourselves, much less attribute agency to ourselves.

To put a fine point on it, agency is a capacity that develops with the empathy of others through actions of joint attention in which persons share experiences. Without these mirrors for experience, people do not perceive themselves as having agency as easily. Those who have been systematically denied agency frequently still manage to attempt to achieve some sense of agency—reaching “horizontal self-transcendence,” but even this capacity to search for agency is built upon a network of relationships in one’s life that constituted a source of self-imagining.

God is proximate to these networks of relationships, these communities of well-being, through which persons discover themselves as having agency and thus are able to develop meaningful goals and work towards them. The human processes of joint attention, empathy, and attachment could be seen as “natural” processes

occurring in relationships of care, given my thesis about the linkage points between persons being where God is present, these processes are also the distinctive location of human agency towards connected communities of well-being.

The consequences of my argument that we are neurologically “wired” for shared experience but that that which we see can only shape us (Ellison 2013). There are several important consequences that could be drawn from this, and further work that needs to be done on the effects of “horizontal self-transcendence” within a relational psychological/theological understanding of agency in regard to particular social problems.

In this chapter, I have explained how agency has been understood in the Christian tradition and staked a claim in the feminist process theological understanding of agency, namely that people are capable of “horizontal self-transcendence” when they use their agency to foster interconnected communities of well-being in the world (Suchocki 1994, p. 35). Using attachment theory, I have shown how important the second aspect of horizontal self-transcendence, namely *empathy*, is to the development of agency. Implicitly, I have shown how this view of human freedom is rooted in a rich theological tradition in which the agency of the self is meant to be in service to others and to God. Because people are born into webs of relationships that systematically deny the agency of others, this should be understood not only as a violation of others but also as a violation of God as God is witnessed in the linkage points between persons.

Perhaps the most challenging claim I have made in the chapter is that agency is inherently relational. Agency is not a personal possession, an essentialized attribute of character that can be deployed at will. Instead, agency is a shared phenomenon so that persons are responsible to foster agency not only for themselves but also for others who have been systematically denied agency. Using process theology as a theological framework, I have argued that, although these relationships are important, social and interpersonal relationships also reflect upon God. Instead, I maintained that these relationships amount to a violation of God since each act of interpersonal violence, and each instance of denial of agency, is felt by God as an infringement against the well-being of a person. God is the one who influences the world towards justice and well-being for all, using God’s agency to attempt to change persons who are capable of responding to God’s influence. Since God is seen as that force existing in and through relationships to foster agency and well-being at the intersections of persons, society, and nature, fostering agency is a shared task that is profoundly theological, thus deserving to be at the center of pastoral theological reflection in the twenty-first century.

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