

RELATIONSHIPS RESEARCH AT THE HEART OF ACADEMIC WORK IN THE GLOBAL ERA

Is globalisation an enemy or friend of 'relational proximity'?

“Who you are among the students is as important as your academic work”, wrote one CASE Associate in an encouraging email. Her wise observation is supported by research being carried out by the Relationships Foundation in Cambridge, UK, under the guidance of Dr Michael Schluter. Michael was at New College earlier this year, delivering lectures and participating in seminars considering the significance of relationships in the era of globalisation.

Michael's thesis is broad and comprehensive and can be expressed in three points:

1. That relationships are pivotal to the well-being of individuals and society as a whole.
2. That the environment within which we live and relate has a profound impact on the quality of relationships.
3. That much more could be done and needs to be done to strengthen relationships across public and private life.¹

The Relationships Foundation has developed diagnostic tools for organisations to assess how relationships within the organisation are affecting well-being, planning and performance.

In his CASE seminar address, Michael emphasised the difficulties of thinking 'relationally' in an age of globalisation “which is hostile at many points to a culture of relational proximity”. After exploring some of the features of contemporary globalisation—the speed and volume of information transmission, the increased mobility of populations, growing income disparities between rich and poor nations and



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individuals, a breakdown of national, cultural and trade borders—he examined the various consequences for relationships.

Described positively, Michael saw increased opportunities for new relationships across existing boundaries—the rise of internet chat

to redeveloping relationships in the global era, according to Michael. It is a complex notion, encompassing such factors as directness (intensity of relationship), continuity (length and stability of relationship), multiplexity (breadth and scope of relationship), parity (mutual

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rooms and email having facilitated relationships where none were previously possible. Negatively, there is less 'relational proximity' between individuals, professional teams and community figures. Whereas one might have known a bookseller ten years ago, now titles are supplied by mail from virtual 'places', such as Amazon.com. Where banks used to provide service in physical locations, they are now located primarily in electronic services, be they phone or internet.

The concept of relational proximity is a key

respect and involvement in relationship) and commonality (shared experience, values and goals). Far from simplistically concluding that, for instance, technology has reduced relational proximity, Michael Schluter has sought to examine these various factors in working out what impact the global era is having on key elements of our lives.

Rather than delivering a jeremiad, Dr Schluter offered a call to at least consider the relational consequences of change at every level. “Do you think about the

relational implications of cooking by microwave?” he asked an intrigued audience. “Whereas cooking often used to be a time of conversation between parent and child, between partners or visitors, this time has now been redistributed—usually in the direction of watching more television.”

Globalisation doesn’t, according to Schluter, alter human *needs* in relationships, but it is having a deep impact on how and whether those needs are met.

The Relationships Foundation has found applications for its work in prisons, companies, churches and universities. Although there are some broad non-ideological principles at work, Michael Schluter outlined carefully in his seminar how his relational approach derives from a biblical understanding of theology, anthropology and community. He finds a basis for his work in the Christian doctrine of the triune God—that is, that God is a

relationship of three persons in one being. This profound axiom for Christians is the starting point for an understanding of God as knowable, loving, faithful (making and keeping promises) and just (pursuing rightness of relations). From this ancient basis, the Relationships Foundation is developing remarkable tools for analysing the contemporary world.

I was struck by the comprehensive nature of the ‘R’ proposal, as it is often abbreviated. In an area of my own interest, continental philosophy, the consideration of relationships has moved into focus over the past fifteen years. Jacques Derrida is one responsible for the shift; recently, his philosophical writing has considered the value of friendships, the importance of mourning as an intellectual activity, and the nature of justice—all relational subjects. The work of Emmanuel Levinas has proposed that ethics is the first

philosophy—in other words, “the most primordial datum in human experience is the face-to-face relation with the other human”.² Levinas’s concerns focus on the significance of ‘the Other’, and it is arguably not too far from such a human concern to the doctrine of the Trinity and the relationship of this divine triune being to other beings.

The relational framework seems to emerge from a Christian world view, but offers much to other world views, too. It provides applied knowledge across many disciplines, within a very stimulating and fruitful theoretical field. And it changes the whole way we think about microwave ovens. ©

END NOTES

- 1 For a more detailed explanation of the ‘R’ philosophy, see the Relationships Foundation web site at http://www.relationshipsfoundation.org/about/Raison_d_etre.html#Relationships.
- 2 Emmanuel Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1996, p.161.

DRIVING THE POINT HOME

ANDREW CAMERON

Relational thinking can affect every aspect of our existence—even driving.

Rev Dr Andrew Cameron lectures in ethics and philosophy at Moore Theological College, Sydney.



Young adults enjoy the experience of growing into their power. I remember a ‘high-point’ of this experience in my own life. It had a surprising twist in the tail.

Driving is a heady experience for young adults. I was alone in my car, driving along a Sydney street. The sun was shining, the radio was loud, and a surging sense of freedom welled up within. I could point the car wherever I pleased, sing as loudly as I liked, do whatever I wanted. I was the Autonomous Western Man, a powerful free-radical of humanity, untouched and untouchable by the will of others. German dance artist, ATB, displays signs of this impulse in the song *Killer*: “So you want, to be free?/ To live your life, the way you want to be?”

We’ve all been there.

Although such thinking can take a deeply pathological turn—we know examples of it being taken to logical and antisocial extremes—something unexpected happened to me instead. A flood of anxiety began to rise around my pulsing sense of power. I realised that as I drove, I was trusting the capacities of dozens of other drivers.

The surface I drove upon, the vehicle I sat in and the radio I listened to were the result of hundreds of hours of effort by thousands upon thousands of people. The traffic lights I approached represented not just an effort in design, planning and construction, but were the salient peaks of a massive underlying tradition of justice. The food I had eaten that day, the people I had come from and was going to, the entire city that surrounded me...I actually sat atop a huge pyramid of humanity-in-partnership, all under a sun gratuitously given to us all.

I had noticed social reality. I had noticed relationships.

I’m told that on the Asian subcontinent, the Western notion of free-wheeling autonomy seems piteous. In their eyes,

Westerners live out a peculiarly unaccountable delusion that flies in the face of reality, and is proven unliveable in our lonely melancholy and dark, bitter thoughts. As ATB continues in *Killer*: “Solitary brother, is there still a part of you that wants to live? / Solitary sister, is there still a part of you that wants to give?”

How *can* we begin to see the social realities that are daily before our eyes? How can we develop an *ongoing* awareness of what I noticed on the road that day? Michael Schluter and John Lee are an invaluable help to us in this regard. In two books, *The R-Factor* (1993) and *The R Option* (2003), they argue that our *personal relationships* are the real ‘stuff’ of our lives. Our personal relationships are not the ‘white noise’ or background for some other plan or project at the forefront of our lives. Rather, relationships are what give our lives

can improve them. The authors mention their debt to Judaeo-Christian thought, but write in such a way as to make the book accessible to all.

I’ve found three shortcomings in *The R Option*. First, the authors cover so much interesting ground that observations don’t always cohere. For example, an Amish man keeps his phone connected to an answering machine in a booth on a neighbour’s property. The authors approve of how he has taken these steps to limit the impact of interruptions upon his relationships at home. But on the other hand, mobile telecommunications are ‘new realities’, and “we have to find ways of making [relationships] work effectively within these new constraints” (p. 29). How, then, should I evaluate technology? Should I subject it to searching enquiry, asking it to justify its existence? Or do I accept its



Copies of *The R Option* can be purchased through CASE at New College for A\$20 each (+p&tp). Ph. (61 2)9381 1999 or email case@newcollege.unsw.edu.au.

Our personal relationships are not the ‘white noise’ or background for some other plan or project at the forefront of our lives.

meaning. They are what all the other plans and projects, rightly understood, are for.

By ‘personal relationships’ they do not just mean that intimate circle of people who really matter to us. They draw the boundaries of our relational-consciousness ever-wider. They ask us to consider unnoticed relationships, such as with *clients* of companies where we are a shareholder. They ask us to consider the impact of technology upon relationships. For example, do mobile phones assist or hamper our relationships? Do they keep us connected with each other, or do they dangerously interrupt the connections we already have?

The later book (*The R Option*) should be read before the earlier one (*The R-Factor*), which considers the place that relationships should take in economic thought (in which Schluter has been trained). *The R Option* begins at the beginning. Aimed at busy professionals and management executives, it takes an elementary tour of our ‘relational inventory’, showing what makes our relationships tick and in what respects we

‘reality’ as a ‘constraint’, and accommodate to it accordingly? There is a complex collection of relational questions here which need more teasing out than we are given in Schluter’s book.

Second, the authors are less than explicit about the Judaeo-Christian thinking which undergirds much of their work. The relational approach is indebted to some theological notions such as the trinity, the God who makes promises, and the ‘love your neighbour’ ethic. Although *The R Option* is written for a general readership, this theological basis deserves to be on display. Little is made of how a reader might develop his or her own understanding of the biblical background to relational thinking. As a ‘way in’ to understanding biblical theology, this is perhaps a missed opportunity.

Thirdly, *The R Option* might have offered greater assessment of our all-too palpable emotional reasons for avoiding relationships. There are short-term emotional advantages in individualism, and significant pain is

sometimes associated with investing in relationships. In Christian thought, these difficulties result from a universal human disease called sin, which requires a divine diagnosis and cure. A chapter on forgiveness does come part of the way towards redressing the imbalance here.

But the book is an excellent way to bring sight where there is such relational blindness, such as I had driving my car. *The R Option* will repeatedly cause you to stare off into space, as you see anew your time, communications, money, mealtimes, sex life, family origins, health, security arrangements and more, all in relational terms. Reading *The R Option* might begin a personal revolution, rippling out to change your home, your workplace, and even your entire society. ©