

## **On Lonergan's Institutions and Althusser's State Apparatuses<sup>1</sup>**

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Many papers that take the 'Lonergan and ...' format, follow a similar pattern. The paper notes a similarity between Lonergan and the other thinker/school, usually on the point of an apparent impasse. Then the paper notes how it is Lonergan can notice the impasse, become embroiled in it, and then transcend it using the dynamic structure and transcendental method. This paper will apply this familiar format to Lonergan's ideas of habit and institution, and their relation to good of order, as discussed in his 1959 Cincinnati lectures, but there will be a twist at the end which departs from the format. After a brief summary of Lonergan's position, this paper traces two intertwining threads. One thread elaborates a few puzzling remarks which Lonergan makes about institutions, the second thread addresses Lonergan's position, or lack of position, concerning the origin of habits. Louis Althusser's essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" will provide some theoretical tools which help to clarify these confusing pieces. But, it will also challenge some central tenets of Lonergan's acting human subject. As a way of closing this paper I will consider some ways that Lonergan might respond to these challenges.

### **Lonergan's Invariant Structure: Particular Goods and Good of Order**

A good of order, most basically, assures that good things recur. "If breakfast is a good thing, and if there is a good of order, you will have breakfast every morning" (*Topics* 35). But there are three other characteristics of every good of order: coordinated human operations, their conditions, and personal status. Habits and institutions fall under the conditions for coordination. Lonergan explains the importance of habits in his blunt way: "If every time something had to be done people had to take a year off to learn, or to be persuaded, or to acquire skills, nothing would ever be done" (*Topics* 35). The three clauses of this sentence correspond to three types of habits.

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The first is the cognitional habit; the second is the volitional habit; and the third is the habit of skill, or the dexterous habit. This tells us what the habits do. Later, we'll consider how they arise. For now...we continue to institutions.

First institutions are "like habits, but in the objective order" (*Topics* 35). These habits in the objective order are "mechanism[s] for making decisions" (*Topics* 35-36), and because of these decisions "you can count on the other fellow doing it: through these institutions individuals are socialized" (*Topics* 36). His only discussion of socialization comes from an example:

if every time you went out for a drive you were not sure whether there might be some lad driving around with the purpose of running into people, it would be a more hazardous enterprise; but because of socialization, we can count on no one but a madman doing that. (*Topics* 35-36)

For Lonergan, it is the government and its arms (ie: the police, the courts, etc.) that 'socialize' people into safe driving but Lonergan states, with no further discussion, that we can find "many such mechanisms –not only governmental, but social institutions in general" (*Topics* 36).

Without some elaboration, this description doesn't clarify much of anything. In order to understand what Lonergan has told us, we need to ask three further questions: 1) What is a 'social institution in general'? 2) What is socialization, and how do institutions create it? 3) How are institutions like habits? As we answer these questions we will also come to an explanation of the origin of habits in terms of institutions. Institutions will act by socialization; socialization will lead to habit; and habit will be expressed as personal status or social role.

Lonergan's work already contains the basis for this new schema. We can begin find that basis by fleshing out what Lonergan may have meant by 'social institutions in general' in relation to governmental institutions. As an aid, we will use Louis Althusser's much more

thorough analysis of a similar distinction found in his essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes towards an Investigation.” However, Althusser’s distinction between institutions can only take shape within his understanding of the State.

### **Althusser’s Project: State, Institutions, and Reproduction**

Usually we think of the State as a collection of public officials, public offices, and public functions such as prisons and courts. But Althusser thinks of these as State Apparatuses and the State proper as State Power. The State, as State power, uses the State apparatuses to reproduce the conditions of production and to, thereby, act as the power that a society has to continue. One of these conditions is what Althusser calls ‘competence.’ By this, he means the reproduction of the very skills that allow laborers to produce whatever good it is that must be reproduced. Obviously, these skills are gained in the “education system, and by other instances and institutions” (Althusser 132). So, to explain competence, we move to institutions.

Althusser divides institutions into two groups: the Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs) and the Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs).<sup>2</sup> RSAs contain what we typically think of as public institutions such as “the Government, [...] the Army, the Police, the Courts, the Prisons etc.” as examples (Althusser 143). Contrary to the RSAs, the ISAs provide a person with arenas in which she receives her personal constitution, the self which she claims as her own (Althusser 182). These include: “Churches, Parties, Trade Unions, families, some schools, most newspaper, cultural venues, etc., etc.,” (Althusser 144).

Lonergan’s driving example shows that he clearly thought of institutions in repressive terms, i.e.: as RSAs. Assuming that social institutions are different than governmental

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<sup>2</sup> With the phrase ‘Ideological State Apparatuses,’ I have invoked a term, ideology, which I must discuss. But, I will not do so now.

institutions, it seems to me at least plausible that Lonergan had in mind something like the ISAs.<sup>3</sup> One reason that the ISAs are a promising equivalent to Lonergan's social institutions, is that although the ISAs make up the private sphere, they offer private lives which also lives which serve the 'State as State Power' or, in Lonergan's terms, the good of order.

The lives which we gain in ISAs come, first, from competence gained by ISAs. Althusser's favorite example of the ISAs is the European school, where students: "go through varying distances in their studies, [they] learn to read, to write and to add [...] and a number of other things as well [all of which] which are directly useful in the different jobs in production [...] Thus, I mean that] they learn 'know-how.'" (Althusser 132) Since know-how stands in for knowledge and skill, ISAs as the origin of 'know-how' account, also, for the origin of cognitive habits whereby "he does not have learn, when he already knows" and dexterous habits, whereby "he does not have to learn how to do something" (*Topics* 35).

### **Volitional Habit, Submission, and Ideology**

It seems that Lonergan's volitional habits whereby "you do not have to persuade him" (*Topics* 35) cannot be explained through the transmission of useful know-how, since even know-how that has been gained seems capable of being used or not. Yet, Althusser maintains that the "the school (but also other state institutions like the Church, or other apparatuses like the Army) teaches 'know-how', but in forms which ensure *subjection to the ruling ideology* or the mastery of its 'practice'" (133). 'Mastery of practice' is precisely volitional habit, and it is gained in the ISAs, but to explain the link between learning know-how and willing to use it, we must speak of Althusser's theory of ideology.

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<sup>3</sup> Given that we can all think of driving examples in which many people break the law, but they do it predictably and safely, it seems that, Lonergan needs something other than RSAs, even to explain the safety of driving.

In traditional ideology theories, an ideology presents itself as an idea which can first be accepted as a belief, and then, second, acted on (Althusser 167). Althusser counters with precisely the reverse: Ideologies exist first as actions within practices, whose function is to complete the goals of State power. I.e.: Ideologies exist first as actions within ISAs (Althusser 168) and ISAs exist only as practices conducive to and constitutive of the State as State Power. For example, unless a child goes to the schoolhouse and does some of what the teacher says (ie: performs the ritualized activities of the school) that child will not learn much anything and no one would say that they will have actually gone to school. Since the school is an ISA and so promotes the state as state power, if we are to say that a child went to school, we are also saying that she performed ritualized actions which serve and constitute State as State power.

Translated, now to Lonergan's terms, this means that, for someone properly said to have gone to school (ie: someone properly called a student) the three sorts of habits can be distinguished from one another, but no longer separated. The student cannot have gained her status as a student without gaining cognitional and dexterous habits. And she could not have gained these without performing the actions of the school. Through repetition, these actions within the school practice become volitional habits which follow from, constitute, and reproduce the good of order.

### **Personal Status and ISAs**

This process of coming to these habits and the habits themselves can both be called socialization. We have now answered the second question and can move to the third: How are institutions like habits? We have started to answer the question already, and can finish it with a discussion of personal status. To quote from Lonergan's Cincinnati lecture: "Thus the family is a good of order; a mother fulfills certain functions within the family; she plays a determinate role in the good of order that is the family" (36). Now, we could argue that either, because she is a

mother, she ‘fulfills certain functions’/‘plays a determinate role’ or we could argue that, because she ‘fulfills certain functions’/‘plays a determinate role,’ she is a mother. Of the two options, Lonergan seems to have had the latter in mind, because he continues:

and by playing that role, fulfilling that part, she enters into certain relations with the other members of the family. Being in those relations with other members of the family is having a status in the family, a status that arises from the personal relations. (36)

The woman’s status is ‘mother’ and she gains it only after and through relating with other family members. It is only through life inside a family that she learns what a mother is; learns how to do what a mother does; and does what a mother does. But it is also the case that, in a manner of speaking, families don’t exist outside of mothers since a family only exists because the mother acts out that set of habits which, taken together, bring other people into the mother relation. The mother is herself only a collection of habits gained in relation to the daughter, father, etc. and the daughter, father, etc. is only a collection of habits in relation to the mother. A family is itself, then, only a term for the interplaying habits of individuals. Since it is the family institution which is to give rise to these specific habits, we’ve got a bit of a problem. The three habits are the conditions for the emergence of the very recurring scheme that needs to have already emerged in order for those habits to arise. More simply, individual choices create certain institutions, and those same institutions create those same individual choices.

### **Lonergan’s Wheel: Out of the Circle**

Roughly speaking, Lonergan’s differentials account for the movement of society, and so, they offer different ways out of this circle. The first, intellectual development, operates with what he calls the wheel. It is a variation on the dynamic, self-correcting cognitive process and it moves from “situation, insight, counsel, policy, common consent, action, new situation, new

insight, new counsel [etc.]” (*Topics* 50). Even in the abbreviated formulation, it is clear that in this way a human individual can come of age within an ISA which she both did and did not create, and at the same time, that child’s cognitive process can be functioning beneath those ISAs so that as an adult, that child can move from this ISA to create a new one, just as someone before them initiated a move to create the ISA in which the child currently finds herself.

### **The Disagreement Concerning ‘The Subject’**

Though Lonergan’s wheel seems to put a firm beginning to the circle, Althusser would disagree with its central tenet: that the acting subject is underneath and operative within every social situation. When Lonergan speaks of a mother within the family ISA, or good of order (or institution?) he says that a mother ‘*fulfills* certain functions,’ she *plays* a determinate role,’ ‘she *enters* into certain relations.’ Althusser says something similar, but with a crucial difference: an individual “acts insofar as he is acted by [...]: ideology existing in [an] ideological apparatus, prescribing material practices governed by material ritual” (Althusser 170). Lonergan’s active voice is countered by the passive voice.

Althusser also argues that subjects are not only brought to the actions of this or that social role but are also brought *about* as a subject by entering into this or that ritual relation. What we call the unique, irreplaceable, acting subject is actually a façade hiding the fact that each so-called unified subject is an amalgam of replaceable and reproducible *functions* which serve the interest of the State as State power. The façade follows a pattern, common to all ideology, which readers of Lonergan might find familiar. There is always posited a capital ‘S’ “Subject *par excellence*” which serves as the Ideal and to which all subjects hold themselves doing so on “the absolute guarantee that everything really is so, and that on the condition that subjects recognize what they are and behave accordingly, everything will be all right” (Althusser 181).

The only alternative to this façade comes through what Althusser calls scientific literature. Regardless of the content, all texts must call out and say ‘*You* are a writer!’ and ‘*You* are a reader!’ As such it is ideological, but in a paradoxical way, since Althusser hopes to use his writings to call subjects to say: “I am in ideology” (Althusser 175). This is tantamount to calling subjects to say ‘I am a set of functions. I am not a subject. I am not an I’

Lonergan would pounce on Althusser’s paradoxical rejection of the subject by the subject, using his well-known rejection of any attempt to reject the subject and the specific pattern of operations proper to the subject: “the activity of revising consists in such operations as accord with such a pattern, so that a revision rejecting the pattern would be rejecting itself” (*Method* 19). And if, in response, Althusser would wish to reject intentional operations as a post hoc ideological construction of “the human agent,” Lonergan could point out, once again, that only intentional operations could have made his rejection of those operations possible, therefore, the acting subject exists and the wheel can run. Of course, Althusser could then counter that the idea of conscious, intentional operations are only possible as an effect of being acted into ritual practices and then cloaking the whole bundle of functions as the “obvious reality” of the subject who is the intentional operator of his intentional operations. By conceiving of such a subject, Lonergan has, in effect, proven Althusser correct. Yet, by showing that the individual within ideology can say: I am in ideology, Althusser has proven Lonergan correct.

We have found a contradicting set of performative contradictions. Each defeats the other, and, in the act of defeating, each is defeated by the other. At this point, then, it is an open question 1) whether or not the subject can anchor the wheel and 2) whether or not our account of institutions and/as habits has come to naught.



## Higher Unity

There is another way out of the circle, through the differentials Sin and Grace. Those latter differentials, though referring to human life, point to a higher order of intelligibility, in which human activities take on, as it were, an extra-human significance. It is my hope that, once we understand what Lonergan means when he tells us that “Whenever we do the good, we are just God’s instruments” (*Topics* 49), the circular process by which we come to constitute the good and be constituted by it will show itself to be part of the drama of one transcendent spiral. Before we make this leap, however, I must state some worries about the dilemma that we have discovered and the preliminary answer we have posed.

The force of Althusser’s critique of the transcendental human subject rests of a reading of institutions which, perhaps wrongly, conflates the following pairs: habit and institution; institution and good of order; subjective order and objective order; content of an institution and the form of coming into/constituting an institution. This set of confluences turns institutions into human relating which comes to relate only by relating to an always already relating human relation. It begins to seem that institutions are always-already, and always-already *only*, conversing with themselves.

A gesture toward sin, and more specifically, to grace would transcend this circle, but before coming to an answer we must be sure that the circle which it transcends is a legitimate circle. Though this paper has created a circle, I am not sure whether or not this paper has not done so by doing some violence to Lonergan’s idea of institutions and habit. It would be worthwhile, in this regard, to study Lonergan’s thought on the interrelationship between habits and society, from the early writings to the late writings. It would also be interesting to build a reading of and Lonergan’s (direct or indirect) engagement with structuralism.

Secondly, if this first further investigation shows that this paper's 'habit-institution' circle is legitimate, then we must be sure that whatever way we find to transcend it takes full account of the circle, without collapsing into a convenient answer. It would be easy to simply posit grace as a way out of our impasse and then attribute to it whatever conditions that the current problem requires, but Althusser's critique carries with it a thicket of epistemological/political/ideological questions that necessitate a careful consideration of the conditions and possibilities of human speaking about/thinking with the divine. The consideration is a worthy one, because, as bad as it is to transcend a cheap circle, it is even worse to transcend a good circle, cheaply.

### Works Cited

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## APPENDIX:

### Lonergan and Althusser on Subject, Group Bias, and Relations of Production

The consideration of group bias shows an apparent disagreement between Lonergan and Althusser, which must be dispelled before we can come to consider their real disagreement. As a Marxist, Althusser holds that this ideology serves the interests of the ruling class, at the expense of the ruled classes. This formula recalls Lonergan's discussion of group bias, whereby the ruling class exercises a sort of social obscurantism, a "blind spot for the insights that reveal its well-being to be excessive or its usefulness to be at an end" (*Insight* 248). As the bias continues to exert its influence, it comes to create "a grotesquely distorted reality" (*Insight* 250), which offers a grotesque set of possible individual roles and group identities.

These roles and groups are refractions of the biased situation which fostered them. These bias-derived refractions generate "unsuccessful as well as successful classes, and the sentiments of the unsuccessful can be crystallized into militant force by the crusading reformer or a revolutionary" (*Insight* 250). But, Lonergan's point is that the roles of the social conservative and the social revolutionary are both extensions of a biased situation, in which the dictates of human intelligence and the sentiments of the varying social groups within society do not align. As an extension of that biased situation, neither group is truly intelligible. At best, the revolutionary group would be intelligible insofar as it has the possibility of moving society towards the true intelligibility, which would make obsolete both the conservative and revolutionary classes.

Althusser, writing as a Marxist with a keen awareness of the biases of capitalist class structure, knows that the biases of capitalism make it such that the range of possible personal statuses offered by the ritual practices that constitute the ISAs of capitalist society is a direct

extension of that biased class structure. This class structure carries with it a standard set of relations between classes. When ISAs contribute to the reproduction of the conditions of production, in tandem with their role of reproducing the material conditions of production, they contribute by reproducing these class relations. It is class relations that Althusser has in mind when he speaks of the relations of production (Althusser 128, 133). So long as ritual practices occur within this biased situation, the biased relations of production between classes will also persist (Althusser 181-186).

Though capitalism in Althusser's day, and still today, offers that biased set of personal statuses and a biased set of relations of production, Althusser has in mind a time in which the capitalist set of relations and personal statuses will be supplanted by the proper relations of production and a proper set of personal statuses (Althusser 184-186<sup>4</sup>). Because of this, it seems plausible to postulate that Althusser, with Lonergan, could each imagine an intelligent society in which individuals would be offered roles which correspond to the pressing and progressive demands of the good as object, rather than roles which currently correspond to the blind spots of group bias. But, even though Althusser and Lonergan could agree about the possibility of unbiased social roles, they would disagree about the conception of the subject that must follow from the fact of taking on social roles.

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<sup>4</sup> On those same pages, Althusser points out that the class struggle occurs only with respect to altering or maintaining the relations of production, and only within the ISAs. Some critics of Althusser, most notably Terry Eagleton (149-150), have wondered whether or not Althusser's idea that the ISAs form a monolithic unity which can only serve the current State power does not preclude the possibility for such a revolution. I acknowledge the critique, but leave it aside. For what follows, I need not take it up.

**Works Cited: Appendix**

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