

Power of Love

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Christianity's ambivalence about power is apparent—for example, from the disconcerting way its history oscillates between unequivocal hostility and ready complicity with “the powers that be,” and from its scriptures, which routinely apply epithets of supreme power and might to God even as they tell of a divine mission for the world climaxing in the weakness and humiliation of the cross, God's victory there in a struggle with principalities and powers pulled paradoxically from abject defeat. Power is sometimes by definition good—because it always has its source in God, following a common interpretation of Romans 13. Sometimes by definition evil—it is the conflict-ridden way of a fallen world. If the whole course of Christian history and the constant contests within it about what to make of its complex scriptures are any indication, power is both good and bad from a Christian point of view, requiring a complex judgment from Christians about when and where it is one or the other.

I agree with the organizers of this conference that Christian ambivalence about power should be channeled today to focus on the good power of God and humans, exercised for the flourishing of life on this planet and for liberation from present conditions standing in the way of it. Such a re-focusing is possible only if one starts from a definition of power that is neutral in the sense of not precluding a good exercise of it. On that basis, different forms of power can be specified, according to such factors as the ends to which it

is put and the mechanisms of its operation. It is in light of the resulting typology of power that good forms of divine power in Christianity can be retrieved and elaborated. Developing an account of specifically divine forms of good power—and, ultimately, a religiously distinctive account of good human power—would involve giving appropriately odd spins to forms of good power within such a typology. God’s power is a weird version or swerve from ordinary forms of good power in keeping with the unusual claims made for God generally in Christianity. Because it also of course specifies forms of bad power, such a typology would have the added benefit of aiding in the elaboration of Christian suspicions about power; it would foster intellectually rigorous critical assessments by Christians of power’s awful potentials. As you will see, I strongly suggest below that most contemporary theologians are working with a truncated typology of power’s forms and that this unduly restricts the account of divine power they can give, while hampering realistic appreciation of the sort of dangers we face today.

I don’t think we should bother too much at the start with the specifics of power’s definition. The main point here is simply a negative one: ruling out overly restrictive definitions. And on that score a number of rather vague formulations might do (In case we were interested, a more definitive specification of power’s definition would probably have to await fuller description of different forms of power; the definition would be a generalization from them, capturing what’s true of power in every case.). In order simply to avoid prejudging the question—by making power essentially good or bad—we could say, for example, that power is the capacity to bring about significant effects, in that way leaving open the character of those effects, how they are brought about, and the locus of the capacity to do so—whether lodged in a community as a whole, say, or differentially distributed among its members. Or, perhaps more specifically, let’s say that power means

relations (among different persons but one can also be talking about relations with oneself) in which the conduct, direction, or government in a very broad sense of those so related is at issue. Again, how these relations are structured, exactly what is the object of attention in them, and the differential consequences for the parties involved are left unspecified. The latter definition is close to that of Foucault's "governmentality," and the account of different types of power to be discussed below is also indebted to him. He, like us, is interested in non-presumptive definitions of power—in particular because he is concerned to avoid overly close associations of power with sovereignty and obedience to the law—and formulates one of the most exhaustive typologies of power I know of.

One might begin to specify forms of good power by looking at the intended consequences or effects of attempts to direct the conduct of others. Such a focus seems central, indeed, to one of the major Christian images of good divine power—the shepherd. Kings, leaders, gods are talked about as shepherds especially in the Hebraic and Near Eastern contexts of Christianity's formation. "An Egyptian hymn invoked Ra this way: 'O Ra that keepest watch when all men sleep, Thou who seekest what is good for thy cattle' An Assyrian invocation to the king ran thus: 'Illustrious companion of pastures, Thou who carest for thy land and feedest it, shepherd of all abundance.' As the Psalms say: 'like a flock/ hast Thou led Thy people . . .'¹ Despite modern associations to the contrary and the growing split between pastoral power over souls and political power over material life in the West, this is clearly a primary image for power generally in Christianity, the direction of life-conduct being specifically at issue: the shepherd gathers and guides the sheep for their sustenance, improvement and comfort. This power of the shepherd, or the power relation set up between shepherd and flock, is good in virtue of its beneficence; the power of the

¹ Foucault, "Omnes et Singulatim," 301; my whole discussion follows his account of pastoral power as discussed here and in his College de France lectures of Feb. 8, 15, and 22, 1978.

shepherd is a power of caring for the sheep, attending to their every need, ensuring their wellbeing, vigilant to every danger they might face. The shepherd's power is good power, in short, because it is one completely devoted to their good; the shepherd is not, say, fattening these sheep simply for the slaughter.

Indeed, this is a beneficence at the extreme, played up in the application of such power to God. The sheep are not partially and episodically—say, only when lost or in danger—but completely and continuously cared for by the shepherd; no aspect of their lives is exempt from the shepherd's vigilant attention to their wellbeing and they are cared for at every moment over the course of their entire lives. Unlike direction by the law, say, that punishes waywardness while leaving the rest of one's life untouched and that finds its insertion point merely in one's "free" will, the shepherd here has a total charge over sheep that give their whole lives over, without reserve, in total trust. It is, moreover, the movements of a population that are being directed here and therefore this is a power that finds the flock wherever it goes, unlimited by any jurisdictions of territory. Although the flock is being directed somewhere—say, away from dangers and towards abundant pastures—the flock is never exempt from such guidance even when dangers are averted and fertile fields attained; the flock is simply lost without its shepherd, never itself apart from the call of the shepherd that gathers it together.

For all the apparent asymmetry in the relations of power here, the power of the shepherd, too, seems nothing apart from the wellbeing of the sheep. As a specifically pastoral power, the power of the shepherd cannot be made manifest independently of the care expended on the flock, in the way the majesty of a sovereign might magnify itself through turning the attention of the ruled, whatever their deplorable condition, to the spectacle of its own power and might. Indeed, the interest of the shepherd is so closely

associated with the flock—his power displayed in its wellbeing—that the shepherd seems willing to sacrifice life itself for it.

Finally, this is beneficent power in the extreme in that it is not simply the flock as a whole or in general that the shepherd is concerned about. Running contrary, say, to what's implied by the common metaphor of a captain or helmsman of a ship of state, the shepherd's is an exhaustively thorough form of solicitousness, as concerned for one as for all; the wellbeing of each sheep is as important to the shepherd as that of the flock. The shepherd is willing to do anything to save even a single sheep that goes astray. And the shepherd's devotion attends to the particular needs of each—young grass for the young ones, tougher feed for those older. Sheep are individualized, therefore, in the shepherd's sight, as whole living beings requiring just that nurturing, sustaining, and comforting attention specific to them, peculiarly suited to their particular needs and circumstances.

Expressing much the same things in a more general theological way—and in less outdated terms—one could say that the power of God is good because of its specific “significant effects” (according to our first neutral definition of power): the goods of creation (existence) and salvation (wellbeing), and the overcoming of dangers to both (sin and suffering, for example). God's power is good because it is productive of the good for others and because it works continually, in a potentially radically transformative way, to sustain and increase that good against all impediments.

Like a shepherd's pastoral power of care writ large, God's is a universally extended beneficent power working for the total good of all through a direct form of intensely personal relationship with one and all—an intimacy of love. As creator and sustainer of the universe, God, by virtue of giving rise to it all, is totally responsible for everything good about it, not just in general but down to the least specifics, there being no exceptions. And

this productive power for the good is exercised in the form of an intensely personal regard, by virtue of its being without intermediaries for the whole, and in every case as directly solicitous, because directly productive, of the good of each and every thing. As savior, God's power is extremely good because it is extremely extravagant, offering to creatures the wellbeing of God's own life through the closest possible relationship of intimacy with them achieved in Christ, where the identification of God with our own predicament and prospects is completed, the dangers of our life taken onto God's shoulders for the purpose of extending the greatest benefits of God's solicitude to us. Faithful to the principle of constant care, which God offers whatever our waywardness, undying devotion to our endangered and precarious lives is proved here by a willingness to die.

As a pastoral power, a power of care, this is a divine power displayed in the wellbeing of those it loves, there being no further striking display of its own strength and superiority. Indeed, one might say this is a good power because of no interest for its own sake, hiding behind, submerged, so to speak, within the importance of its effects. Christian concern for divine power is accordingly subordinated to an interest in those effects. God is powerful, Christians claim, simply because God is capable of and actually efficacious of the good. God's power is exalted by them for the sake of certain goods—beneficence or goodness bestowed upon others, in the first place, and the intimacy of love which is the way to it, in the second. The point, for example, of claiming that God has the sole and unmediated productive power to create and save is to prove the intimacy of our relations with God, and to shore up our hope in the possibility of goodness in our lives however dire and intractable the circumstances that seem to stand in the way of it. Thus, God's beneficent working for us can never be far off, or present only by way of some substitute or representative, given the fact that it always reaches out to touch others directly—the world as a whole and each of its

members, irrespective of the character of their relations with others. And when the possibilities of this world seem completely exhausted there remains hope for a transformation of things for the better in God.

Focus on ends doesn't dispense with worries about means and mechanisms, however. The primary worries about the goodness of divine power concern, not its effects, but how it operates—in classical theism, in some all powerful, preemptive and unobstructed fashion. Indeed, Foucault is primarily interested in the mechanisms of pastoral power—how it works—and he hardly thinks those mechanisms good. The basic technologies of power that develop in Christianity in association with language of shepherding (e.g., practices of confession and spiritual disciplines in which the flesh and its desires become objects of intense scrutiny) mutate into the subtle and pervasive micro-powers of the modern state, a whole host of mostly medicalized regimens for the discipline and surveillance of bodies, exemplified in prisons, schools, and factories. The modern state has indeed an interest in the wellbeing of its population, in its health and productivity, for example; the regulation of population, the organized direction of the conduct of people in the modern state, may even work to maximize a population's powers in a fulsome sense, from top to bottom, the object of the state being the biopower of a population, as Foucault puts it, and its augmentation. But the technologies used to direct conduct here are surely not, in Foucault's eyes at least, for that reason commendable.

Although he is clearly on the side of resistance to mechanisms of power, whatever form they take, Foucault is somewhat notorious for avoiding principled judgments of good and bad in the evaluation of the diverse historical mechanisms or technologies of power he meticulously traces. All the technologies seem equally bad, dangerous in their different ways. The implacable coordination of one's every gesture to a particular function on a factory

line—the sort of disciplinary power whose dangers Foucault is most concerned to draw attention to in *Discipline and Punish*—seems hardly any worse a mechanism for the direction of conduct than the threat of spectacular violence by a sovereign—as Foucault’s stomach-turning description of being drawn and quartered that starts the book makes abundantly clear. And all of them seem equally good, in that technologies of power, by definition according to Foucault, always leave some room for the disaffected to maneuver against them. Relations of power operate via tactics and strategies that presume the freedom of those subject to direction within them. “The characteristic feature of power is that some men can more or less entirely determine other men’s (sic) conduct—but never exhaustively . . . A man who is chained up and beaten is subject to force being exerted over him, not power.”²

In contemporary theology, especially those forms of it most worried about the goodness of divine power in classical theism—process theology I believe is the most systematic in its objections and will be the implicit dialogue partner for me below—there often is, *pace* Foucault, an attempt to discriminate between good and bad ways that power might operate. Mechanisms for influencing conduct are divided according to a whole host of binary oppositions, distinguishing bad from good power—or power, which is bad, from some other sort of influence or direction of others that, because of its goodness, shouldn’t be considered power at all. Coercive power is distinguished from persuasive power; relations of power in which force is monopolized are distinguished from those that distribute power more widely; unilateral power is distinguished from cooperative; preemptive from responsive; irresistible from resistible; unconditional from conditional; and so on.

² Foucault, “Omnes,” 324.

The different elements that constitute each side more or less cohere to form a dual picture. There are only two main types of power: on the one side, power working to direct the conduct of others against their own inclinations and working to concentrate force in its own hands by weakening, avoiding, or hampering altogether the power of others to stand in its way; power that operates through force and suppression, in short. And on the other side, power relations where the conduct of all is directed in and through mutually conditioning complex interrelations of a potentially harmonious and cooperative sort; power sharing is a given of these relations and therefore, at the most fundamental level, conduct is directed here by the way multiple forces work together with, rather than against, one another, each doing their part in the course of some, ideally, increasingly value-productive spiral of reciprocal influences. By bringing the classical theist perspective on divine power I sketched above together with Foucault's more complex typology of technologies of power, I believe one can show this to be a false dichotomy, and one misdirected in its efforts to evade bad power.

Let's take the distinction between coercive and persuasive power first. From a classical theist view such an alternative is hardly exhaustive. The classical theist identifies the mechanism of power in which divinity is implicated with neither side. Divine power can, it is true, be exercised on occasion in either of those forms—God can lure us towards the good by presenting us with possibilities for action we find attractive, and God can try to get us to change course by threatening us or simply by hindering acts that go against God's beneficent intentions for us. But neither captures the primary workings of divine power; the fundamental distinguishing character of divine power, indeed, is just this capacity to escape a dichotomy between coercion and persuasion.

From a classical theist view, both sides of the dichotomy wrongly assume that God has to work from the outside to redirect the conduct of others, as ordinary forces do. As we know from ordinary life, sometimes the action of others upon us is coercive or violent in that it either drags us where we don't want to go at all, or forces us to choose what, all things being equal, we would prefer not to. One can be pushed out a window to one's death or one can choose to jump rather than be burned alive or shot by a madman; the course of action runs contrary to what we would will for ourselves—either absolutely and then it takes place in the absence of our will altogether—or conditionally, in the sense that we would really rather not but feel we have no other choice under the circumstances. Or, we can be persuaded to act ourselves according to our own wishes, either by being presented with courses of action we find attractive or by being placed in circumstances that simply redirect choices we are otherwise inclined to make for ourselves. We come upon a cool brook and it tempts us to quench our thirst in it; a travel agent talks up Mali and we decide to take a vacation there. These are cases of the former sort of persuasive influence. Or, a hot day leads us to seek shelter from the sun; a bad hurricane season prompts us to go to Bermuda rather than the Caribbean. These are examples of the latter sort.

Both general types of influence—coercive and persuasive—assume that we have already established inclinations and preferences of our own, which are simply to be modified in some fashion or other by external influences—encouraged and incited, in the one case, squashed and frustrated, in the other. In both cases, there is what we would independently be inclined to do, and then what we are inclined to do when influenced by those others. The inevitability of this underlying picture is what the classical theist account of God puts in question. Exploding what all these operations of worldly forces assume and expanding thereby the possible technologies of power, one might say, classical theism maintains that

God's power is exceptional in giving us the very desires and inclinations we have to begin with. God acts internally, so to speak, as no worldly influence can, by producing in us the very preferences and choices that determine our conduct, and in that sense working in them. It is for this reason that God is not in the situation of all the other influences upon us we know, whose only recourse is to redirect our desires and choices after the fact, or perhaps precede them by activating the prior capacities we have for them. If God gives rise to those very wishes and desires, God does not need to be persuasive in order to conduct our behavior in accordance with our own wishes and desires. And God's influence on us is never coercive if it is the case that what God wants of us simply forms us in our own internally generated choices, produces in us what we choose to do simply because we want to, the desires of our very own heart. As Aquinas makes these points:

No created substance can act on the will, or be the cause of our act of choice, except in the way of a persuading agent . . . [T]o give natural inclinations is the sole prerogative of God. So also, to incline the will to anything, is the sole prerogative of Him Who is the cause of the intellectual nature [E]very movement of the will must proceed from within. Now no created substance is joined to the intellectual soul in regard to its inner parts, but only God who is the cause of its being and Who sustains it in being. Therefore, by God alone can voluntary movement be caused [T]he only agent that can cause a movement of the will, without violence, is that which causes an intrinsic principle of . . . movement, and such a principle is the very power of the will. Now, this agent is God, who alone creates.”³

What the dichotomy between coercive and persuasive power ignores, then, is the possibility of a constitutive or productive exercise of power, power that works by constituting or producing the subjects whose conduct it directs, power that directs in and through the very constitution or production of those subject to it. As Foucault makes clear, even in human history there are technologies of power that might be characterized in those terms. The disciplinary power that developed in the West after the 18th century is his primary

³ Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Book Three, Chapter 88, sections 2, 4-6.

case in point. “Subjects are gradually, progressively really and materially *constituted* through a multiplicity of organisms, forces, energies, materials, desires, thoughts, etc,” “at the level of those continuous and uninterrupted processes which subject our bodies, govern our gestures, dictate our behaviors, etc.”⁴ Power plays out in all the subtle ways over the course of one’s whole life—in school, at work, at home—that one is trained in detail to be the sort of person one becomes, a person who habitually acts in just this way, with just these desires and preoccupations. Bodies are trained—their every gesture and desire—through the manner of their organization or interrelation with other persons and their environment; and it is in that way that power primarily gets a hold on them.

In short, here power doesn’t so much act *on* subjects as *enact* them.⁵ Relations of power of this type make them into, in other words, people habitually acting of their own accord in the required ways—like the prisoner in Foucault’s famous treatment of Jeremy Bentham’s proposed panopticon who comes to act on his own, as a good prisoner should, because he is always visible from a central watch tower, a watch tower that for that very reason need never be manned. Within such technologies of power, the one subjected to them “assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection.”⁶

Because power relations work in this way from inside or within the very ones whose conduct is subject to direction, power does not primarily operate here by forbidding people to do what they would like to do, by laying down the law and threatening awful reprisals for bad behavior, or even by holding out positive “carrots,” coaxing or cajoling people into

⁴ Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 97, italics mine.

⁵ Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 13.

⁶ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 202-3.

giving up or redirecting their usual proclivities, after the fact. This is a power that instead works on you before you've done or even thought of doing anything, and then makes you do what you want to. It does not therefore work by rendering people passive, passively obedient before implacable external laws or passively compliant before the complex convergence of external forces that bend wills; instead, power here traverses people's active self-direction and hides itself within what they choose to do themselves. People undergo it as they exercise it, being power's "vehicles" rather than merely its "inert or consenting targets."⁷

The power of their subjection takes shape in their own expression of energy; and therefore this technology of power has no interest in seeing the powers or energies of those subjected to it decreased or diminished. This is power "bent on generating forces, making them grow, and ordering them, rather than one dedicated to impeding them, making them submit or destroying them."⁸ The genius of its internal mechanism is just to make those powers and energies of its subjects the more docile to administration and management the more they are increased. These are "methods of power capable of optimizing forces, aptitudes, and life in general without at the same time making them more difficult to govern."⁹

Power "arranges things in such a way that the exercise of power is not added on from the outside, like a rigid, heavy constraint, to the functions it invests, but is so subtly present in them as to increase their efficiency by itself increasing its own points of contact."¹⁰ Points of contact everywhere in the pervasive functions served, both positive and negative: myriad benefits secured, and dangers averted. Both paradoxically proliferated rather than

⁷ Foucault, *Power / Knowledge*, 98.

⁸ Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, 136.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 141.

¹⁰ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 206.

reduced. Instead of squelching the bad behaviors of those it would control, power works here only to multiply the dangerous features of those subjected to it—the always potentially deviant character of thorough-going, ever-present desires—in order to have all the more things apparently demanding of themselves incessant surveillance and minute regulation. In the case of sex (one of Foucault’s primary objects for historical investigation), “the implementation of perversions is an instrument-effect; it is through the isolation, intensification, and consolidation of . . . sexualities that . . . power . . . branched out and multiplied, measured the body, and penetrated modes of conduct . . . A proliferation of sexualities through the extension of power; an optimization of power to which each of these . . . sexualities gave a surface of intervention.”¹¹

The theological typology of good and bad modes of power we have started with makes the mistake, then, of organizing itself around a single, and in today’s world, subsidiary, form of power, the repressive and coercive kind that Foucault calls sovereign-judicial power. The will of the monarch or head of state is expressed through a rule of law with primary powers of interdiction and sanction, prohibiting all internal warfare and private settling of disputes in order to ensure state-wide peace, on the one hand, and justice, on the other. This is “a power that only has the negative on its side, a power to say no; in no condition to produce, capable of only positing limits, it is basically anti-energy. This is the paradox of its effectiveness: it is incapable of doing anything, except to render what it dominates incapable of doing anything either, except for what this power allows it to do.”¹² This is power in the form of a law of transgression and punishment in which all the conduct required of its subjects reduces to obedience.¹³ And all the other features on the bad side of

¹¹ Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, 48.

¹² *Ibid.*, 84.

¹³ *Ibid.*

the divide in the usual theological typology come along with sovereign-juridical power's repressive, coercive character. In contrast to disciplinary power which works like a fluid spreading itself out everywhere or like a machine in which everyone is caught and which therefore no one seems to own,¹⁴ here power is a possession that some people have and exercise over those without it, and which therefore can be exercised unilaterally. This is power amassed and ideally monopolized to make control over others easier, its exclusive concentration in the monarch proved, and its consequently unstoppable exercise glorified, in outrageous displays of overwhelming, spectacularly destructive brutality. Without waiting for serious threats against it to emerge, this power preemptively crushes the least show of resistance, the slight flesh wound to the king inflicted by an unbalanced man, Damiens, the last person to be tried in France for regicide, met, as Foucault so graphically describes, by the irresistible force of the state that literally ripped him apart for his audacity. Unlike a panopticon where relations of power work with minimal effort to effect a maximum return of continuously docile behavior, here power wastes itself without reserve in periodic interventions of exaggerated expenditure and display. According to the usual theological typology, power modeled on such sovereign-juridical mechanisms is the only sort of power to fear, and therefore the sole temptation when theologians speak of divine power. If Foucault is to be believed, sovereign-juridical power, to the contrary, is only one form of power and an increasingly marginalized one to boot, now subordinated to and co-opted by chief mechanisms of other sorts, such as disciplinary power.

Lacking a more thorough typology of forms of power, which would show sovereign power to be only one form of power and help to clarify, therefore, its quite narrow, historically specific preconditions, the usual theological typology errs further in its

¹⁴ Foucault, *Power / Knowledge*, 156.

recommendation of alternatives to bad power—in its promotion, that is, of other free centers of power that might hamper exclusive, unilateral, irresistible, and unconditional exercises of power typical of the sovereign form. Running contrary to what the usual theological typology suggests about alternatives to it, sovereign power actually operates by giving those subject to it plenty of leeway in their everyday lives; there are certain things that the laws of sovereign power prohibit, but the rest of the time—most of the time in fact—one is free to do as one likes. Rather than posing a challenge to it, then, insisting upon space for the exercise of multiple centers of free agency, beyond the jurisdiction of sovereign power, only plays into how sovereign power usually works. Sovereign power itself, moreover, typically recognizes limits to its own power in the consent of free subjects, subjects who decide of their own free will to obey (say, as part of some original social contract). That indeed is usually how it justifies itself, supports its own legitimacy. Simply upholding such a limitation by self-determining subjects, the fact that it is conditioned and not all determining, is hardly, then, any radical rebuff to the workings of sovereign power. In virtue of being, not mere brute force, but a form of power relation—and with a specific focus on the will peculiar to it—sovereign power presupposes subjects with the freedom to decide about themselves, with the ability to say yes or no, personally responsible for either obedience or disobedience to the sovereign and his laws, able to make themselves into law abiding citizens or punishable law breakers. Agents with their own free wills are just the sort of objects of operation that the technology of sovereign power requires of itself in order to function. While refusing to obey may be the way to resist a sovereign, it does nothing, then, to dismantle the general mechanisms of sovereign power.

Because sovereign power is not the primary mechanism for conducting the lives of others in contemporary times, making it the focus for resistance, as the usual theological

typology does, simply greases the wheels of the real mechanisms by helping to cover them up. The totalistic and unilateral tendencies that are part and parcel of sovereign power might be resisted, for example, by giving more people, the people as whole indeed, traditional rights of sovereignty, but this extension of sovereign power, so as to ensure its conditionality and mutuality, merely helps to disguise the more thorough-going ways that people are being subjected (for example) to disciplinary regimes. At the same time as the will of all assumes sovereignty under an egalitarian administration of law, disciplinary power guarantees asymmetrical relations of submission for their lives as a whole.¹⁵

Why has the theory of sovereignty persisted . . . [as] an organising principle of . . . major legal codes? [Because] the theory of sovereignty, and the organisation of a legal code centred upon it, have allowed a system of right to be superimposed upon the mechanisms of discipline in such a way as to conceal its actual procedures, the element of domination inherent in its techniques The juridical systems . . . have enabled sovereignty to be democratised through the constitution of a public right articulated upon collective sovereignty, while at the same time this democratisation of sovereignty was fundamentally determined by and grounded in mechanisms of disciplinary coercion.¹⁶ (*Power/Knowledge*, 105; British spelling in the original).

Moreover, the ways the usual theological typology counsels resistance to sovereign power's excesses plays directly into the hands of the real mechanisms. Unaware of the multiple forms power can take beyond sovereignty, theological proposals for escaping its dangers remain unaware of the way the very forms of power they advocate easily align themselves with more modern mechanisms. "Allow other centers of power to express themselves" and/or "remove all these repressive obstacles to the operations of others" are some of its demands in the face of sovereign power's dangers; but these are just the demands that disciplinary power, which props itself upon the active agency of those subjected to it, would itself encourage. Or power sharing is proposed against tendencies to

¹⁵ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 222-223.

¹⁶ Foucault, *Power / Knowledge*, 105; British spelling in the original.

monopolize power typical of sovereignty, without any recognition that disciplinary power is already a form of power sharing; power is already everywhere for it.¹⁷ Persuasion is the recommended form of power, but how different is this from the persuasion of disciplinary power, a power that, in contrast to sovereign power's simple prohibition of illegal acts, routinely incites, induces, seduces the desires and pleasures of the flesh into confessing themselves so as to make them the object of regulation? Attention is turned to all the sensations introduced through games of little pleasures, tiny consents, and the sort of permanent slight connivances in which will and pleasure are intertwined.¹⁸ Have you lingered in thought over these fleeting sensations and come to offer them the consent of your will, making them thereby into the object of your now lascivious desires? The power that takes charge of bodies in modern times "sets about contacting bodies, caressing them with its eyes, intensifying areas, electrifying surfaces, dramatizing troubled moments."¹⁹ Power here persuades in that it operates through a "mechanism of attraction," drawing out and encouraging the impulses of the flesh over which it keeps watch.²⁰

Finally, the usual truncated theological typology of power straitjackets theological imagination concerning divine power by leading one to assume that supreme power can take the form only of exaggerated sovereign power—crushing, all-powerful, and repressive in its monopoly of force. Because the typology envisions supreme power in the form of sovereign power, divine power can be good only when weakened, that is, partial rather than total, conditioned and resistible by those other centers of activity now acquiring it, rather than unconditional and overwhelming, and so on. A trade-off ensues between the God-who-

¹⁷ Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, 93.

¹⁸ Foucault, *Abnormal*, 210; see 186-194 on the pleasures of the flesh; 210-214 on possession.

¹⁹ Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, 44.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 45.

would-be-king's loss of power and the gains made by these other centers of activity and influence—the would-be-king checked by the power of the people, say.

If Foucault is to be believed, however, there are more effective techniques for maximizing power than those typical of sovereign power, whose rather crude tactics for doing this seem limited to amassing all the power for itself and threatening to bring it down on the head of any and all opposition. Sovereign power is hardly supreme, comparatively speaking:

If you are too violent you risk provoking revolts. Again, if you intervene in too discontinuous a manner, you risk allowing politically costly phenomena of resistance and disobedience to develop in the interstices. This was how monarchical power operated. For instance, the judiciary only arrested a derisory proportion of criminals; this was made into the argument that punishment must be spectacular so as to frighten the others A great expenditure of violence is made which ultimately only had the force of an example. It even becomes necessary to multiply violence, but precisely by doing so one multiplies revolts."²¹

Disciplinary power (like other modern methods for regulating the biopower of a population) is a far more effective technology for directing the conduct of people, using entirely different means. Here power is supreme in virtue of how continuous, thoroughgoing, and subtle its operations are, pervading the entirety of every one of those subjected to it, every hour of the day, and working with such little fanfare in and through their own activities that they hardly notice or know to whom to direct a complaint. In this power mechanism, supreme power is neither secured through an exaggerated asymmetry between those who have it and those who don't, nor threatened as more people become active agents of their own lives. To the contrary, the exercise of power by others is the very way the supremacy of this mechanism of power is ensured—since it works in and through the very power exercised by those subjected to it. Because, as we have suggested before, God's power

²¹ Foucault, *Power / Knowledge*, 155.

is a constitutive one, the supremacy of God's power would be proved in much the same manner—by pervading the entirety of those subjected to it over the course of their whole lives in ways that draw no attention to itself—this supremacy guaranteed ultimately by the fact that divine power works in and through the very agents with their own operations that it produces or gives rise to.

The crucial question for a theological typology of good and bad forms of power comes down, then, to have nothing much to do with sovereign power: what's pressing is to discriminate between good and bad forms of *constitutive* power. In what respects might divine constitutive power be good? How might one distinguish the power relations of a constitutive sort in which God is implicated from the bad forms of constitutive power with which we are all too familiar in ordinary life?

As is the case with any other form of power, the only good thing about ordinary constitutive power, according to Foucault, is the fact that its organization permits resistance. Any relation of power permits resistance, as we have seen, in the sense of being internally constituted by some struggle among contending forces, the various parties to it always retaining some capacity for action and reaction to the influences of others upon them. But organized forms of power relation still differ in the degree to which they allow for it. Sometimes, for example, power relations are organized in such an unbalanced way that parties to them have very little room to maneuver—killing oneself, for example, might be the only way to resist at such an extreme. And unbalanced forms are made even worse the closer they come to fixity and permanence, the various techniques, of independent origin, which they include losing the fragility of their historically contingent confluence so as to form some solid immobile block of seamless integration and articulation. Because that can happen,

states of domination do indeed exist. In a great many cases, power relations are fixed in such a way that they are perpetually asymmetrical and allow an extremely limited margin of freedom. To take what is undoubtedly a very simplified example, one cannot say that it was only men who wielded power in the conventional marriage structure of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: women had quite a few options: they could deceive their husbands, pilfer money from them, refuse them sex. Yet they were still in a state of domination insofar as these options were ultimately only stratagems that never succeeded in reversing the situation.²²

The constitutive power that Foucault talks about—disciplinary power—would be good, then, to the degree it was made up of diverse techniques for conducting others that remain rather loosely coordinated and ill-fitting—medicalized techniques for analyzing bodies oddly combined, for example, with practices for disciplining wayward flesh of an originally religious sort—a complex conjunction fissured in ways that might fracture or break apart when tugged, so to speak, by those retaining the freedom within its mechanisms to do so. And here one might say disciplinary power is particularly good by being particularly vulnerable: the freedom of self-initiating agency that disciplinary power plays up as the condition for its operation would also be its weakness. This might seem an illusory, impotent freedom where disciplinary power is particularly effective. Despite the self-determining activity of someone on a factory line, for instance—there by free choice, one's movements self-initiated—can the minute calibration of every gesture to the movement of a machine still be considered genuinely free? But whatever the effectiveness of disciplinary power, Foucault seems to assume—perhaps simply because it's a form of power relation—that its pretensions to complete power over others must be false. One can resist disciplinary power because it is not as thoroughgoing as it pretends to be; those subjected to it are not formed from top to bottom by it but retain some independence of operation. They retain it through failures of socialization, one might say, or perhaps as the inevitable spin-off of disciplinary

²² Foucault, *Ethics*, 292.

power's normal operations. Such independence might be assured, as Butler's Foucauldian treatment of the issue of resistance to constitutive power suggests, simply by the fact that when power works through the active agents who are its vehicles those agents re-iterate it, in the form of their own activity, and therefore always with some difference of a potentially subversive sort. Subjects enacted by power assume it, and in that very assumption or appropriation of power lies the possibility of resistance: "assuming power is not a straightforward task of taking power from one place, transferring it intact, and then and there making it one's own; the act of appropriation may involve an alteration of power such that the power assumed or appropriated works against the power that made that assumption possible."²³

The problem for divine constitutive power would be that, at least at first glance, it doesn't seem good by either measure. The oddly single font or organizational center for constitutive power that God represents would seem to ensure, first of all, the tight coordination of all its mechanisms into some immobile solid block. Distinct techniques of historically diverse origin, which one would otherwise expect for that reason to be no more than loosely arranged or superimposed upon one another when they come together later to form some organized form of power mechanism, now all go back ultimately to the very same coordinating source—God. Second of all, it is just the prerogative of God's power, according to classical theism, to be in fact and not simply in intention completely constitutive: everything in the world that's good, in every respect in which it is good—including every detail of one's own self-initiated activity—is brought into being and maintained over its whole course through divine power. Those subject to it are never in any

²³ Butler, *Psychic Life of Power*, 13.

respect free of God, then, whatever they go on to do as the active, self-determining agents of divine constitutive power.

The first problem is, I think, only an apparent one, however. If our world seems to include power relations, in some way productive of the good, that are changeable because made up of loosely fitting connections among their techniques, the same God's being behind them all does nothing to alter that fact; simply claiming that God is behind them all doesn't make their integration any tighter than it appears to be. God's constitutive power is unalterable but that does not mean any of its mechanisms need be: "The will of God is entirely unchangeable. On this point we must consider that to change the will is one thing; to will that certain things should be changed is another. For it is possible to will a thing be done now and its contrary afterwards, and yet for the will to remain permanently the same."²⁴ The paradoxical supremacy of God's constitutive power, indeed, is just its ability to make do with very loose mechanisms, ensuring the variability of organized forms of relationship over time. Contingent power relations abound, for example, in Aquinas' understanding of how the world works—these are prototypically loose relations in that no unbreakable necessity joins the interrelated parties—but Aquinas thinks God, nonetheless, works as a completely constitutive power through them. "Since . . . the divine will is perfectly efficacious, it follows not only that things are done that God wills to be done, but also that they are done in the way that He wills. Now God wills some things to be done . . . contingently. . . . Therefore to some effects He has attached . . . defectible and contingent causes from which effects arise contingently."²⁵

God's constitutive power, in short, is not loose—whatever God wants happens—even though any and all of the created mechanisms God works through might be. The

²⁴ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Q19, a 7.

²⁵ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Q19, a 8.

genius of divine constitutive power, one might say, is just to allow for a distinction of this sort by reserving God's constitutive power for the relation that gives rise to all the created mechanisms of its exercise. Indeed, this is the point of the weird talk, in the case of divine constitutive power, of God as a single source for all the mechanisms distinct from it and through which that constitutive power is exercised: the character of those mechanisms need not bear any resemblance to the constitutive relation by which God gives rise to them.

The second problem seems, again at first glance, more serious: the loose mechanisms that are required by Foucault for a power relation to be good may genuinely be loose according to an account of divine constitutive power, but freedom from God, which Foucault, it seems, would also require, has to go, on the classical theist picture. As a matter of fact, however, a solution to the second problem follows directly from what we have already said about the first; the two problems are resolved, therefore, in exactly the same way.

It follows from what we have already said that human beings might freely alter any mechanisms made up of contingent relations without being free for that reason of God's constitutive power; God constitutes them in that case as the agents altering such mechanisms—say, replacing the dominant influence of sovereign power in human history with that of disciplinary power and then—one hopes—making it in turn some just as anachronistic surface phenomenon as the course of human history proceeds. In the same way that God's complete or total constitutive power extends not just to the existence of created causes or influences on others that happen to work contingently, but also to that very manner of their operation, so God gives rise to the acts of human agents in their very freedom (Indeed, the relation between the will and its free choices, and the relation between those free choices and the acts that enact them, are simply cases for Aquinas of contingent

cause/effect relations.). “And just as by moving natural causes He does not prevent their actions from being natural, so by moving voluntary causes He does not deprive their actions from being voluntary; but rather is the cause of this very thing in them, for he operates in each thing according to its own nature.”²⁶ Indeed, “a man does choose in all cases the object in accord with God’s operation within his will;”²⁷ but in such cases “God cause[s] a movement of the will in us without prejudice to freedom of will”²⁸ since God is acting there just to constitute us in the very freedom with which we act. We can have, in other words, a freedom of operation within any of the mechanisms through which God’s constitutive power is exercised, without for that reason being free in any respect from God. This holds for just the same reason, as we saw earlier, that contingently arranged mechanisms may be the way God’s constitutive power is exercised.

The theological account of divine constitutive power can agree, then, with Foucault about what makes *human* power relations good—they are good to the extent they are resistible, by allowing for the free operation of those subject to them to take them apart. One wouldn’t want human power relations to be, for example, absolutely constitutive of those subject to them, in the way that holds for God in the power relation between God and the world, if that were to mean they become irresistible. Completely constitutive power—the power to create, in short—is always reserved in Christian theology for God, and there is a good reason for this: no one besides God is to be trusted with it.

As Foucault well knows—and this is where his account of good and bad power strays from a simple attention to mechanisms back to the question of effects—disciplinary power is not good—not simply because it might be hard to resist—but because it really isn’t

²⁶ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Q83, art 1, ad 3.

²⁷ Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Book 3, Chapter 92, section 4.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, Book 3, Chapter 89, section 1.

good for those subjected to it. The goods of life that mechanisms of disciplinary power work to promote form quite a narrow band—good workers, for example, are its object, not good lovers. And outside that narrow band concern to promote the good stops: one might as well be dead. Indeed, the promise of disciplinary power that lodges in its Christian pre-history—to care for one and all—is evacuated as disciplinary power comes increasingly under the thumb of the new form of power typical of our neo-liberal age—what Foucault calls the statistical “regulation of population.” What matters for this power mechanism is simply the character of the population as an aggregate; the economy as a whole, for example, might be in good working order, tweaked along by the appropriate state regulation of fiscal and monetary policies, even when—maybe even because—a certain percentage of the population is out of work, in debt, and without health care.

Divine power is the only power good in its very irresistibility, we might therefore say in conclusion. The point of resistance disappears before a power that genuinely works to bring about only the good of each and every creature in the most thoroughgoing and inclusively fulsome fashion possible. Good, though irresistible, because of that very thoroughness of its operation and fulsome character of the good promoted. Thorough, for example, by working, not just as a paternalistic power might, for your own good but for your free recognition of what’s good for you; a fulsome good worked in such a case by including not just what’s good for you but the good of one’s own free self-recognition of that fact. In radical contrast to other forms of power—disciplinary, regulatory--that actively exclude from their benefits all those failing to conform to their norms—and for that very reason are to be resisted—divine power is the only power good in its refusal to take no for an answer, following us with steadfast devotion to bring us back within the fold however we might stray. That’s the power of love.