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The Ethics of Discernment

Lonergan's Foundations for Ethics

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Introduction

When Bernard Lonergan's work began to be known in the 1960s, it was received with enthusiasm for its emphasis on both the dynamism of human knowing and the dynamism of the world. It was seen as a fresh alternative to the dominant epistemological and metaphysical views that reigned in secular and Catholic circles – logical positivism and scholasticism, respectively – which felt lifeless and static. Lonergan became best known for his innovative contributions to the theories of human subjectivity and human knowing – cognitional theory, as he called it – that appeared in his major work, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*.¹ Both in *Insight* and in his writings from that period, he showed the fruitfulness of his approach to all kinds of topics.

By comparison, Lonergan's interest in ethics seemed quite muted. While he intended in *Insight* to develop an ethics that “prolongs … self-criticism into an explanation of the origin of all ethical positions and into a criterion for passing judgment on each of them,” the book actually contains only one chapter devoted to ethics, which was circumscribed by the larger project of *Insight*.² Some of his most important ideas of ethical import came in the writings that followed *Insight* as he worked his way towards *Method in Theology*.³ Yet his later writings that touched on ethics were never given an integrated presentation comparable to his earlier treatments of cognition, human subjectivity, philosophy of science, history, and God. My own readings of his post-*Insight* writings that touched on ethics were deeply illuminating, but they also gave rise to many difficult questions which he did not himself answer explicitly, or that he addressed elliptically or in confusing ways. I gradually learned through my conversations with others that they shared many of the same questions and also found them difficult to answer.

This book presents the answers that I have come to after years of wrestling with such questions as: Why does he call hunger a “non-intentional” feeling, when it seems perfectly clear that the feeling of hunger does have an intentionality? What exactly did he mean in saying that feelings respond to values? Why did he say that feelings are “intermediate” between judgments of fact and judgments of value? Why did he say that ethical deliberation does not arrive at a grasp of the virtually unconditioned? What justifications can be provided for his pronouncements on the invariant structure of the human good? What support can be offered for his characterization of a transcultural scale of value preferences? In order to answer these and many other questions, I found it necessary to go beyond what Lonergan actually wrote, all the while endeavouring to take seriously what he did say about these matters. For this reason I have subtitled this book “Lonergan’s Foundations of Ethics.” This book, therefore, intends to round out an approach to ethics on the foundations that Lonergan began in his own writings.

In seeking answers to these and other questions, I have endeavoured to remain faithful to his approach to philosophy in general – what he called “self-appropriation.” Self-appropriation can be likened to the contemporary philosophical method of phenomenology – returning to the things themselves (*zu den Sachen selbst*, as Edmund Husserl put it) by discovering the correlations between the objects that appear to consciousness and the diverse activities of consciousness that constitute these as objects for consciousness. For Lonergan this meant that each person would pay careful attention to the activities that actually occur when he or she is endeavouring to know anything. In particular, Lonergan held that the roles of insight and inquiry had been shockingly overlooked or misunderstood throughout most of Western philosophy, and he set himself the task of reacquainting people with the prevalence of these activities in their own processes of knowing. He likened his method of self-appropriation to an experiment: “The crucial issue is an experimental issue, and the experiment will be performed not publicly but privately. It will consist in one’s own rational self-consciousness clearly and distinctly taking possession of itself as rational self-consciousness.”⁴ This means paying careful attention to one’s own experiences of coming to know (what Lonergan called the “data of consciousness”), endeavouring to understand those experiences and critically scrutinizing and correcting one’s understandings of those experiences. As with Husserl and other phenomenologists, Lonergan held that a person gains ability to resolve a host of philosophical and other conundrums, once he or she has taken the time for this kind of self-scrutiny.

Following Lonergan’s approach has been very beneficial in appropriating my own endeavours to know and to criticize what I thought I knew. So I endeavoured to follow this approach also in answering the further

questions pertaining to ethical knowing and acting, questions about ethics raised not only by Lonergan's writings, but also by the writings of many others, as well as questions that arose for me simply in trying to find my way towards thinking and acting ethically. In other words, I endeavoured to pay attention to my experiences of the various acts of consciousness that went into my efforts to think and act ethically, to understand those experiences, to critically evaluate my understandings, and to consider what courses of action I should take in light of this self-knowledge. All the while these efforts were enriched by my readings of the writings of Lonergan and many other authors. In turn, what I gradually learned about my own activities of trying to be ethical also transformed my readings about ethical matters as well.

The chapters of this book came out of this interaction between self-appropriation and reading. I have chosen to characterize the approach to ethics that resulted as "the ethics of discernment." Chapter 1 explores the notion of discernment in general. It situates Lonergan's approach of self-appropriation in relation to discernment as understood by some of his most important predecessors – principally, Aristotle, St. Paul, and St. Ignatius of Loyola. Self-appropriation, however, could only be given a preliminary sketch in this first chapter. Still, this preliminary sketch is needed in order that the reader might begin with some understanding of what I mean when I speak of the "ethics of discernment." A more complete account of self-appropriation is presented later, especially in chapters 3 and 10, and will serve to refine the reader's initial understandings. The remainder of the book is devoted to explaining in much greater detail just what discernment as self-appropriation means when extended into the realm of ethical thought and action, what some of its consequences are, and how this relates to the idea of a method in ethics.

Part I of this book is devoted to "Preliminaries." In addition to the chapter on "Discernment," chapters 2 and 3 treat Lonergan's philosophy of cognition. Chapter 2 is intended mainly for those who are new to Lonergan's approach to the phenomena of human knowing, although those already familiar may also find some things worthwhile there as well. It offers a summary of Lonergan's best known contributions to philosophy. Because it is a summary of a major philosophical achievement, this is a dense chapter. Readers new to Lonergan's thought are encouraged to make use of the excellent and more expansive treatments of most of the same material by other scholars recommended in chapter 3.

Chapter 2 itself is cast in the form of extended answers to Lonergan's three questions: What am I doing when I am knowing? (cognitional theory); Why is doing that knowing? (epistemology); What do I know when I do that? (metaphysics or theory of being). He himself never stated explicitly

what he regarded as the answers to these questions, so that chapter is original at least in making those answers explicit.

The central topic of the chapter is his approach to the problematic of objective knowledge, which also provides the background for much of the remainder of the book in two ways. First, Lonergan himself stressed that factual knowledge of reality is indispensable to authentic knowledge of ethical values and actions. Second, objectivity and normativity in ethics are among the greatest contemporary concerns, and Lonergan's approach to objectivity of factual knowing provides a unique and fruitful model for approaching the problem of objectivity in ethical knowing and acting.

No doubt many will contend justifiably that the greatest moral problem is not in knowing the right thing to do, but in actually doing it. But we live in an age where that deep ethical problem is masked and rationalized by a skepticism that there cannot be any objective knowledge of what is right, and a hyperbolic suspicion that every claim of objectivity in ethical matters can be nothing other than a cloaked effort to gain or maintain power. When such attitudes prevail, doing what is right has little chance of succeeding. So objectivity in ethical matters is of great importance at present and perhaps perennially.

Chapter 3 presents the notion of self-appropriation insofar as it pertains to factual knowing. That is to say, it presents what Lonergan called the "self-affirmation of the knower," and also offers a guide for readers to appropriate for themselves what they are doing when they are knowing. Self-appropriation does not consist in merely believing some statements about what knowing is on the authority of Lonergan or the words of this book or anyone else. Just as personal, self-reflexive knowledge is indispensable to the notion of discernment discussed in chapter 1, this is also true for self-appropriation of one's own processes of knowing.

The three major sections of this book (parts II–IV) are organized around three questions: What am I doing when I am being ethical? Why is doing that being ethical? What is brought about by doing that? These three questions are modelled on Lonergan's own three questions concerning knowing, objectivity, and reality.

The opening chapter of part II (chapter 4) forms the core of this book. There I offer my account of the expanded structure of ethical intentionalities that includes but goes beyond the structure of cognitional intentionality presented in chapter 2. Perhaps many readers will be satisfied that this book has reached its goal in chapter 4. However, it took me a very long time to work out, on the one hand, the structure of conscious activities involved in ethical knowing and doing and, on the other, their relationships to what Lonergan called "feelings as intentional responses to value." The role of such feelings, then, could only be given a preliminary sketch in chapter 4.

It takes several additional chapters (5 through 9) to analyze more fully those feelings and their proper (and improper) roles in ethical thought and action.

Since it is widely assumed that ethics and values are merely matters of subjective opinion, much of this book (parts II and III) is an extended argument that values, and especially ethical values, can be known objectively. This argument depends upon Lonergan's revolutionary approach to objectivity in the realm of factual knowing. He eschewed the idea that factual objectivity consists in accurate representation – that is, matching an idea formed in the mind with how things actually stand “already out there now” in the external, real world. Instead, he argued that factual objectivity results from authentic subjectivity – that is, faithfulness in answering all the questions posed about whether or not things really are so. Part III (“Why is Doing That Being Ethical?,” chapters 8–10) therefore explains how this notion of objectivity can be expanded to incorporate a faithfulness in answering all questions about value and the good and what ought to be done. The argument for the possibility of objectivity in ethics builds upon the previous chapters, which detail the structure of ethical intentionality, but now focuses in greater detail on the role played by the horizon of feelings in reaching judgments of value.

Because feeling responses to value play such a central and indispensable role in knowledge of ethical values, the objectivity of such knowledge depends utterly upon the character of our feeling lives – upon the structure of our “horizons of feelings.” Yet both cultural and personal events massively influence how our feelings come to be structured. Unless our feeling lives are restructured so as to empower authentic judgments of value, ethical knowledge and action will be distorted and lack their proper objectivity. Lonergan used the term “conversion” to designate the changes in the structuring of our feelings necessary for us to be capable of objective judgments of value. The first two parts of this book explain what Lonergan meant by three kinds of conversion, and why they are so essential to objective and authentic ethical knowing and living.

Chapter 7 argues that each person’s horizon of feelings determines what questions will be regarded as needing answers in order to substantiate a judgment of value. Chapter 8 argues that two fundamental feelings – the unrestricted notion of value and the experience of unrestricted being-in-love – are permanent sources of tension and self-transcendence in those horizons. These two feelings, I propose, provide standards for assessing a person’s own horizons of feelings that are internal to that horizon itself. When the composition of the rest of the feelings in a horizon is in harmony with those two fundamental feelings, then the further questions regarded as pertinent, and the subsequent judgments and actions that follow from that

horizon, will be objective in the unqualified sense. However, when there are unresolved tensions in the feeling horizon arising from the unrestricted notion of value and unrestricted being-in-love, then judgments of value and subsequent actions will be objective only relative to that horizon. The tensions that arise in each person's horizon of feelings from the unrestricted notion of value, unrestricted being-in-love, and the normative scale of value motivate transformations (conversions) of horizons of feelings that will resolve these tensions. The transformed horizons of feelings that the tensions orient towards are horizons out of which objective judgments of value and ethical actions come forth.

The composition of every horizon of feelings will contain some scale of value preferences, at least implicitly. I refer to this *de facto* scale as a person's existential scale of value preferences. Chapter 9 offers illustrations of how we make *comparative* judgments of value, in order to bring to light these existential scales of value. The chapter argues further that, in addition to the existential scale, there is also a normative, invariant, transcultural scale of value preferences. This normative scale also makes its presence felt within a person's horizon of feelings, *even though* a person's individual, existential scale may deviate from it in significant ways. There will also be tensions in the horizon of feelings that betray this deviation. These tensions testify to the existence of a scale of normative value preference that can provide grounds for objective judgments of comparative value.

It is one thing to argue that *a normative hierarchical scale of values reveals itself in human thinking, deciding, and acting, even when it is being violated*. It is another thing altogether to formulate accurately the hierarchical organization of that scale. Because Lonergan relied on the works of Max Scheler and Dietrich von Hildebrand for his idea of a scale of value preference, their differing accounts of the elements in the scale are compared. Yet the question of the accuracy of Lonergan's own account is postponed until chapter 14 because it presupposes the discussion of Lonergan's account of the good.

This book reaches a certain climax in chapter 10, "Self-Appropriation, Part II: Why Is Doing That Being Ethical?" This chapter explores in detail the fuller meaning of self-appropriation. Much of what is promised in chapter 1 is fulfilled at that point. All that comes afterwards – especially regarding Lonergan's theory of the good and a model for method in ethics – depends upon what is gathered together in chapter 10.

Since the objective of this book is to provide an integrated view of Lonergan's disparate ideas about ethics, the topics in part IV ("What Is Brought About by Doing That?," chapters 11–14) are explorations of his ideas about the good. It shows the implications of the expanded account of ethical intentionality and objectivity for a comprehensive theory of the good.

Contemporary philosophical schools of ethics tend to divide into those based upon deontological notions of right action and proper procedures on the one hand (and their “thin” theories of the good), and those based upon a more robust (or “thick”) theory of the good or value on the other hand. For the ethics of discernment, this is an unnecessary dichotomy. The structure of ethical activities (the most basic, perhaps “thin” ethical procedures) implies a surprisingly rich account of the good, including the diversity of natural goods, the goodness of the natural universe as a whole, the structure of “the human good,” Lonergan’s approach to the problem of evil, and the relation of all these things to transcendent goodness. For this reason, part IV is much more technical than the rest of the book. It works out in careful detail just how the structure of ethical intentionality entails a fundamental, pre-choice commitment to a structure of the good and a scale of values that is not limited to mere subjective preference, or even to the specificities of particular cultures or epochs.

These accounts of the good and of ethical knowing and acting provide a basis for entering into the very difficult ethical disputes of our time. Part V (chapters 15 and 16) therefore, explains how Lonergan’s idea of the “eight functional specialties” can be used to make unusual but much-needed contributions to those disputes. I argue that this is a method that integrates these functional specialties and meets the challenge Lonergan set for himself in *Insight* but never fully met: a method in ethics that would be comparable to his work on method in metaphysics and theology. Those final chapters do not, however, actually apply the method to such disputes, but rather offer tools that can be used fruitfully by those engaging in such controversies.

Throughout this book I have provided concrete illustrations of unfamiliar and technical ideas either from literature, world events, or from my own experiences. Much of the length of this book is due to those illustrations, as well as to the effort to bring all of Lonergan’s ideas touching on ethical concerns into a coherent whole. I hope that the clarity gained from these illustrations will more than compensate the reader’s patience with the length.