

The Ethical Person and The Habit of Reason

“One has to acquire the skills and learning of a competent human being in some walk of life.
One has to grow in sensitivity and responsiveness to value if one’s humanity is to be authentic.
But development is not inevitable and so results vary. There are human failures.

There are mediocrities.” *Bernard Lonergan.*

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1. Introduction:

The thesis of this paper is that the monitor of moral behaviour in a free and democratic society is not a code of law, but rather the ethical person whose actions are the result of moral judgment based on normative standards developed by the habitual resort to reason. This paper will attempt to outline the history of the search for normative standards, and the qualities of ethical or “Virtuous” persons. The underlying conclusion is that virtuous individuals are driven not by subjective and fleeting notions of the good, but by their engagement in a process of debate and judgment based on good reasons.

Good reasons imply values and meaning and so ethical persons must evaluate the facts and experiences of life to make choices directed at the good and the true. We may live in a society where there is no longer a shared concept of the good, but there is now more than ever before, a pervasive desire to find meaning. Moral leadership requires serious debate not only about the “is” but also the “ought” in human inter-relationships, and a renewed understanding of the value and meaning of life as a human person.

2. Persons as Subject: Embodied Reason.

Question: Why is it important to be a reasonable person? Answer: The alternative is emotivism. Persons who abandon reason rely on feelings and perhaps the vagaries of intuition alone to make choices and are very often subject to manipulation, i.e. being used as a means to an end. They become objects. Persons as subjects are not only reasonable, i.e. they perceive reality and make reasoned choices for responsible action, but they also are not objects of reality.

A person, (as opposed to a chair, a car, an airplane), is not a means to an end. In the corporate context it seems that the employee from the most junior to the most senior desires recognition and is most productive and satisfied in a work environment which does not simply see that person as a means to an end.

Our ethical knowledge is drawn from human experience and consequently needs to be reassessed in the light of further experience. Conscience formation is as much about the development of human sensitivity as it is about being educated in the principles of morality.¹ Being engaged with our whole being we are awake and alive to the world around us and so we experience life very deeply in all of its good and less than good aspects. However, experience only tells us what is. The more challenging question is “how do we move to the ought?”

Debate about the “ought” is essential to the meaningful existence of rational human beings. Whether individuals are engaged in debate from a purely emotive stance in which beliefs are exchanged but issues are polarized and rarely resolved, or are seriously engaged in a rational discussion, the individual as subject must be seen as a person, a subject. The more one cultivates his or her ability to learn, to know, to understand, and to debate, the more likely the person is to find fulfillment as subject to be expressed and not object to be manipulated.

When we speak of persons as subject, i.e. the person observing and processing life experiences and interacting with other persons doing the same, we speak of what Bernard Lonergan refers to as human “inter-subjectivity”. This is not persons “existing” in the same universe and politely avoiding or tolerating one another, but it is persons thinking of themselves as living, reasoning individuals who express themselves in every aspect, (mentally, physically, emotionally, spiritually) in relationship with others. With authentic “inter-subjectivity”, we have a society, which is not a collective of individuals, but a web of persons connected and living together in a collaborative effort to understand such transcendental concepts as the truth and the truly good. It is an understanding of existential reality, but what is fundamental is recognition of some standard for weighing these insights which come and go with each new experience and in each new age.

When one makes the statement that the ethical person is one who adopts the habit of reason, there can be a tendency to think of the mind as separate from the body and conclude that this approach will not take into account the symbiotic processes, which work together to give one the “whole picture” when, perceiving the physical world from the standpoint of the human person. The person is, by virtue of its circumstance here on earth, embodied reason and these symbiotic processes within the person can be corrupted when the interaction of the person with outside stimulus (the “other”) is with a mind and a body each perceiving, but not together in the organic way intended. The mind or the emotions will dominate, or at the very least not incorporate and process perceptions together. Isolated from each other, what would otherwise be authentic reasoning will result in a distortion of judgment.

The kind of reasoning therefore which I refer to as proper to development of normative standards of evaluating the facts of life is this full human process. Because of the fallibility of the human condition, it is essential that the individual reasoning person have resort to normative standards in order to test one’s insights and judgments against an accepted standard of the good, or at the very least a standard of historically and traditionally accepted notions of the good. In order to establish and maintain this normative standard, we must acquire the habit of reason.

Not only is reason and debate essential to an authentic understanding of the good, the true, etc., knowledge of these things is progressive by nature. We begin where others leave off and so we have something to measure our new ideas against. To the extent that we do not have authentic, reasonable individuals, we do not have a historically accepted perception of truth against which evolving insights can be perceived and understood or in fact rejected. We can become directionless. Without accepted normative standards, individuals in society can become a-moral and lack meaning.

3. Good Reasons and the Need for Normative Standards.

Good reasons in arguments about matters of fact are generally thought to be those that are accepted by reasonable persons after serious rational debate. In the realm of moral argument, positions are often valid, i.e. conclusions follow from the premises, but the rival premises are such that we have no rational way of weighing the claims of one against the other.² In emotivism, which has tended to dominate post-modernist thinking, moral judgment, (unlike facts) are neither true nor false. How I feel determines my judgment and there is no accepted rational method of determining the basis of authority for determining moral judgments. Emotivism claims that every attempt, past or present to provide a rational justification for an objective morality has in fact failed.³ This position is one which would strip reason of the human aspects of embodied reason, primarily passion, (the thing that moves us). By requiring that a rational method is a rigid and scientific process, we separate the mind

from the body, and we dehumanize the process of discovery of normative standards. What makes us human is not only that we reason, but also that we reason as passionate and emotional human beings.

Moral judgment ideally emanates from the good we experience within. It is not based on static concepts of truth, but on an understanding of the dynamic, life-giving nature of truth. The intersubjectivity of persons expressing themselves and being enriched by free and open debate is the only hope for continued progress towards enlightenment of truth and the truly good. Even when goods are identified through such process, the question of the ultimate good, which assists us in prioritizing the goods, remains to be sought after even when not understandable by reason alone.

It was Aristotle who first observed that man is not a functional concept.⁴ If we accept this premise, a person, though he or she provides no “useful” purpose as defined by a particular society, remains a person. This must mean that even in a society focused on “doing”, “being” will continue to be appreciated and valued, or at the very least the person as subject will not be dispensable simply because he or she serves no useful purpose. So long as we as a society acknowledge and value “being” we advance toward the good and toward meaning. Normative standards protect these values so that those in society who cannot participate in reasoned debate continue to contribute to the enrichment of the debate itself by virtue of their “being” because they often pose those transcendental questions of Why? And How? And What for?

The search for Objective Normative Standards:

(a) The Limits of Philosophy.

In the 20th Century Nietzsche provided a major insight, which has revolutionized Philosophy and opened the door to the post-modern era. His insight was that what appears to be objectivity is in fact an expression of subjective will. The more dominant a person, a class, a country in its political/social will, the more that individual or group will be seen to be expressing the objective viewpoint. This insight brought into question the rational and more scientific political and social thought laid down by Enlightenment thinkers and paved the way for what we now acknowledge as post-modernist philosophical views of morality.

The post-modernist view is in fact de-constructionist, to the extent it does not accept the concept of objective normative standards in the philosophical tradition of the modernist Enlightenment tradition. While Nietzsche’s insight is brilliant and cannot be dismissed in any debate to follow, such insight should not lead to a fundamental revolution and rejection of reason as a tool for defining objective normative standards. Normative Standards, like truth, are objective in that they do not reside in the mind of any one individual, and it is only reasoned debate which holds the possibility of future and more advanced insights.

At any point in time, there must be some consensus of accepted normative standards to guide such debate. When this debate breaks down, and we lose faith in the concept of guiding moral principles, we are vulnerable both to, and to becoming, self-serving, a-moral individuals and the progress of society as a web of intersubjectivity is deterred. Nietzsche’s insight was profound, but like all insights, it must be continually revisited and re-evaluated in the light of history and experience. This is the only way that such insights can provide the basis for a new understanding of objective normative standards.

Today, we have a “rights” mentality which states that establishment of certain rights should, because they are self-evident to any human person, lead to action to protect such rights. This is strangely like the Enlightenment period’s reference to an objective natural law. However, rights are not normative. When we are faced with competing rights and values we are left with the age-old question of “What is a good reason for giving priority to one right over another where there are competing individual rights. It is the thesis of this paper that a good reason is one which will help the individual to recognize what constitutes the transcendent concept of the good and the supreme good.

While debates in religious traditions are within a telos, which has provided a framework and meaning for such debate through the centuries, and in both the East and the West religious traditions present an understanding and belief in God as the Supreme Being, the debate over normative standards must still be rational and be conclusions based on good reasons. If it is not, persons will be considered objects of each other and of God, to be controlled and manipulated and not understood in their wholeness and their intersubjectivity. Ends will continually be used to justify the means.

Applying moral norms often requires imagination and creativity. Good moral decisions frequently require a grasp of the situation and a sensitivity regarding which elements in the situation are most important, imaging different possibilities, calculating probable results of possible courses of action and deciding which course of action best achieves various goods while minimizing evils. Moral decision making in many cases is rather like the process by which a creative artist discovers how to express himself in a beautiful work of art.⁵ Figurative expressions of norms (unlike inflexible codes of law) are always open ended, i.e. open to growth. I would add to this that in “healthy” and life-giving religious traditions there is always the possibility of growth, but always the understanding that authentic growth is tied to a core of experience and knowledge gleaned from experience, which can be relied upon, to guide ones choices and ultimate actions along the way. As persons whose essence is embodied reason, we have the task of listening to the past, which speaks to us in the present, so as to, understand that while the present is shaped by lessons of the past, the events of history are understood differently from the perspective of the present.

The movement today toward fundamentalism could be seen as rigid objectivism of religious belief attempting to create rigid laws out of what should be a flexible, inspiring and enlightened spirituality which is revealed through the intersubjectivity of human persons. A person centred ethics is not inconsistent with religious tradition which includes worship and a recognition of objective moral authority.

The unique aspect of religious belief is that it presents a concept of the ultimate and supreme good. In the Judeo-Christian tradition of the west, there is also the concept of salvation from our fallible human condition, always emanating from a supreme being, which embodies the ultimate good. The very weaknesses of human nature identified by religious traditions, i.e. the fallibility of the human person, is countered by the practice that (despite some failings), religious traditions contribute strongly to the formation of practices that reform the individual by the development of human character. With the proper development of character, the unreliable urges, wishes and intuitions of religious or any other belief become less frequent, or weaker, or are more quickly recognized as unbelievable.⁶ Even in the realm of religious belief, reason is the best tool for identifying the unreliable.

In the Muslim tradition, the fallibility of human persons was identified in history and a text evolved which attempted to set down a code of behavior more fitting to the noble life. In a pluralist society where there is no apparent consensus regarding right behavior, the question becomes, “are there common public moral values which can serve as goals of a common effort, or must morals become either a private matter or a subject of public conflict?”⁷ If we agree with the concept of persons as subject, the corollary to this is that individual actions that flow from individual moral judgment is not a private matter. In order to find common ground to resolve the apparent conflict of views on what constitutes right action, it is helpful to think of moral judgment as a reality of every day life and not a matter requiring our attention only when certain publicly identified issues are raised. The common ground appears to be an acceptance by religious and non-religious persons alike that what is uniquely human is that we are people of conscience.

Judgment based on conscience is not a judgment according to a feeling, but according to an ability to judge. Foresight, the capacity to vision the future, requires that we recognize not just the good or evil in the present, but also what potential or possible, (consequential) good/evil will result. One who does not have a mature and properly developed character, has no internal mechanism for judging his or her appetites and properly weighing particular goods and evils in comparison with

each other. He or she must depend on others. We need the help of general rules to inform us about preferences among goods when they conflict.⁸ Three factors which may cause an individual to make moral judgments in a subjective rather than objective way are (a) ignorance of facts; (b) ignorance of norms; and (c) bias. Bias is learned and one source of learning is the culture in which we live.

The History of morality and moral philosophy is the history of successive challenges to some pre-existing moral order. It is only by this reference that questions of natural superiority can be settled.⁹ What are the rational standards for judging the superiority of one option(theory) over another? In the words of Nietzsche, what has in the past appeared to be objectively good has very often been simply an expression of subjective will by those in a position to impose it on those less empowered by reason and position.

A telos, a concept of the good which will help us order other goods, transcends the limited goods of practices by consulting the good of a whole human life: the whole human life as a unity to avoid a subversive arbitrariness. A telos is necessary to personal integrity. With a telos and a sense of personal integrity, life has meaning. It is more than a sequence of episodes.¹⁰

To the extent that practices become external to the person, i.e. the person is “going through the motions”, but is not engaging the person in a relationship with other human beings, the more there is an objectification of those who might suffer the consequence of choices, actions and decisions. A recent example of the “objectification” of persons is the corporate scandal of Enron. Persons in authority who should have been guided by normative standards were willing to use persons, employees of Enron, for personal gain. The choices made revealed a willingness to use persons as means to an end.

In trying to understand situations of a total failure of ethical behaviour, we ask the fundamental question, “What is the ethical thing to do? We may probe more deeply and ask ourselves the question “What is the ethical life?” According to Kierkegaard, “The ethical life is the commitments and responsibilities of the future springing from the past episode in which obligations were conceived and debts assumed into the present, to past and to future in such a way as to make of a human life a unity, i.e. a narrative”. To this I would add that lives can be lived as one episode following another. Persons can move from moment to moment never learning from past experience or having any vision of the future and probably survive as well as many others. But when this lack of vision appears at a societal level or indeed on a global basis we have not only a crisis in action, but also a crisis of meaning.

MacIntyre concludes with the view that our pluralistic culture possesses no method of weighing; no rational criterion for deciding between claims based on legitimate entitlement against claims based on need. Without a telos, one resorts to clamoring for the satisfaction of present needs and wants in an attempt to find fulfillment and meaning. “Weighing these claims, (i.e. needs), as “moral” claims with a sense of the absolute good is inappropriate and misleading. We have to reintroduce the notion of transcendence/meaning and a sense of integrity of the individual in moving towards a transcendent good.”¹¹

Why do we as individuals and as a society struggle with moral issues? Why do experiences in life often present to us a moral dilemma to choose one thing instead of another? It is self-evident that people are not only conscious of alternatives and the need to make choices, but also that there is a conscience which brings our attention to the consequences of choice and some notion of the good and the better, and for many a search for the supreme good that orders these other goods. Reasoning individuals have a natural propensity not just to reason, but also to identify and understand and find meaning. If we do not see the need to express oneself in meaningful relationship with other individuals, we fail to grow and to learn. We all have insights, but it is the exchange of insights that assist in making progress toward the truth in a given situation or evolving understanding of ultimate truth and meaning.

4. Habits

In an article entitled “Getting Egypt out of the People: Aquinas’s Contributions to Liberation”, Judith W. Kay extracts from the writings of Thomas Aquinas his reflections on what he calls the “Habits”. Habits are sustained ways of being moved, thinking, and acting, which through repeated experience, choice and action have become second nature to us. Moral habits are qualities of character that dispose us well or badly to our end, the flourishing of our nature. A virtue is a good habit, a “characteristic condition relevant to a things’s nature”; vices are bad habits contrary to inherent nature. And so, according to Aquinas in the essence of the person is the good.

The “flourishing of our nature” does not mean satisfaction of our desires as narrowly understood in a capitalist culture. Too often people are misled into believing that satisfaction of any want will lead to fulfillment. Thomas, in contrast, believes that there are truly human desires, and these must be distinguished from acquired tastes. More accurately, Thomas speaks of truly human attractions; humans are so constituted as to be naturally attracted to the good-for-humans, the ultimate good being enjoyment of God. Habits are thus fundamentally relational – they reflect how well or how poorly we relate to the good (ultimately to God) for which we have ontological wellsprings of desire.¹²

By acquiring habits, our intellectual, volitional and affective powers can be developed fully. We can choose the habits from which we would like to act and we can intentionally resist acting on the basis of undesirable habits.

There are different types of habits of which moral virtues are a special type. Moral virtues are a type of habit that (1) affords a clear perception of reality; (2) enables effective engagement with the environment; (3) incorporates voluntarily chosen and sustained commitment; (4) permits flexible thought and action within the operation of the virtue while preserving freedom of choice to act viciously; and (5) embodies appropriate passion. These desirable habits differ in kind from vices, which are deprived of these characteristics.¹³ The virtuous or ethical person is the human embodiment of the moral virtues. He or she is a person who is aware; is engaged in effective relationship; is free to act or not to act and is passionate in ways appropriate to the environment and circumstances in which he or she is engaged throughout the experiences of life.

5. The Role and Function of Virtue.

James Keenan, in *Virtues For Ordinary Christians*¹⁴ states that every human act is a moral act. Morality is the study of human living. We adopt practices to handle daily life. Practices form habits and habits form us! Lasting changes take time and are not simply a matter of will or intention. The decision to change ones habits occurs in a context, i.e. we make a choice that we want to be different, but a decision to change must be deeply rooted to take effect. In the Catholic Christian tradition it is believed that it is the grace of God that beckons and continually calls us forth to see opportunities to grow and change in relationship with God, the source of all good, and with each other. In a secular sense, one can sense that there is an ultimate good, perhaps human compassion, which calls one to give priority to certain goods over another. This awareness calls for a change in practices, which form the habits that form us.

In a secular society, it is exceedingly difficult to establish a consensus of what constitutes the virtuous person. Alasdair MacIntyre provides the following definition:

“A virtue is an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods”. He willingly acknowledges that this definition is inadequate, but it does illuminate the place of the virtues in human life and that if we fail to identify with the key virtues, the internal goods of life are not accessible to us.¹⁵

Virtues function in practices. A practice produces two types of goods, (1) external and (2) internal. Justice, courage and honesty are the key virtues required for internal goods. These internal goods are what lead to fulfillment and meaning and to the engagement of the individual in a life experience that benefits the entire community, thereby producing some external good. One who genuinely possesses a virtue can be expected to exercise it in any situation, and every practice requires a certain kind of relationship between those who participate in it.¹⁶ Institutions are required to sustain practices, however, without the key virtues of justice, courage and honesty, practices cannot resist the corrupting power of institutions. “Whenever the virtues begin to lose their central place, Stoic patterns of thought and action reappear.”¹⁷ Hence the call for rules in our modern day reaction to corruption in corporations and other public institutions.

Alasdair MacIntyre defines a practice as “any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved are systematically extended.”¹⁸

The Historicity of virtue means that the ideals for character are shaped and modified over time. Anne Patrick¹⁹ argues that there are two predominant paradigms of virtue which are in conflict: (1) Patriarchal and (2) Egalitarian or Feminist. The first is deeply dependent upon obedience to a hierarchy and the second is dependent on commitment to a call to universal holiness. In model 1, there is an emphasis of domination of the flesh by the will. In the extreme it presents a dichotomy between the mind and body. In model 2, reason is embodied. Respect for all created reality is fundamental. The emphasis is not on control and domination to impose some greater good but to build social relationships of respect, equality and mutuality from which the greater good will emerge.

Choices must be discerned in view of the relevant circumstances, values and principles involved in each case. Anne Patrick²⁰ argues that we need new myths and new models of virtue to replace patriarchal narratives. The shift she is advocating is a new paradigm of virtue in which Justice is central. I would argue that no one of the virtues should be central as they should be interacting and fluid in the search for objectivity. For example if we make individual or social justice central and fail to emphasize the need for courage and truthfulness, we may find ourselves attempting to impose an ideology on others rather than enter into that intersubjective relationship from which, over time, the virtue of justice will emerge. It is my assertion here that no one of the virtues reflected in practices should be sacrificed or compromised for the sake of the other.

Despite her call for new narratives and a new model of virtue to replace the patriarchal, Anne Patrick does in fact respect tradition and emphasizes the need to look not only at the present and the future, but to respect and draw on the lessons of history.

At page 88, she states:

“I hope there will always be communities of Christians who focus their energies on prayer and apostolic activities, some of which find it helpful to practice celibacy, communal ownership of property, unfailing hospitality, explicit dedication to non-violence and so forth, but I believe our times call for an end to romantic praise of elitist notions of poverty, chastity and obedience which lend themselves so readily to fundamentalism and authoritarianism. It would be good if the currently needed character traits associated with the traditional three vows could be restored for the whole church in language intelligible to everyone. Solidarity with the poor and oppressed, sexual integrity and justice, and dedication and co responsibility in the use of one’s talents and energies for the common good of the earth and its inhabitants.....everyone is called to the perfection of charity.”

Charity, in Catholic moral theology, unlike the virtues acquired through exercise, is God's free gift enabling us to discover what is most important to us. Charity helps us every day to integrate the many motivations we harbour affecting us at deeper levels of life. Charity helps us to love by subduing the strains of self-centredness. It is love – the very presence of God in our lives. Charity is about feeling intensely our love for God, neighbour and self. We grow in charity as we respond to it.²¹

Judgment has an indispensable role in the life of the virtuous person which it does not and could not have for example in the merely law abiding or rule abiding person. Intellectual virtues are derived from learning; character virtues are derived from habit.²²

The good is never to be accepted in its entirety without a critical and rational response, but neither is it to be rejected out of hand as a result of the fleeting insight of the individual in his or her perception of reality, which is always limited in time and experience. To be a subject is to understand the impact and influence of the emotions, and yet to express one's insights freely and in a manner which is self-actualized with a view to contributing to the general body of knowledge which forms the basis for future insights into the nature of the human good.

As stated above, there are two kinds of goods, which can be achieved from a practice: (1) external and (2) internal. External goods are those, which are accidents (result from) social interaction or circumstance. External goods are competitive. Internal goods, which can only be specified by means of example, require participation by the individual in order for that individual to be aware of them. Justice, courage and honesty are the key virtues required for internal goods. I postulate that these virtues when embodied in the habits of the individual living in relationships with persons as subjects are what lead to fulfillment and meaning.

6. Reason as Method.

Method (in intellectual pursuits) is a framework for collaborative creativity. It is more an art than a science. It is a reflection on previous achievements.²³ Understanding the process of reasoning is key to accepting the proposition that the ethical person must adopt the habits of reason. The following are some of the key concepts relevant to the notion of human beings as mediators of meaning.

(a) Operations.

Logical operations are operations on propositions, terms and relations. Operations are transitive, i.e. they have objects. In the psychological sense this means that by the operations one becomes aware of the object. The presence is a psychological event. The subject, (i.e. the person reasoning), is the operator. He or she operates consciously. The subject has self-awareness and is aware that he or she is operating present to herself or himself operating and experiencing the self-operating. Introspection is the process of objectifying the contents of consciousness.²⁴

Different levels of consciousness and intentionality have to be recognized. The first is the empirical level, i.e. sense experience. We sense, perceive, imagine, feel, speak and move. The second is the intellectual level on which we inquire, come to understand, express what we have understood, and work out the presuppositions and implications of our expressions. On the rational level we reflect, marshal the evidence, pass judgment on the truth or falsity, certainty or probability, of a statement. Finally, on the responsible level we are concerned with ourselves, our own operations, our goals and so deliberate about possible courses of action, evaluate them, decide and carry out our decisions. All four operations are intentional and conscious, but these vary from level to level. The fuller self emerges at stage 4.²⁵

"There is a still further dimension to being human and there we emerge as persons, meet one another in a common concern for values; seek to abolish the organization of human living on the basis of competing egoisms and to replace it by an organization on the basis of man's perceptiveness and intelligence, his reasonableness and his responsible exercise of freedom."²⁶

Different operations yield qualitatively different modes of being conscious subjects and they yield qualitatively different modes of intending. The intending of our senses for example is an attending. It is selective but not creative. The intending of our imaginations may be representative or creative. What is grasped in insight, is neither an actually given datum of sense nor a creation of the imaginations but an intelligible organization that may or may not be relevant to data. The intending that is conception puts together both the content of the insight and as much of the image as is essential to the occurrence of the insight; the result is the intending of any concrete being selected by an incompletely determinate (and, in that sense, abstract) content.²⁷ So that abstract thinking can be insightful without being creative and can be creative without being insightful! Most importantly, however, in the context of moral judgment, human reasoning and insights are, by their nature, fallible.

The most fundamental difference in modes of intending lies between the categorical and the transcendental. Categories are determinations. They are limited by the intellectual capacity, the personal experience, including cultural context of the person doing the reasoning. The transcendental, while it includes the categorical, goes beyond these and is contained in the questions prior to the answers. They are a priori because they go beyond what we know to seek what we do not know yet.²⁸ In Lonergan's words, it is the radical intending that moves us from ignorance to knowledge. Intelligence takes us beyond experiencing to ask what and why and how and what for?

(b) The Transcendent Good.

Reasonableness takes us beyond the answers of intelligence to ask whether the answers are true and whether what they really mean is so. Responsibility goes beyond fact and desire (sentiment) and possibility to discern between what is truly good and what is only apparently good. Lonergan accounts for the processes of reason and attempts to define the truly good:

"While the transcendental notions are broader than any category, it would be a mistake to infer that they are more abstract. On the contrary, they are utterly concrete. For the concrete is the real not under this or that aspect but under its every aspect in its every instance. But the transcendental notions are the fount not only of initial questions but also of further questions. Moreover, though the further questions come only one at a time, still they keep coming. There are ever further questions for intelligence pushing up towards a fuller understanding and ever further doubts urging us to a fuller truth. The only limit to the process is at the point where no further questions arise and that point would be reached only when we correctly understood everything about everything, only when we knew reality in its every aspect and every instance.

*Similarly, by the good is never meant some abstraction. Only the concrete is good. Again, as the transcendental notions of the intelligible, the true, the real head for a complete intelligibility, all truth, the real in its every part and aspect, so the transcendental notion of the good heads for a goodness that is beyond criticism. For that notion is our raising questions for deliberation. It is our being stopped with the disenchantment that asks whether what we are doing is worthwhile. That disenchantment brings to light the limitation in every finite achievement, the stain in every flawed perfection, the irony of soaring ambition and faltering performance. It plunges us into the height and depth of love, but it also keeps us aware of how much our loving falls short of its aim. In brief, the transcendental notion of the good so invites, presses, harries us, that we could rest only in an encounter with a goodness completely beyond its powers of criticism."*²⁹

(c) Judgments of Value.

Three components unite in the judgment of value:

1. Knowledge of reality (especially human reality);
2. Intentional responses to values;
3. Initial thirst towards moral self-transcendence constituted by the judgment of value itself.

When knowledge is deficient we have “fine feelings” which are apt to be expressed as “moral idealism”, i.e. lovely proposals that don’t work out and often do more harm than good. However, full knowledge alone is not enough. Moral feelings have to be cultivated, enlightened, strengthened, refined, criticized and “pruned of oddities”. Finally, the development of knowledge and the development of moral feeling head to the existential discovery, the discovery of oneself as a moral being, the realization that one not only chooses between courses of action, but also thereby makes oneself an authentic human being or an unauthentic one. With that discovery, there emerges in consciousness the significance of personal value and the meaning of personal responsibility”.³⁰

One’s judgments of value are revealed as the door to one’s fulfillment or to one’s loss. Experience of one’s failure and weakness raises questions about one’s salvation and on a more fundamental level, there arises the question of God. ...But a well-rounded moral judgment is ever the work of a fully developed self-transcending subject or as Aristotle would put it, of a “virtuous person”.³¹

Terminal values are the values that are chosen. Originating values are those that do the choosing. They are authentic persons achieving self-transcendence by their good choices.

“One has to acquire the skills and learning of a competent human being in some walk of life. One has to grow in sensitivity and responsiveness to value if one’s humanity is to be authentic. But development is not inevitable and so results vary. There are human failures. There are mediocrities.”

Lonergan refers to “aberrations of common sense” as being the variable. Egoisms of the individual and of the group are to blame for both the breakdown of the individual and/or the group:

“Group egoism directs development to its own aggrandizement and provides a market for opinions, doctrines, theories that will justify its ways and at the same time reveal the misfortunes of other groups to be due to their depravity. Of course, as long as the successful group continues to succeed, as long as it meets each new challenge with a creative response, it feels itself the child of destiny and it provokes more admiration and emulation than resentment and opposition. But development, guided by group egoism is bound to be one-sided. It divides the body social not merely into those that have and those that have not, but also makes the former the representatives of the cultural flower of the age to leave the latter apparent survivals from a forgotten era. Finally, in the measure that the group encouraged and accepted an ideology to rationalize its own behaviour, in the same measure it will be blind to the real situation, and it will be bewildered by the emergence of a contrary ideology that will call to consciousness an opposed group egoism.”³²

(d) The Good of Order.

The good of order, is the concrete way in which cooperation among persons is (or is not, *emphasis added*) working out. The good of order is not a set of laws or a design for a Utopian state or some super institution. It has a basis in institution, but it is a product of all the skill and knowhow, all the industry and resourcefulness, all the ambition and fellow feeling of a whole people adapting to each change of circumstance; meeting each new emergency, struggling against every tendency to disorder.³³

(e) Human Inter-subjectivity

Meaning is carried in human-intersubjectivity, in art, symbols, and language and in the lives and deeds of persons.³⁴ There is subjectivity of action and feeling and also of communications of meaning.³⁵ Human inter-subjectivity is like an embrace compared to a glance. There is an exchange on many levels and as with art and symbolic language, there is meaning simply in the meeting which may or may not be expressed. Returning to the fundamental notion of persons as subjects and not objects, human inter-subjectivity presents the possibility of persons having a sense of belonging to an order, which is uniquely human. An order from which we derive meaning.

8. Conclusion.

With the rejection of Natural law theories, Alasdair MacIntyre asks, “Is there an order to be preserved which requires from us certain ends?”³⁶ I would answer this question in the affirmative. When progress is being made on the human journey, the outward sign is that we are enlightened and we better understand each other and our inter-subjectivity as well as our later experiences. We need to evolve in societal structures which are flexible enough to allow for the free flow of human relations in all their aspects, and at the same time have some standards and guiding principles which sustain good practices with in this loose order. Only virtuous persons can enforce these guiding principles through practices and as we learn, our practices evolve. We never, however, completely reject the past, and so in the words of Bernard Lonergan, “we don’t have to keep starting all over again”. So long as rational debate is seen as fundamental to an enlightened and meaningful journey, tradition will be essential in contributing to an ever evolving, objective normative standard which remains open to the present reflecting on the past and projecting into a hopeful future. We need to express new insights in reasoned arguments so that the “universal argument” progresses and new insights are tested against the old.

If we debate from an emotive stance, we argue about beliefs, which are subjective and perhaps legitimately held, but such debates can only result in conflict. Competing beliefs tend to develop into competing theories and ideologies. A willingness to concede to the fact that we are fallible human beings, limited in time and space can lead to an appreciation of the need for an objective normative standard based on good reasons. This standard may not answer all of the questions of a generation, but at least it will tend toward an expansive understanding of truth and rescue us from the circular arguments of belief which fails to allow the life force of the transcendent to break through.

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