

## **The Social Self: A Reply to Susann Pangerl**

### **Paul B. Rasor**

I want to thank Susann Pangerl for her careful reading and thoughtful response to my article on the self in the inaugural issue of the Journal. It is the highest honor for a writer to be taken seriously, and Pangerl has honored me with her comments. In this brief "reply" to Pangerl's "response," I cannot hope to do justice to the many important points she raises. I will limit my comments to two main issues, the question of power and trust within the group, and the role of language in the development of the self.

Pangerl suggests that my analysis of the social self needs a more nuanced treatment of "the profound dynamics of power and trust that are inherently present in the emergence of selfhood and within the structures of groups or communities." Here, she clearly accepts my basic claim that the self emerges within the context of the group. What needs to be attended to, then, is the nature, structure, and power dynamics of the group. I agree. Issues of power and trust are always present in groups, and these have a profound impact on the development of the self. I treat these issues in a preliminary way in my discussion of the role of participation in the development of the self, where I criticize the liberal emphasis on individualism as leading to a loss of solidarity and so contributing to our often ineffective justice work. Pangerl is right, however, that these issues deserve more attention and deeper analysis than I offer in my paper. In fact, her comments suggest a fruitful line of further inquiry into the dynamics of liberal religious groups, including their relation to the larger social context in which they are situated.

Pangerl also suggests that rather than artificially juxtaposing the individual and the group, we think instead in terms of a "community of selves," a vision that holds both an "I-ness" and a "We-ness" in creative tension. Perhaps Pangerl is right that I overstated my case in the dialectic I set up between the Enlightenment's individualistic view of the self and the contemporary or postmodern emphasis on the social self. Of course I recognize that things are never this neat, that there is never just one or the other. My paper was intended not so much to dispute the complex interdependence of the individual and the group, but rather to counter a particular way of thinking among many liberals that ignores this complexity by its overemphasis on the individual. Worse, this way of thinking interferes, in my judgment, with our ability to achieve some of the goals we hold out as important, especially our efforts to create a more just community.

In any case, I like Pangerl's image. It recognizes that individuation and socialization are interdependent. As I argue in my paper, an individuated and morally mature self emerges out of a process of intersubjective exchange that always takes place within a social context. This is but another way of saying that the self cannot exist in isolation; it can exist only in relation to other selves. In my discussion, I draw upon the work of Seyla Benhabib, who notes:

The "I" becomes an "I" only among a "we," in a community of speech and action. [I]t is the kinds of associations which we inhabit that define the kinds of individuals we will become.<sup>1</sup>

This is Pangerl's point precisely, if I understand her right.

Finally, Pangerl objects to my emphasis on the role of language in religious experience and in the development of the human moral self. She suggests that recent brain research and infant studies challenge the notion that the self is entirely "circumscribed" or "determined" by language, and she argues for a more relational view of the interaction of language with other modes of perception.

Here, Pangerl and I are closer than she thinks. I agree that there are different forms of perception, and indeed different ways of knowing, and that some of them involve affective and bodily responses that cannot be reduced to logical or linguistic ordering. I am familiar with some of the recent studies of brain functions in religious experience, and I believe these hold much promise for our understanding of ourselves as religious beings. Language is but one aspect (albeit an extremely important one) of the process of mutual communicative exchange that is constantly taking place between the organism and its environment, including its social environment. In human beings, language develops simultaneously with biological functions such as brain development and social functions such as communication and socialization. Pangerl is right that these processes are complex and interrelated.

In my paper, I am not really concerned with whether an infant can experience pain or joy without having words for it (of course she can). I also recognize that certain kinds of human experience, including religious experience, is often perceived as being beyond words, or at least beyond the descriptive capacities of logical and linguistic analysis. Nevertheless, in adult human beings, language cannot be separated. I can have something I perceive as a religious experience of God, for example, only if I already have some notion of "religion," and some understanding of the linguistic symbol "God," available to me. This is not to deny the validity of the experience. It is real, but it is also "interpreted" or understood in these terms because these ideas and words have already been supplied by my culture.

My deeper concern is not about the role of language in experience, however, but with a way of thinking among liberals that tends to separate experience from its social (and therefore linguistic) context. This is why my own constructive model of the self moves away from linguistic communication and toward participation and praxis. Here, I want to emphasize the liberation theme of the self as constituted by a way of living in the world. To say, as I do, that the self is intersubjective, means not only that it is formed within a social context and by means of communicative exchange. It also means that the self emerges as we engage in activities in the world and encounter other selves within their social

contexts. In other words, our selves are also formed through praxis and engagement. This view of the self, I believe, can go a long way toward eliminating the "us-them" phenomenon, since it enables solidarity with persons who became different sorts of selves within very different social contexts. Thus, I argue that it is precisely in understanding ourselves as social that we can most readily move toward an understanding of ourselves as "selves in community," as Pangerl advocates.

One final comment. Pangerl holds up our first principle as "a particularly precious gift in a globalized world economy." Here, she is responding to my observation that this principle is individualistic in nature, and therefore part of the whole package of individualism I argue against. But to note that this principle has an individualistic cast is not to deny its importance or potential for recognizing the divine in all of us. When we affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person, we are making a moral and religious claim, not an anthropological claim. I agree that we need to recognize the inherent worth of individuals precisely because of the many cultural forces that devalue and commodify people. But we are wise not to lose sight of the fact that the group is always there. We can easily miss how powerful this is, or think we are somehow above its influence. We can all too easily come to think that simple self-assertion is enough, when this notion is itself largely a product of class.

Pangerl has given me several new lines of inquiry to explore, and in the process has initiated just the kind of dialogue I had hoped to generate in my article. For this, I am grateful.

## **Notes**

1 Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 71.