

# Power and conflict in human relations. Tentative reflections from a Christian perspective

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## Abstract.

In this paper I attempt to sketch the contours of a framework for understanding power and conflict from a Christian perspective. In the first part I look at them in the light of creation, fall and redemption. I emphasize that power has a negative connotation only because of the fall. As such it is a necessary element in human relationships and functions for human wellbeing. In the second part I argue that in spite of its Christian starting point my approach can be accounted for in a general philosophical discussion. I also try to show how it is open for the integration of the results of the empirical sciences and can be used to assess their wider interpretation. Finally I discuss some of its implications for the practical understanding of actual conflicts and how it implies some principles for dealing with them. Some main points are summarized in the conclusion.

## 1. Introduction

There is a general tendency to understand the operation of power in human relations as something negative.<sup>1</sup> Power impinges upon the freedom of the person in relation to whom it is exercised. This holds, I think, also for the understanding of power in the social sciences, even if 'power' is taken as a supposedly neutral concept. 'Power' is understood as 'a generalized potentiality for getting one's own way or for bringing about changes (at least some of which are intended) in other people's actions or conditions'.<sup>2</sup> One's own way is clearly opposed to the way of the other. So when conflict is understood as one party being opposed to another, whether or not this is expressed in words or by other potentially violent means, the exercise of power implies conflict almost necessarily.

There is no doubt that the actual practice of power gives much reason for this negative appreciation. The use of power often, if not always, implies some element of violence. It might be physical or emotional abuse, or just a lack of respect for the other person. It might be hidden and subdued or extreme in terms of brute force and cruelty. The truth is that power is most of the time used for the sake of the one that has it, not for the other person. The question can be asked, though, whether this is necessary, something that is essential to power. I have the impression that the negative connotation of power often presupposes the idea of the autonomous human person, primarily seen as an isolated individual. Any

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was written for the working conference as part of which proceedings it is now published. It has in mind PhD. students, and other researchers of Christian conviction, who are confronted with notions of power and conflict as they are commonly understood in the social sciences and it attempts to help them develop an understanding that is more consistent with Christianity.

<sup>2</sup> *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Paul Edwards, vol. 6, p. 426. This definition is not very different from the well known one by Max Weber.

limitation of freedom coming from outside is then seen as a violation. This idea in turn is clearly connected with the modern conviction that belief in a transcendent order giving meaning and normative direction to human existence needs to be rejected. Even when the idea of the autonomous subject is explicitly questioned, as by Foucault and Bourdieu, the negative appreciation of power seems to be maintained because some ideal of absolute freedom and its corollary in the rejection of a transcendent order is still at work in the background (cf. Van der Stoep 2005).

In this paper my focus is not on this modern view.<sup>3</sup> Instead I will try to develop another perspective that takes seriously biblical Christianity and its implications for understanding our world. My approach will depend strongly on ideas developed in the movement of reformational philosophy, especially the structural analysis of created reality by Herman Dooyeweerd (1953-1958)<sup>4</sup> and the worldview approach of people like Albert Wolters (1985) and Sander Griffioen (2003; also Mouw and Griffioen 1993). First I will look at power and conflict from the perspective of creation, fall and redemption, trying to distinguish between structural and directional elements. In a second part I will ask three questions: 1. Can this alternative approach be argued for in general terms? 2. How does it relate to scientific explanations? 3. Can it be used for dealing with actual conflict and abuse of power?

I realize that all I can do is make some sketchy remarks. For one, the issue is far too broad to cover in one paper. More important, my knowledge and ability are limited. Yet, I hope, some contours of a framework for understanding power and conflict from a Christian perspective will emerge.

## 2. Structure and direction

The attempt to distinguish between what in our actual world is part of God's intended creation and what is the result of evil and sin, is a risky venture. What about predators and prey animals? On the basis of contemporary science it is hardly believable anymore that they exist as a result of human sin. But does that mean that all what happens between predator and prey is as God had in mind originally? Next to psalm 104 that suggests God providing prey for lions we read in Isaiah 11 of predator and prey lying down together.<sup>5</sup> And what about our human condition? Is the state instituted just because of the fall (Dooyeweerd following Kuyper) or is it also part of a structural development of human culture to take care of organisational complexities (Chaplin 1995)? We cannot always be sure. Yet, the distinction is crucial for our life in God's creation. If no distinction could be made, no real appreciation would be possible because we could not be sure whether what we enjoy is God's good creation, still present or provisionally redeemed, or is evil itself and so should be rejected in stead of being enjoyed. We could not even discern where redemption is at stake. So we have to try to make the distinction all the time, listening to the teaching of the Bible as our guide and trying to be sensitive as much as possible to the world around us as it presents itself in this light.

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<sup>3</sup> Of course 'the modern view' is much more complex than I suggest in my opening remarks. Actually it is rather ambivalent. It cannot be denied that there is also a positive side to power, as I will argue in my paper. Yet there remains a tension because it is hard to fully recognize this positive side as long as the modern understanding of human autonomy is maintained. In my own approach I separate 'getting one's own way' in the definition I start with from 'bringing about changes in other people's actions or conditions'. I take 'power' only in this latter sense. See for a more abstract characterisation of power footnote 10.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. for an introduction Kalsbeek 1975 and Clouser 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Actually, there are pictures of a lioness in the wild taking care of a young impala gazelle.

In this part I will try to understand more about power and conflict by looking at them first from the perspective of creation, then of the fall, then of redemption. Genesis 1 speaks of the relation of humans both to the natural world and to each other and in either relation power is at stake. I will concentrate on the second kind of relationship, but sometimes make some remarks concerning the first.

## 2.1 Creation

In the biblical perspective power clearly has a place in humankind's relation to nature.<sup>6</sup> Genesis 1 tells how God speaks to male and female at the creation: 'Fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground'.<sup>7</sup> Humans are meant to have a position of authority over the natural world and such a position requires the power to make this authority effective. Yet, this position of power is not unqualified. It clearly has its place in the framework of a world that repeatedly is called 'good', or even 'very good'. Power and authority for humans are not absolute, they are part of stewardship, meant to take care of the natural world as it is intended by the Creator.

Although power and authority are thus limited, actually this is not a restriction as if humans should feel frustrated this way. God's commandments are for the intrinsic wellbeing of those they are given to. Good care for the natural world is not only good for plants and animals, it is good for humans themselves. Taking care of plants and animals, each after its own kind, they themselves will fare well, blossom and mature. They enjoy it. In God's good creation humans, plants and animals are not competitors in a rat race in which only the fittest survive. They live in harmony and flourish together. So power and authority of humankind is meant to be for the good of all creation.

What about the relations between humans amongst each other? God says: 'Be fruitful and increase in number.' Power and authority are not mentioned. This means at the least that they should not function between humans as between humans and animals. All humans are made in the image of God. They are basically equal. But could this mean that power and authority have no place in human relationships as intended by the original creation? I don't think so. If power is taken as having influence on the behaviour of others, human relations cannot be understood without it. The very fact of living together will have an effect. Humans are meant to live in relationships. That is how they are created. And thus they must have the potentiality to bring about change in the behaviour of others. Otherwise they could not relate. Parents educate their children and teach them how to behave. From professional instructors they learn more specified abilities. Tasks are assigned to employees in a business organisation. Political decisions are made by authorities entitled to do so and they are followed up by those concerned. Any organised society needs to assign special tasks and responsibilities to individual people and they need to be respected. I imagine that if the earth had been filled and subdued without the impact of the fall, their would have been social institutions with different positions and responsibilities attributed to different people according to their abilities.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> To avoid misunderstanding I like to repeat that I am looking for what is creational in our actual world. I am not trying to describe creation as it might have been before the fall in any temporal sense.

<sup>7</sup> All Bible quotations are from the New International Version.

<sup>8</sup> For this reason I take authority in both institutional and informal settings as a special responsibility and entitlement to act. Although to be effective authority is necessarily connected with power in the sense of the potential to influence others, its foundation does not lie in power but in the structure of an organisation or in acquired competence.

So in God's good creation power and authority have their place. People bring about change in the behaviour of others and are entitled to do so. Yet it is not 'in their own way' as opposed to 'the way of others' as in the definition we started with. Basically it is in the way of God's intention. Therefore it is good for both sides and is acknowledged as such. The normative framework of God's good creation holds also for power and authority between humans. Power and authority are meant for the good of all, not primarily for those who execute it.

Humans live in relationships of different kinds: ethnic, economic, legal, educational, ethical, and these are given shape in social communities like cultural groups, labour associations, business companies, schools, families and states. They all have their specific nature as intended by God. People live in them although they do not submerge in them. As people they transcend them. Yet they need them to flourish because they are deeply relational and function in all kinds of aspects that express the richness of God's creation. Power and authority are meant to support that flourishing. They are meant to serve not to be served (cf. Matthew 20: 28). In this way those who are in power and have authority will flourish themselves as much as those for the sake of whom they have their position. In God's good creation the exercise of power and authority is an expression of the commandment of love. It shows a deep recognition of the will of the Creator and it serves the wellbeing of others. By loving others people with power and authority come to their destination and flourish themselves.

What about conflict, would it have arisen also without the fall? Again, I look at the natural world first. Is there conflict in the animal world? And if so, is this all the result of evil? And is this evil all the result of human sin? These are difficult questions. I can make only some remarks. I do not think that the relation between predators and prey as such is evil. Yet it might be called a conflict. At the same time, there is so much cruelty in the animal world and what seems to be distortion that we can hardly connect it to the character of God as we know Him from biblical revelation. Yet it seems to be part of the natural world as we now understand its evolutionary development on the basis of scientific evidence.<sup>9</sup> So there might be evil before the fall of humankind. This does not mean that human sin has not effected the natural world also. It is clear both from biblical witness and experience that this is the case. But there might have been evil under the influence of the evil one before he succeeded in the temptation of humankind. It might even be that the task to subdue the earth and to rule the animals is related to this as is the calling of Adam to take care of the garden of Eden (Genesis 2).

Anyway, our main question concerns the possibility of conflict amongst people apart from their fallen condition. What kind of conflict can we fancy that is not the result of sin? I have no doubt that people would have been different. Different characters, different abilities, different upbringings, different positions. Diversity as such is not a result of the fall. It is an expression of the richness of God's creation. This applies also to individual diversity. How much difference there would have been in terms of knowledge, wealth (property and money), positions of authority and the power connected with them is hard to say.<sup>10</sup> It never would have been used for selfish purposes, though, but always for service

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<sup>9</sup> I take evolution here as pattern and process not as the Darwinian mechanism of chance mutation and natural selection. Cf. for this distinction Uko Zylstra (2005), who refers to Keith Stewart Thompson, 'The meanings of evolution', *American Scientist* 70 (1982), p. 529-531.

<sup>10</sup> Throughout, I mention these most apparent examples of power. In a more abstract analysis illustrations of the positive (and negative) potential of power could be mentioned in relation to all the modal aspects distinguished in reformational philosophy, e.g. number and size in the numerical and spatial, vitality and emotional appeal in the biotic and psychical, lingual ability and moral fame in the lingual and ethical

and sharing. If everybody is acting out of love, looking for the good of all, there could not be a conflict of interests. Yet at moments there might have been differences of opinion how knowledge, wealth or authority should be used for the good. Humans are finite by nature, not all powerful, not omniscient. How this would have effected decision making in complex situations, especially if related to taking care of evil in the animal world, is hard to say. But I do not exclude that some form of conflict is not the result of the fall. Yet, conflict would not have led to strife and violence. It would have been respectful and not selfish and at the end it would have been solved in an appropriate manner. Like healthy competition it would not have been harmful but for the good of everybody and everything.

## *2.2 Fall*

Before I focus on power and conflict from the perspective of the fall, I first want to make some remarks about different aspects of evil and sin. How do they affect human behaviour? I start again with the book of Genesis and add some basic distinctions.

The core of the story of the fall as told in Genesis 3 is that humankind wants to be like God. Female and male are not satisfied with being told what is good, they choose to decide for themselves. They are tempted to do so by misleading suggestions, yet they are responsible for their choice. Sin is religious in its root, although it shows in all kinds of behaviour. It is revolt against God. And thus people miss their destination as expressed in the great commandment of love. As a result they get estranged from God and from each other. This affects human life in many ways.

I start with the individual. Instead of loving and serving others as the way to fulfilment the self becomes the centre of life. We have become deeply selfish, although it shows more in some than in others. That does not mean that we do not care about others anymore. On one side, the reality of the creation still urges itself upon us. We still can feel love, act upon it and feel fulfilled. But the danger of acting out of our own interest, easily understood as being opposed to that of others, lurks all the time and spoils what is good. On the other side, we cannot do without the others. We have to live with them anyway. So good relations are good for ourselves. Hobbes, who paints a very negative picture of humankind as basically self-centred makes use of this given as a foundation for strict laws of the state. It is useful for us to give up our absolute autonomy, because otherwise at the end we might lose in the battle of all against all. Yet it is clear that evil still does affect deeply the behaviour of people against each other, sometimes to satisfy understandable needs, sometimes, it seems, just for the enjoyment of power in acts of humiliation and cruelty.

What is true on the personal level holds also for societal communities. It is especially within organised communities like the state and a business that people might feel that their interests are different. But communities are themselves also affected by putting one's own interest first. One state feels threatened by another. One business loses out on the other in a market competition. And even communities of a different kind like the church and the state or a business and a family might fight with each other for having priority in stead of living together in good harmony (cf. Griffioen 2003, 87-109).

A different aspect of evil relates to the idea of religious ground motives (Dooyeweerd 2003) or of direction in the threefold distinction between associational, contextual and

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aspect. In a technical modal analysis power can be placed as original in the physical aspect and as either an anticipatory or a retrociprocity element in the other. In reality a modal analysis of the different expressions of concrete power may be very complex. But always it can be used for good and for evil purposes.

directional pluralism (Mouw and Griffioen 1993). Direction concerns the plurality of worldviews, basic philosophical conceptions or religions. If the world is not seen as God's creation an alternative view is needed. Our selves might be in the centre, but we cannot do without some kind of other gods that we trust and serve. There is more to the universe than just us. So we develop ideas and they affect the way we live and give form to the world. Here it might be more the estrangement from God than the intention of revolt against Him that is at stake. Intentions might even be good in the sense that the wellbeing of people and the world is looked for. Yet, because in one way or another some part of the creation is made absolute, or at least the rich diversity of creation is not recognised because the Creator Himself is kept out of sight, tensions easily arise and creatures do not come to their full destination. Different worldviews or different ground motives exclude one another, yet they might also share insights and intentions. Here too the creation urges itself upon people even in their estrangement from God.<sup>11</sup>

A third dimension relates to the effects of individual and communal behaviour and of the alternative worldview or religious incentive. The way people act shapes the world. Human decisions have remaining effects. Worldviews and religious ground motives, although dependent on all kinds of circumstances, direct people in their giving form to the world. History makes that evil settle down in societal structures and thereby conditions human conduct. Earlier we noticed that evil might affect the structures of nature even apart from humankind. The same is true for the choices we make. They affect the structures of the future. Society itself becomes estranged from God. After the fall we never make a fresh start in a full sense. Evil has nested itself in all corners. That characterizes our condition. Yet it remains parasitic on the creation. The latter always shines through however deep the darkness might be. Fortunately, there are grades of darkness. Not everywhere evil is at its peak. Maybe it is nowhere yet, although sometimes it looks close. This leads me to the last point I want to mention.

Until now I have limited myself to the human dimensions of evil and sin, although, by suggesting there is evil in nature apart from humankind, I already touched upon what transcends human responsibility. Here I want to mention explicitly the powers of evil as they are mentioned for instance by the apostle Paul in Ephesians 6: 12. Although the biblical emphasis in relation to evil is on human responsibility, there is no doubt that the evil forces in the bible go beyond human powers. It is good to realize that lest we underestimate the power of evil. Sometimes it is hard to deny that humans are driven by demonic powers, not just in individual behaviour controlled by demonic possession, that too, but especially in cruelties afflicted to others like by the 'Army of the Lord' in northern Uganda and its manipulation of children by having them kill their family and friends in order not to be killed themselves. Evil goes very deep and we should be thankful that this does not happen all the time and everywhere.

It does not need much argument that evil and sin have deeply affected human exertion of power. The very understanding of power as something negative is a clear illustration. Sin in the religious sense as a revolt against God works itself out in human relations especially through the use of power. Human power is no more primarily functioning in the context of serving the other out of love. Its motivation very much has become the promotion of self, which often happens to be at the expense of others because the interest of self is understood

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<sup>11</sup> Of course, ideologies and worldviews concern not only the creational dimension. They also express a view of evil and redemption.

as being opposed to that of those others. The very understanding of what is good has deeply altered. Playing God affects the understanding of what is good. Power is not for serving but for being served. This might happen within the organisational setting of a business firm or a soccer club, in politics or even in families. It might also occur between societal communities and individuals or between those communities themselves. Individuals can abuse power in relation to other individuals. A state or a business firm might do the same in relation to other states or firms or individuals. Even churches have been and are oppressive in relation to individuals or other churches. Sometimes the abuse of power is motivated by worldview or religion. Sometimes they are just being used as a justification to cover up the real motive. Yet they might also be the actual motivation for the use of power and violence to achieve ideological and political goals.

The means by which power is exerted may be knowledge, property or money, a position of authority or physical strength and violence. The risk that it all serves the interest of the self and its group and not the well being of others is present everywhere. At the same time this should not lead us to ignore the original intention of power. Even in our sinful reality power is not only a negative force. It still functions also as an essential element of created reality. This applies to all human relationships and their institutional form as they actually function. We cannot do without the other. They affect us and we affect them. In itself this should not be seen as something negative. As such it is not an impingement on our freedom. It is part of God's good creation. Actual reality may be very much removed from what creation stands for, we should not forget about how it still affects us.

The situation is more complex because, as indicated, we cannot make a fresh start anymore. Our condition has come about as a result of historical development and decisions of the past. Evil has settled in societal structures. That applies also to the distribution of power and its specific forms in terms of knowledge, property and money, and positions of authority. In an assessment of the given conditions of ourselves and others we should take this into account, both on the personal, the national and the international level. The conditions within which we live with all the differences of wealth, knowledge, positions of authority, and the power that issues from them, are not as they are originally intended by God in his good creation. Even when we ourselves use our wealth, knowledge and position for the good of others, as a matter of fact they remain stained by the conditions in which they are obtained.

Diversity as it actually manifests itself is as much a result of evil and sin as it is an expression of the richness of God's creation. At the same time, looking at power from a historical perspective, we should not forget about the creational given. However much its use might be a distortion of God's original intention, we should not deem it as negative as such. Historical development as such implies putting power into effect to open up the potentials of the creation as meant by God. This will affect other people and cannot leave them untouched. Here too, it is the normative framework that should guide our assessment, not a negative appreciation of power as such, however hard it might be to distinguish between the creational good and the actual distortion.

From the perspective of the fall power and conflict are never far apart. If power is used for selfish reasons it naturally leads to conflict. The interest of one taken by itself easily clashes with that of others. Thus conflict might arise even from the bare fact of being different. Diversity leads to jealousy. Power in terms of knowledge, wealth or positions of authority, if pursued for being served instead of for serving, will provoke a striving for counter power by the same or different means. Being in a position of power itself will raise suspicion, because it will hardly be believed that such a position is used for the good of

others instead of for selfish purposes. How is that position achieved anyway? Again, this applies both to the individual and the communal level. Abuse of power, suspicion and strife, potentially they are everywhere.

When the human self is taken as the starting point, conflicts cannot be avoided. When they arise power will be used to control them. But that clearly cannot be the real solution. It might even worsen the situation. This is very much the condition we are in. Power corrupts and it leads to conflict. Self stands against self. Yet, that is not the whole story. Some conflicts arise because good stands up against evil, either from an original sense of justice or motivated by the promise of redemption. So provoking a conflict might also be for the good, for the good of others instead of being the result of selfishness. Here we are on the verge of the next section about redemption.

### *2.3 Redemption*

Sin is religious in its root. That is also where redemption starts. It concerns in the first place the relationship with God: atonement, forgiveness and reconciliation, and liberation and conversion from being self-centred to the love of God and the neighbour. The means by which these are achieved are not cheap. God acts in Jesus Christ and through the Spirit. And it takes time, more time than in the Old Testament was envisaged. It also happens in a way different from what was expected. But the scope is the same. The kingdom of God encompasses the redemption of all of life, more precisely the whole creation. Humankind will rule with God as originally intended (Rev. 21). There will be peace and prosperity and evil will have no place. The new is even more than restoration of the old. The garden has developed into a city. God is present in a new way. So the new creation is also more beyond our imagination than the original before it got corrupted by sin.

The expectation of the New Testament goes beyond what Israel expected. But the way the kingdom of God appears is also different. Liberation and judgement do not arrive together as Israel envisaged after listening to many of the Old Testament prophecies. First comes Jesus Christ with his teaching and healing, and his suffering, death and resurrection. First there is a time of conversion and new life in the midst of the old. First there is a new way of serving instead of being served, because now it might imply suffering, even death as in the case of Christ. Love is deepened to love for the enemy to redeem him. But he might not want it. The old life will keep its hold and the liberating truth for many is too hard to accept. As the new creation goes beyond the original, looking for the good of the other changes too by becoming potentially costly and eventually leading to death. It now means forgetting about oneself and accepting the evil consequences. Yet this new service out of love is the means by which the kingdom of God is manifested and it reveals his intention. His love goes so far that even death is not avoided as a consequence.

To the surprise of even the believers the end of times is divided between the already and the not yet. History continues, but in the midst of it the kingdom is present until it finally appears from heaven in its full glory with the coming again of the Son of man. The kingdom of God is present already, by its proclamation and acceptance and in signs of new life. In the present condition this new life is pretty much a restoring of the original in a provisional way. Sick are being healed but they still die. Relationships are restored but difficulties might remain. The healing might not only touch the individual, it might also affect communities and structures. Yet the conditions of brokenness are not taken away. Redemption shows in signs that point forward to the fullness that is still going to come. In this way redemption affirms the original creation and strengthens its urge on people to be respected. At the same time it might also provoke the powers of evil to rage more than ever.

Because they cannot stand the kingdom where it appears. Their judgement has to wait till the end of times is completed when the kingdom of God comes in full glory and makes an end to the power of all evil forces.

Redemption affects all of life, also the meaning of power. Power is restored to its original purpose of serving instead of being served. It is manifest in the healings Jesus performs. (The Greek word for 'power' (dunamis) is often translated in the NIV with 'miracles' referring to acts of Jesus to restore people's health). Christ himself is called the power of God by the apostle Paul referring to the cross of Christ by which we are redeemed. Instead of being self-serving, power is connected with love and giving oneself even to death. It is remarkable that when Christ is presented to John in his visions about the future He is called 'the lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David' (Rev. 5: 5). But when John looks at Him he sees 'a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain' and afterwards the name of lion as a symbol of power is never mentioned again. The book of Revelation always speaks of the Lamb. He has triumphed. He sits on the throne. He deserves all power and glory.

The power of God is revealed in his love as shown in the suffering and death of Jesus Christ. This characterizes also the way Christ as king conquers the world. Even so He remains the one who has come to serve instead of being served. That is why his disciples are sent out to convert people by the word of the gospel and change them into obedient disciples. They should become part of his kingdom by conviction, not by force. Jesus Christ wants to reign in our hearts. It is a well known phrase, sometimes emptied of its meaning. But it is revolutionary in a deep sense. Communists too wanted to build their society by creating a new 'man'. They could not but end up in a totalitarian state leaving no room for real freedom. They can act only as a bad imitation of Christ. He wants to reign by making people a new creation. But He is not mistaken about what He is able to accomplish. He deserves to be believed, because He acts out of God. He can be trusted and be surrendered to. He brings people back to God and so liberates them to their true destination.

Power in its redemptive form goes beyond its creational nature. The means of knowledge, wealth and position of authority, even physical strength or armed forces, might be used to restrain the powers of evil. But they as such cannot bring the kingdom of God. The power of the latter is shown in what usually is considered as weakness, as its wisdom is misunderstood as foolishness (1 Cor. 1).

So it might seem that redemptive power has no place for conflict because it is not self-serving anymore. This is true. Diversity becomes an expression of richness again as Paul indicates in relation to the church as the body of Christ with its plurality of gifts (1 Cor. 12). Differences that are either understood in terms of superior and inferior like male and female or Greek and Jew or are an actual expression of inequality like those between slaves and free are reinterpreted, because in Jesus Christ they have lost their divisive meaning (Gal. 3: 28). Paul does not act against slavery. He accepts very much the conditions of this world as shaped by evil and sin (cf. 1 Cor. 7: 20-24). Yet they appear in a new light. Slaves may understand their serving as service to their real Master. Masters should realize that they as much as their slaves should obey the Master who is in heaven, for whom their different social position does not count (Eph. 6: 5-9). In Jesus Christ diversity does not hinder unity anymore, to the contrary, it will become a means of serving one another again, expressing the goodness of God's creation and His redemptive love.

Redemption overcomes potential conflict in many ways. Love triumphs over selfishness. Yet we know how limited room is awarded to the redemptive power of the

kingdom of God. The actual world remains full of conflict. Even the church where the powers of the kingdom should be visible in all their strength often is divided by conflict and strife. But the word and reality of the kingdom of God lead to a new form of conflict too. The one who wants to be known by love between his disciples (John 13: 34-35) has also spoken: 'Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.' (Matth. 10: 34). New divisions will come about because of the decision for or against Jesus Christ. New conflicts arise. People will become enemies. Yet the followers of Christ should never forget that other word of Him 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may become sons of your Father in heaven' (Matth. 5: 44f.). The Christian party in the conflict should not harm the enemy but act for the good of him. The spiral of evil should be broken. That is how redemption works. Yet evil will continue. The tension of the kingdom between the already and the not yet will show time and again. It will end only when the new Jerusalem as the city of God and the Lamb appears. Only then all abuse of power and evil conflict will be removed and have no place anymore, because heaven and earth are full of the glory of God and the Lamb. Then humankind will rule in peace for ever and ever as intended from the beginning (Rev. 22:5).

### **3. Theory and practice**

In the first part I have assumed the truth of biblical teaching. Now I will ask the question whether it is possible to communicate on the basis of this approach to those who do not accept this starting point. As a matter of fact modern social and political theory originated because it was not believed anymore that Christianity and the teaching of the church could function as a solid foundation. Hobbes and Locke did not reject Christianity as such. But in their situation with all the dissent and fights between churches and believers they felt a neutral starting point was needed to argue for sound political structures. Are we not isolating ourselves, and stepping outside of the general discussion and make our views ineffective just because we return to biblical assumptions to gain the right perspective? In the second part I shall try to deal with these questions. It is clear that this will be even more sketchy than the first part.

#### *3.1 Philosophical argument*

Is it possible to account for the views developed in the first part without assuming beforehand that biblical Christianity is true? I think especially of 3 points: 1. the distinction between a positive and a negative use of power; 2. the complex relationship between diversity and conflict; 3. the general worldview. To some extent I believe the answer is positive. In my argument I will make use of the so-called transcendental-empirical method of Dooyeweerdian philosophy. 'Empirical' means that the starting point lies in human experience (in a broad sense, not limited to scientific observation). There is no rational or logical foundation with an a priori character. So there is no claim of absolute certainty in the sense of metaphysics. Yet the argument claims validity because it is believed that human experience connects with reality as given, a conviction without which our everyday existence would be impossible. The second term 'transcendental' has a twofold connotation. It refers to the Kantian method of looking for universal conditions for the possibility of experienced phenomena. It also has an Augustinian flavour because it points to an ultimately religious conviction. Human existence cannot be understood apart from the relationship to the transcendent God or a substitute. That applies to his very being and therefore also to his knowledge and conduct. Both elements will return when we look at the three points mentioned.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> In what follows I abstain from explicitly referring to the available literature to confirm my argument,

## *Positive and negative power*

If the general connotation of power is negative because its exertion by one impinges on the freedom of the other and therefore always implies potential conflict, how can we argue this is not necessarily the case? In the discussion of worldview I will deal with the understanding of freedom and the rejection of a transcendent normative order. At this point I will give only some structural remarks.

In my earlier discussion I mentioned already the relational nature of all that exists. Here I will elaborate that argument a bit. If we look at the natural world in terms of the modal aspects of Dooyeweerd's philosophy, interaction occurs from the physical mode.<sup>13</sup> Energy is part of the core of the physical. On the level of nuclear particles the position and velocity of one affect those of the other. The same is true for the sun and its planets in our solar system. Interaction is everywhere. It applies to the world of plants and animals as well. So if we take power as influence on behaviour it belongs to the very nature of the world. It is constitutive for its very existence.

The original definition implied an other element that takes it outside of the natural world, though. At least some of the effects should be intended. Leaving the psychic aspect with its own kind of intentionality aside, I will look especially to the historical aspect of the Dooyeweerdian scheme which is typical for humans. The nature of this aspect is much discussed. Dooyeweerd himself describes it as 'formation according to a free project' (NC II 195) and applies it especially to culture and history. But is also related to technology (Schuurman 1972) and education (De Graaff 1966). I take it in the original sense of Dooyeweerd but with a wide application, including education and technology. Free formation is at stake where human intention and responsibility function in making decisions that affect others. This can be in relation to people and things. It concerns personal relationships outside and within communities. It applies also to choices and decisions that are called 'historical' in the usual sense. Always there is power involved. Acts of one person or community affect the life of others. Can we argue here that a distinction between the positive and the negative meaning is necessary? I do believe so.

Humans too exist in relationships. They interact in all kinds of ways. Education is only one example. Trade is another, but also teamwork in science, making music as an orchestra, cooperation between a painter and a gallery, and so on. All the time some power is involved as the possible misuse of it makes clear. But as such it is constitutive for the relationship. One person influences the other because they need one another to live, act and flourish. This applies also to different positions of power and authority within an organisation. As soon as a human relationship is organised by means of a communal structure like the legal one in the state, the labour one in a business or union, sport activities in a club, in general common interests in an association, some specific responsibilities with the authority involved have to be assigned to specific people. They need some power to exercise this authority. Power in this sense is a structural given of human life. It can be used for what it is supposed to do. It can be misused as well. In actual life we cannot do without that distinction.

Power in the sense of bringing about changes in the behaviour of others with at least some of them being intended has a constitutive role in human life. This applies to historical

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although many points that I make could be supported that way as also suggested by the empirical element of the method I employ. See also footnote 3.

<sup>13</sup> For the relation between power and the physical aspect see footnote 10.

choices and decisions in a special sense because they have long ranging effects. They too can be for the good and for the bad. It might be hard to find any historical decision that has been completely for the good both as intended and in its real effect. Yet here too we cannot do without the distinction. All the time we do assess history for what we think is good and bad. Often we take the first for granted and only complain about the latter. Actually no one could maintain that all that the past has brought is only negative. So it is possible to argue for the distinction between positive and negative power as necessary for an assessment of the reality we live in, even with the abuse of power abounding both on a small and a large scale.

### *Diversity and conflict*

My contention in the first part has been that diversity is not necessarily a reason for conflict. The other being different does not mean a threat by itself. Originally diversity is an expression of the richness of creation. The change has come about because of sin and selfishness. Can we argue for this by appealing to shared experience even when we have different worldviews? Making use with some addition of the different kinds of pluralism distinguished by Griffioen I will look at individual, associational, contextual and directional diversity.

Individuals often have a competitive relationship. Competition as such is not bad, but it might lead to strife. This holds for individual people and for associations or communities. Of course there is cooperation too. The question is whether this is only for selfish reasons. The market mechanism is a clear illustration of the idea that competition for selfish reasons works for the good of both parties. It assumes, though, that the parties are of equal power and this is often not the case. So a conflict of interests remains. The market mechanism makes a lot of people suffer. Yet it is not difficult to argue that not all kinds of cooperation are of this nature. Different people might complement each other. The same is true for different business firms. People can even focus on the good of others. So can organisations. Actually it is rather shameful that serving others is most of the time not as strong an incentive for people to do the utmost of what they can as selfish ambitions. Yet it is hard to deny that people sometimes do act for the good of others, even when they are not of their own kind or kin.

What about the different kinds of organisation that we belong too, can they live together in peace? Max Weber had difficulties to believe so (cf. Griffioen 2003, 88ff). According to Weber we have to choose our gods, serve them and ignore others. We focus on the family, the state, our job, sports, but whatever we choose it will be at the expense of other responsibilities. Again, this is often the case, but is it necessarily so? Could we not divide our attention in an appropriate manner, doing justice to different interests and responsibilities? Anyhow, we do make the distinction between excessive and healthy behaviour where different aspects of our life are concerned. It might not be easy, as Weber makes clear, to bring real unity to our lives when our social functions are so diverse because of the differentiation process and the lack of a transcendent purpose. Yet it can be questioned if this is necessarily so.<sup>14</sup>

Another aspect of diversity relates to Griffioen's contextual pluralism. Are different cultures necessarily in conflict when they meet each other? Again, in actual reality that is what happens most of the time. This holds for the past when one culture invaded the other,

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<sup>14</sup> In this context the Kuyperian principle of sphere sovereignty or Griffioen's associational pluralism is of crucial importance (cf. Griffioen 2003).

especially in the case of western colonialism and imperialism, but also in other contexts. It holds too for Western Europe and its treatment of large groups of immigrants that in the recent past have become part of their societies. The optimism about a multicultural society has disappeared to a great extent. Yet, again the question can be asked, whether cultural diversity necessarily means a threat. Could it not also lead to enrichment? No culture is perfect. Does this not mean that one culture could learn from another and this in both directions? Fortunately the critique of ethnocentrism is not completely silenced. The different ways of cultures should not be judged from one's own perspective. We need to look for a norm that transcends both. Although in the actual contact with other cultures the tendency might be to absolutize one's own, meeting others might also make one aware of one's own relativity.

Can we say the same about directional differences? Griffioen takes this kind of pluralism as the only one where conflict is unavoidable. Differences in worldview as far as they are not contextual but based on a basic outlook on the world concerning its origin and meaning, cannot be overcome by relativising their truth claims. If all worldviews are seen as only a relative approach of the truth this somehow implies a worldview of its own. Even when the limitations of all worldviews, including one's own, in relation to understanding ultimate truth in its fullness is recognised, basic differences need to be acknowledged. Indeed, conflict is unavoidable. Yet the nature of this conflict should be kept in mind. It is a conflict of ultimate conviction. Therefore it should be fought with spiritual means not by violence and political restrictions. Although worldview differences will influence the view of politics and society, there might still be consensus in many areas concerning ways how to live together in relative peace. Worldviews do not need to be different in all respects. All have to account for reality as it is given, both as to its very nature and the actual conditions we have to face together. Even here argument is possible, how difficult it might be. This leads me to the next point.

### *Worldview*

In relation to the topics of positive and negative power and of diversity and conflict I deliberately abstained from bringing in the influence of worldview. Yet we cannot keep the interpretation of both issues separated from worldview considerations. The idea of power is connected with the view of freedom and the question whether there is a transcendent anchorage for normativity. The understanding of diversity and conflict depends on how we see humankind: as an autonomous individual with as a natural result the conflict of interests or as relational and responsible within a given normative framework which implies flourishing by serving others. I will discuss here shortly 3 points: 1. the threesome of creation, fall and redemption as such; 2. freedom and normativity; and 3. the idea of a given order.

It is clear that beliefs concerning creation, fall and redemption are part of a religious and ultimate understanding of reality. They cannot be based upon a universal rational argument and they are far from generally accepted in the contemporary secular western world. Yet they relate to phenomena everybody has to account for. Reality is given somehow and we cannot avoid thinking about an ultimate origin. There is social evil both as wrongdoing and suffering and we have to come to terms with it. There is also the question what we can hope for and do about it. History is full of utopia's and dystopia's either of a political or a technological nature. So we can ask the question: which worldview does account best for authentic human experience of the world we live in? Which conviction can actually be lived with? Which does justice to our human nature as vulnerable, hopeful and responsible? The argument will have a theoretical level, but it

basically is of an existential nature. It should relate to actual desires for fulfilment, actual guilt and suffering, actual evil and hope for justice to come. It is my personal conviction that biblical Christianity answers those questions in a way that is deeply true to reality even where it goes far beyond human possibilities and really is a matter of faith and trust in the midst of a world that often seems to deny its truth. In a sense a secular worldview is more down to earth and requires less faith. At the other hand, its answers are not as convincing when related to being human in the sense indicated. So both worldviews have the nature of faith be it of a different kind. Yet the truth of them can be argued for because they have to relate to our actual experience of reality.

As to freedom as rational autonomy it is already deeply questioned by post-modern philosophy. The same holds for the autonomous individual. Rationality is not such a free floating universal capacity as Kant still believed. It is embedded in historical settings and is directed by deep seated motivations. The individual is historically conditioned as well and not just in a negative sense either. Speaking abilities, political rights, labour opportunities, sports facilities, they are all shaped by historical developments. Freedoms are made possible, they are not original rights of an isolated individual. The question is, though, whether this finiteness is actually understood as a positive given. It makes the human person deeply dependent. Will he really be able to enjoy this dependence, especially within a world which is distorted by the abuse of power and full of violent conflict? The reality of dependence is hard to deny. It is not difficult to argue against the idea of an autonomous subjectivity whether it be in terms of autonomous reason for which reality is just a construct or in terms of autonomous freedom which claims the right to shape the world apart from any given direction. Yet deep convictions and motivations are involved. The desire for autonomy is deeply rooted in the modern world as in the human heart. Especially when the connection with normativity as part of a given order is at stake it will be hard to let it go. This touches my next point.

A given order of nature probably will not raise too much protest. The laws of physics are not so much of a problem, although people tend to see them more as regularities than as constitutive for existence. That order makes being possible is still an idea that is foreign to most people. But when it is applied to human culture in the sense that given normativity is a condition for its very being, that certainly will not easily be accepted. Yet the arguments are not so far away. They themselves are not possible without the distinction between logical or rational and illogical or irrational. A sense of justice is presupposed every time when we feel injustice being done. The same holds for the distinction between ethical and unethical, social and asocial behaviour. Alasdair MacIntyre has applied the notion of intrinsic normativity to all kinds of practices. It can also be connected with societal structures like the family and the state, a business firm or a sports organisation. They all have a normative nature. They can function for good or ill; well or badly. And the difference is not arbitrary. It is true, both social practices and societal structures have developed historically. But in an ontic sense there needs to be something in order to develop it. Something basic with a nature of its own be it a normative principle or a qualitative structure has to be given. At the same time, in an epistemic sense, this structure or principle needs to be recognisable in order to unfold it into specific forms and still identify it as the same in those different forms. Order, including some normative principles, makes life and the world possible. We cannot really understand reality without it. At least we can argue so.

### *Conclusion*

So it is possible to account for the position that is proposed in the first part in a discussion with those who do not share its starting point in biblical Christianity. The argument

probably will not convince, at least not totally. But this is not unusual in philosophy. What is necessary is that the position can be accounted for in an appropriate way. And this certainly can be done. Some elements might make people think and even be appreciated. Others will face fierce opposition. Anyhow, there are many ways to engage in fruitful discussion where the general theoretical approach is concerned. What about the relation to science? This is the subject of the next section. There I will also elaborate on the idea of order and law.

### *3.2 Scientific integration*

Another challenge for the alternative approach of power and conflict is how to relate it to the empirical sciences. This concerns both studies in the field of biology and psychology like genetics, neurosciences, socio-biology and developmental psychology, and in the field of the social sciences like anthropology, political science and empirical sociology. On the one hand their overall perspective might be very much characterised by a naturalistic or at least secular frame of thought that directly clashes with the approach proposed in this paper. On the other hand the actual results of empirical research and the theoretical explanations thereof cannot be dismissed just because of the worldview behind them. The discussion between the different perspectives should take place especially on this level and therefore empirical results have to be accounted for and theoretical explanations assessed. It is clear that I cannot deal with all sciences mentioned. I will only make some general remarks with the notion of responsibility as their centre point.

#### *Human and animal world*

I start with the distinction between the human and animal world. Dooyeweerd distinguishes humans and animals in two ways. First, humans have a central religious unity, animals do not. Second, animals have their highest subject function in the psychic aspect, in the others they function only as an object. Animals are supposed not to make analytical distinctions, neither to speak or have social stratifications. M.D. Stafleu (1991, 116f.) has challenged the second point. He contends that animals do have subject functions to some extent at least in the lingual and social aspect. They directly relate to some laws that belong to those higher aspects. Yet he maintains that the qualifying function of animals is psychic. Even when animals function as subject in the lingual and social aspect they do so basically on the basis of instinct. As to the first point being made in the image of God is for him the crucial characteristic of humankind which is also at the heart of Dooyeweerd's view.

I tend to agree with Stafleu. There is a lot of evidence that there are similarities between humans and animals also in the post-psychic law spheres. Frans de Waal (2006) even contends that there is some sense of ethical value among certain kinds of apes. They take care of weaker members of their group even when they are not immediate offspring. There are a lot of studies that show how power and conflict function amongst the higher apes in ways that reflect social mechanisms amongst people. And some elements of a picking order (or a natural hierarchy) which is often found in animal group life can also be found in human society, although most of the time unconsciously.

Yet, in spite of the similarities there remains a crucial difference. At least in concrete everyday life we will not ascribe the same kind of responsibility to animals as we do to humans. The nature of this responsibility might be understood in very different ways. As a matter of fact it is a complex phenomenon. Yet in the study of human life it should always be taken into account. In the animal world we observe power struggles between groups of the same kind or between their leaders. They can also be found between groups of different

kind especially in the case of predators, like lions, hyena's and cheetahs, where there is limited availability of prey. Within a group fight for domination might even lead the new leader to kill the offspring of the former for the sake of new procreation possibilities, as happens in the case of lions. To apply a moral assessment in any of these cases would not be appropriate, though. But if power struggle, even of a similar kind, occurs in the human world, judgment in normative terms will always be called for. Human conduct cannot be understood apart from responsibility. I will elaborate on this in the next three paragraphs.

### *Responsibility in context*

The two groups of sciences which I mentioned correspond roughly with the distinction between nature and nurture as explanatory of human behaviour. Sometimes they are seen as exclusive: either nature or nurture provides the explanation. It is a gain already when both receive their place. This implies a recognition that there is not just one kind of explanation. Human behaviour is too complex for that. Yet even taken together they cannot give a full account, because it would leave out the element of human responsibility. At the same time the discoveries of genetics and neurosciences at one side and of the social studies that refer to social factors as determinative for human behaviour at the other, cannot be dismissed with an appeal to human responsibility. They need to be taken seriously. The question is how they are interpreted. For this an appropriate theoretical framework is needed. Here Dooyeweerd's philosophy can be helpful. I will mention both his sketch of a philosophical anthropology and his social philosophy.

The beauty of a Dooyeweerdian anthropology is that it is at the same time open for the integration of empirical scientific study and non-reductionist. It makes use of the distinction of several irreducible yet cohering aspects and applies this to an analysis in terms of different body-structures that can be studied for themselves: a physical, a biotic, a psychic and the so-called act-structure which relates to inner acts of different kinds (all the post-psychic aspects can be qualifying). The 'lower' structures are opened up by the 'higher' ones, the higher ones are based upon the lower ones (cf. Glas 1996).<sup>15</sup> The neurosciences and genetics would relate to the physical and the biotic structures. Yet their discoveries could not be understood by themselves because they are part of human bodily existence as a whole in which the psychic and the act-structure have an undeniable place. 'Nature' can therefore never be a total explanation, because the higher structures cannot be ignored. At the same time it has a necessary place, because human existence necessarily implies the natural side and its impact on the higher functions.

Although responsibility is involved in the act-structure because it concerns the normative aspects, the full story requires still another element. Dooyeweerd distinguishes the human body with its four substructures from the central self or ego. I do not agree with all Dooyeweerd says about this self or ego, especially not it being supra-temporal, but the distinction as such has much value because it accounts for the unity and diversity in human existence and its central relationship to God. I take this relationship as answering to a call understood both as a promise-command to be and as a call for responsible action (Geertsema 1993). The structures of our being can therefore be characterised as structures of answering. They make being as answering possible, they delineate it and direct it in a normative sense. But they do not determine it fully. To the contrary, as structures of answering they presuppose freedom and responsibility.

A similar story can be told about Dooyeweerd's social philosophy. As indicated earlier

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<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately I do not know of a succinct introduction in Dooyeweerd's anthropology in English.

Dooyeweerd distinguishes several kinds of social relationships and communal structures. They all have a specific nature which can be analysed in terms of different aspects of which one would be qualifying and another foundational. As explained before all these relationships do influence us. They have impact on our behaviour. Yet here too this influence is not fully determining. For one there are many relationships and communal structures in which we function. For two they have a normative character. So they imply responsibility from both sides. For three we transcend also all of these relationships together in the unity of our self that transcends the diversity of functions and relationships. Actually, the diversity of social relationships can be related to the diversity of act-qualifications in Dooyeweerd's anthropology. Thus both theories complement each other.

In this way both personal (freedom and responsibility) and structural factors (body structures and social relationships) can be accounted for. Freedom is not the same as autonomy. It always has a given context, not just in the sense of limitations, but primarily concerning what makes it possible. Yet there are also limitations and sometimes they are very much an expression of a distorted reality. This might apply as much to genetic as to social conditions as they are studied within the sciences. Responsibility is not just of the individual. Living in relationships we have responsibility for each other and together, because we influence one another and act in communal functions. This holds also through generations. Genes affect our behaviour and sometimes make people inclined to aggression as might hormones and chemical or electrical impulses within the brain. The same is true for a certain kind of upbringing both within a family and by a culture. Sometimes these factors may narrow down the scope of our freedom and responsibility so much that the first challenge is to find some room for them again to restore this basic trait of our being human. The next paragraph will elaborate on this. Here I mention this point to avoid too simplistic a view on responsibility and freedom even when taken in the context of physical and social structures.

### *Laws and conditions*

Empirical studies of human existence focus on its structural aspects. They try to discover regularities and explain these eventually by theories that are formulated as laws. In this way behaviour might be predicted and changed for the better, if this is necessary and if it is indeed possible (as we might hope). I have already made the contention that this explanation can never be total. That would exclude human responsibility and freedom. Nevertheless explanations are given, predictions are made and measures are taken to change what is seen as undesirable. Sometimes this works. To get some more understanding of how this is possible we need to make some distinctions both in relation to laws and conditions that affect human behaviour and in relation to freedom as a condition for the function of responsibility.

Laws are of several kinds. Some laws are constitutive for reality. This applies to some natural laws like that of gravity, but also to normative laws as those of logic, linguistic expression, economic behaviour and legal practices. The latter, except maybe the laws of logic, require positivisation. The laws are only given as principles. They need human formation by competent bodies like laws of the state by government and parliament. So here is the first distinction concerning normative laws. There are principles that are constitutive and positivisations that depend on human formation. The difference between just and unjust or between ethical and unethical is not a human invention as little as that between logical and illogical. The distinction is based on given principles that make legal and ethical behaviour possible as much as logical reasoning. Yet these principles require human shaping in history. This can be done in a good or a wrong way. One might wonder

whether these positivisations still have the character of law. Dooyeweerd claims this is the case and I tend to agree with him, because they are normative and ask for being respected and obeyed. Yet they might be mistaken and therefore Chaplin (1995, 25) denies them the character of law. Anyhow, the distinction is important. But it is not sufficient.

Another type of law might be called empirical generalisations. These concern actual patterns of behaviour as they can be found and used for prediction and possibly control. They should not be taken in any normative sense. Actually they might imply elements that go against normative principles. Usually they will be described apart from any normative considerations. To some extent this might even be justified as far as understanding what actually happens is at stake. Actually most empirical research in the social sciences concerns this type of laws. But they cannot lead to a full understanding of human conduct. They do not have the nature of necessity as physical laws, not even in a statistical sense. In principle people can, often even should act differently. They themselves therefore require normative assessment in terms of human responsibility. For a full understanding even of the empirical generalisations laws in terms of normative principles need to be recognised. As in the case of positivised laws and structures the mixed character of our world as created and fallen needs to be taken into account lest human reality be disposed of its very humanness.

Next to laws in the threefold sense we can still discern another element that affects human conduct. This I would call the concrete conditions that face us. Although they will have general traits and thus connect with the different kinds of law, they have also unique features. And they might work for the good and for the bad as well. So it becomes very clear that human responsibility is not a simple matter. It is made possible by constitutive laws and principles. But it also faces all kinds of challenges that condition it. Therefore at times it becomes very hard to make responsible choices and do the good thing. This brings me to the final point of this section: human freedom

### *Freedom*

If all kinds of factors influence our conduct, laws and normative principles, the behaviour of individuals and of groups, ingrained patterns and actual conditions, how much room is left for freedom? This is an important question. Responsibility depends upon some amount of freedom. If actual freedom is an illusion, it does not make sense to speak of responsibility anymore. Concerning this point I want to make some distinctions also. Freedom itself is not a simple thing.

We can distinguish at least three elements in human freedom. The first concerns our religious nature. Here freedom has its roots. We are called to love God and our neighbour. But it is a call and we have to respond. That is freedom, but the choice is not indifferent. The choice against God's command actually takes away our freedom and we become bound to our fallen nature. This will affect all of our life. We do remain responsible, but it is only the power of God's redemption that can truly make us free again. As the apostle Paul writes in his letter to the Romans: we are either free in Christ or we are enslaved to sin. The extent of the effects of the latter might differ, but its reality is pervasive and powerful.

The second element I want to mention concerns the distinction between law and subject. I take law here in the sense of making possible concrete individual being. Law and subject should be distinguished. This means that at least from the physical aspect onward individual behaviour is not completely determined by laws. There is room for individual diversity. This too might be called a kind of freedom and it increases with the later aspects.

In relation to normative laws two extra elements need to be mentioned. Normative laws can be disobeyed. This is an element of freedom that refers back to religious freedom but it is not the same. Not all transgression of norms is sin. There are also errors and mistakes some of which might just be a consequence of our being finite. The other element is connected with the historical aspect: formation according to a free project and the element of positivising normative principles that is connected with it. This is freedom as creativity. But of course here too is responsibility. Historical free formation is bound to normativity. As we have seen before sin will affect and has affected historical formation also to a large extent.

So human freedom relates at least to our central relation to God, to the distinction between law and subject and to free formation as creativity. What is left of these different kinds of freedom? We lost our religious freedom by falling into sin. But this does not mean that we are not responsible anymore for the choices we make in relation to God and our neighbour. This choice affects the other elements, but does not take them away. Creation is not abolished by the fall. It still urges itself upon us. The other elements of freedom might be affected by our fall into sin to a great extent, they still function. And so our responsibility remains. But we do not start from a fresh situation. Our responsibility is conditioned in many ways and this will show in the results of empirical research. Yet we do need to acknowledge that responsibility is still there, otherwise we loose sight of what basically makes us human.

### *Conclusion*

In this section I have tried to sketch some contours of a framework in which the results of the empirical sciences can be accounted for. I have not focussed so much on the topic of power and conflict but dealt with the study of human behaviour in general. Yet it will apply also to the analysis and explanation of the use and abuse of power and how this effects human conflict. It shows that scientific explanation is not a total explanation. First, there are different sciences each with its own approach. Secondly, also the sciences together cannot grasp the full reality of actual life. In their core freedom and responsibility escape them. They can only be understood from a worldview perspective. They need to be respected, though, otherwise the human nature of our conduct is denied. And where this is the case, this is not science per se, but itself expression of a worldview. The philosophy of Dooyeweerd appeared to present a helpful framework to integrate the results of the empirical sciences within a worldview that is explicitly Christian. It helps to account for what is human in our world also by providing a tool for the critical assessment of these sciences.

### *3.3 Practical usefulness*

Is it possible to make a practical use of the framework for understanding power and conflict as sketched so far? Section 2.1 about Philosophical argument and section 2.2 about Scientific integration imply that the approach developed in this paper should be of use for the assessment of both philosophical and scientific theories. In this section I want to discuss the question whether it has also implications for dealing with conflict in practice. I have no special expertise in this area. Neither do I claim to be original. I will make only a few general remarks trying to elucidate some practical implications of what I have discussed so far. They concern the understanding of conflict and some principles for action.

### *Understanding conflict*

Concerning actual conflicts, the first point to keep in mind is the nature of our world as being God's creation but distorted by evil. The reality of evil is present everywhere. Yet underneath or even at the surface the goodness of God's creation urges itself upon us. We have seen that diversity as such does not imply conflict of interest. But after sin has entered the world and selfishness has become pervasive any diversity might lead to jealousy and strife. So reasons for conflict abound, especially since evil settles in structures and determines conditions of life. Much diversity indeed is an expression of unjust inequality and might call for opposition both by legal and illegal means. But what we need in the first place is spiritual discernment. There is a spiritual battle going on of which somehow each conflict is a part. So we need to ask which dimensions of evil are at stake. At the same time we should be careful not to identify easily one party as good and the other as bad. There can be real victims, but most of the time a conflict is not just black and white. Even victims are not perfect and have a responsibility of their own. Therefore a deep sensitivity is necessary to discern how both the intentional goodness of God's creation and its distortion by evil and sin manifest themselves within a concrete situation of conflict. An awareness of evil and sin as such is not sufficient, though. This leads to my second remark.

Each conflict has a character of its own. It is unique, but it also has a specific nature dependent upon the kind of human relationship or communal structure that is at stake. To understand a conflict we have to understand that specific nature. So we should distinguish between political, economic, ethnic, religious, social and possibly other conflicts. Or rather we should distinguish between the different aspects of them. In most cases one aspect will prevail and give the conflict its specific nature. And it is important to keep that in mind to understand what is going on. At the same time other aspects might be involved and they should be taken into account as well. The nature of a conflict might be very complex. Anyhow, to speak about conflicts just in terms of opposing powers, be it in terms of oppressor and oppressed, is not really helpful. The nature of the conflict should be taken into account, and its complexity. Simple explanations are off the mark most of the time.

Next to the specific nature of a conflict it is important to know which and how many parties are involved. Who are the 'stakeholders'? This question applies to groups as much as to individual people. Both have a nature of their own. Each conflict has a personal dimension concerning e.g. the ambitions and frustrations of individual people. Yet there might be groups or social communities with their own dynamics as well. An extra complicating factor is the influence of ideological factors. Ideology might be used just as a justification for personal ambitions or the use of violence. They also might be the really motivating factor. Anyhow, they should be taken seriously, although they must not be separated from the nature of the conflict in terms of the different aspects mentioned before.

Special attention should be given to historical background. Political conflicts usually are not solved by putting a real or supposed oppressor out of the way, as the USA have discovered in Iraq. Situations of potential conflict and injustice have developed over time and have become a structural part of reality that cannot easily be eliminated. Often there is a complexity of factors involved that has developed during a long time. To understand a conflict these historical developments should be taken into account. This holds for political and ethnic conflicts like in Afghanistan, but it might also be true for many other situations. The importance of historical background is also the reason why the introduction of the western kind of democracy will not function as a simple solution in case of oppressive regimes or structural injustice everywhere in the world. Democracy requires a historical development by which people are prepared to bear responsibility together for public justice by not giving priority to regional, tribal or private interests. Otherwise it will just become another means for the rule of one interest group at the expense of others. It might even be

the cause of new violence instead of diminishing conflict.

So to understand conflict often a complexity of causes needs to be taken into account. Political factors in terms of positions of power and authority or freedom of government might be mixed with economic and social inequality. Ethnic or cultural factors might even more complicate the situation as will the element of ideology. At the same time there might also be an element of misunderstanding and distrust next to personal ambitions for power. The point is to really analyse a situation and its different elements as they are now and have developed over time and attempt to do justice to all parties in all respects.

Here a final element needs to be mentioned. Analysis just in terms of interests of both or more sides in a conflict is not sufficient, let alone an analysis in terms of the interests of just one group, be it the oppressed or threatened party, or the oppressor or threatening side. A normative assessment on the basis of what is just in all respects - political, economic, ethnic, social, religious and whatever - is necessary. Parties are not just autonomous individuals whose interests should be protected or reconciled, if possible. That too, of course. But this can only be done, if the normative principles which are constitutive and directive for human relationships are applied in the attempt to really understand what is happening. Democracy e.g. can only function well on the basis of the rule of just law. This presupposes a principle of justice that appeals to us, should be acknowledged as such and not be seen as just an arbitrary human construction. To understand a conflict we need a normative assessment in terms of fair and just principles. This applies also to the present fight with Iran about nuclear energy and nuclear weapons. A truthful analysis cannot take into account just the interests and rights of one party i.e. the western world to protect it from potential harm by the other. Both sides need to be taken into consideration and assessed on the basis of impartial normative principles. In the case of Iran this should be international law as holding for all nations.

### *Principles for action*

The requirements for understanding a conflict are closely related to the principles for action. The first step to solve a conflict might be seen in the attempt from both sides to understand each other and on that basis accept and respect one another. Power can defeat power to some extent, but it does not really solve a conflict. The other needs to be respected and his interests need to be taken seriously. Sometimes a mediator is needed to accomplish such a goal, especially when the parties themselves do not take the initiative to make the first move. It is also possible, though, that one or both parties refuse such a step, even invited to do so by a mediator. Then the attempt might be necessary to dissolve the parties and take away their (means of) power. Yet, all the time the interests of all groups as far as they remain in existence should be taken into account. Otherwise the seeds for new conflicts are being sown and they will erupt at some point.

Openness for the other often will only lead to compromise. And maybe nothing more is possible in many situations. Yet the norm should be the attempt to achieve more. Interests of different parties do not necessarily conflict with one another. If we look at human relationships as originally intended they are for the good of both sides. To accomplish this we need to be open to the intrinsic normativity of those relationships because the quality of a relationship is the other side of taking its norms seriously. That is why responsibility is so important. Human relationships flourish if the intrinsic normativity that characterises them is taken as a guideline. This holds for political and economic relationships as much as for friendship and family ties. Sometimes it works when we appeal to human responsibility in a situation of conflict. Often in our broken world this will seem to be an unrealistic ideal. Yet

we should keep it in mind when we deal with conflicts that arise from a clash of interests. It might be that a true understanding of what makes life flourish is missing. Humans are not isolated individuals but they live in relationships and need them for their wellbeing. At the end flourishing together is more satisfying than thriving at the expense of others. Not everybody will be open to that because sin has really affected us. Yet we can still appeal to the original character of the creation and hope it will speak to people on a personal, national and international level. In politics, economics, science and technology, and everywhere.

A special approach is needed in case the motivation behind a political, ethnic or other conflict is an ideology or worldview of some kind, especially when the use of violence is involved. If it is true – what I believe – that ideologies (in a broad sense including religions) in their core are irreconcilable, it makes no sense to strive for compromise when they clash with one another. A solution can only lie in the emphasis upon the spiritual nature of an ideology or religious conviction. It should not be forced upon people but be accepted in freedom. That means that in a political or cultural and ethnic sense different religions and worldviews should be able to exist next to each other. They might lead to different political and ethical views. And there should be room to defend them. But they should not take away the freedom of others to think and act differently. Of course, in a political context there should be consensus concerning what is possible within the limits of the law. And much of law formation itself will not be neutral in relation to religious or other deep seated convictions. Here compromises are unavoidable. Yet, there is also the reality of creational principles that can be appealed to in order to make possible peaceful living together. It might even be that the competition between different views works out for the good of society as a whole.

It is also important to take the historical context into account. Situations of conflict sometimes have deep historical roots. Therefore solutions that work in one situation might fail in another. Contextual differences as such need not be the reason for a negative appreciation. They might just go back to different decisions in the past, each of which had its own justification. Negative aspects, of course, will be involved too most of the time, but they need not be decisive. Anyhow, the historical background of each situation has to be understood to deal with the conflict that has arisen out of it, whatever its nature otherwise might be. Even normative assessment cannot make abstraction of what has developed over time. Normative principles always have taken form in historical settings and this should be taken into consideration also in the case of conflict.

There is still another element that needs to be mentioned. Conflict might imply guilt of one or both parties. This should be acknowledged however hard that might be. True reconciliation requires facing up to what went wrong and how. It requires admittance of guilt and willingness to forgive. Evil cannot be made to disappear by ignoring it or acting as if it were not there. Injustice can be compensated for to some extent and this should be done if possible. But it needs to be acknowledged or even confessed. Suffering and evil do not only affect the visible aspects of our existence. They reach much deeper, to the very heart of our being. This should be recognised.

The element of reconciliation and forgiveness touches the question what we can expect concerning the solution of conflict in its divers manifestations. Is it realistic to ask for acknowledgement of guilt from one and true forgiveness from the other party? Often this seems impossible on a personal scale. Could we expect it from social communities, let alone from ethnic groups or political parties and nation states? In many ways we have to live with evil, even when we should oppose it by all means. And who does so? The true hope of Christians is for the new earth in its unity with the new heaven. Even our own lives

will only then be fully reflecting the glory of God by living his image. Sometimes we are happy already when evil is contained and not spreading everywhere. And our calling is indeed to also just resist evil. Yet, we should be open to God to work 'miracles', because the powers of his kingdom are already amongst us. They might affect all aspects of his world.

This takes me to my final point. Christians should be willing to suffer themselves when they act for peace and reconciliation. Sometimes it is necessary to make use of power and authority which inflicts upon the freedom of some to make sure that evil is taken or kept away from others. Yet the true power of the kingdom of God is love that is willing to suffer even for the sake of the enemy. Good should overcome evil by changing hearts. There is no guarantee that it will work. But the risk should be taken, with wisdom and courage. Ultimately Christian action is out of faith which looks beyond this world and its possibilities to the next. Maybe for that reason some time even states and business firms can take risks for the sake of justice being done to the oppressed or hope given to the hopeless.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Let me try to summarize in a few points what I have tried to argue for in this paper. In the first place, from the perspective of creation power and even conflict do not have a negative connotation. Power is part of human existence because by nature it is lived within relationships that involve mutual influence. Diversity too is intrinsic to created reality. It all serves for the wellbeing of everyone as long as life is lived according to God's intention as revealed in the commandment of love. Even conflict as a difference of opinion from that perspective will work out for the good because serving others is the motivation behind it.

The second point is the all pervasive influence of evil and sin because humankind has made itself the starting point of life and so selfishness spoils everything. Yet creation maintains its basic influence. So as to power and conflict, how negative they often might be in their intention and effect, they still need to be understood from the perspective of created reality. This means that the diversity of human relationships and communal structures that are part of creation should be taken into account. The normative principles that constitute and characterize them are necessary to understand the different kinds and aspects of conflict and of power as exercised.

In the third place the historical dimension should be recognised both in its positive and negative aspects. Decisions of the past keep their influence in later times and have settled in all kinds of structures. This cannot be ignored in understanding and dealing with conflict. This applies both to legitimate differences that are contextual as to negative developments that colour a situation.

Finally the perspective of the kingdom of God is basic for a Christian worldview. It also affects the understanding of power and conflict and how to deal with them. The exertion of power as service receives a new dimension as it might include suffering and even death for the sake of the other. The kingdom of God is not established by means of external force but by changing hearts, because it is based on free service out of love. Its aim is not to subdue but to heal and make really free in order that God's original intention with people will be realised in a way that even goes beyond how it started in the beginning.

I have tried to show that even though the approach that I have developed is very much dependent on biblical Christianity, it can be accounted for on the basis of philosophical

argument and made fruitful for the assessment of scientific theories and the positive integration of results of the empirical sciences. The foundation for this lies in the claim that biblical Christianity is true to reality and so it can appeal to human experience in the broad sense. To elaborate in a more theoretical vein I have made use of Dooyeweerd's philosophical anthropology and his social philosophy. In relation to the empirical sciences the distinction between laws as empirical generalisations and laws as normative principles has been introduced. The first are just descriptions of what happens, the latter are needed to give a normative appreciation of these factual realities. Laws that concern human behaviour cannot have the nature of natural necessity. For their functioning they always depend on human choices. In relation to philosophical argument and discussion of scientific theories the notions of human responsibility and freedom proved to be crucial. Both should be understood in the context of a normative framework that transcends human decision and in relation to the effects of brokenness and sin.

In the final part my endeavour has been to elucidate some practical implications for how to deal with actual conflicts. Several elements that have been discussed before are applied to both the understanding and the handling of conflict. How far these suggestions are practical should be judged by those that are experts in the field.

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