

SINFULNESS: A PHILOSOPHY OF HUMAN TRANSNATURALITY

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As a philosopher, I wonder generally about what is called a “Christian Intellectual.” At last year’s Lonergan on the Edge, I read a paper on the relationship of philosophy to theology that began by asking, in short, whether we can conceive of such a thing, such a person as a Christian Intellectual in a manner that does not compromise the integrity of either term. That essay contained a few general implications for those theologians, philosophers and other scholars committed to the work of Christian higher education. Such implications are offered in the hope that we might realize the “Christian Intellectual,” not merely in the private library of ideas, but in the public theater of history. That realization, of course, is conditioned by the realization of the Christian Intellectual in ourselves.

And yet, attempts (whether well-founded or foolhardy) at the personal realization of the Christian Intellectual are regularly ignored, misunderstood, dismissed, and/or aborted. Bearing in mind the developmental aberrations that plague the aspiring Christian Intellectual, I wonder specifically today about what is called “Sinfulness.” I will argue here that if the concept of sinfulness cannot be demonstrated to be meaningful, it is doubtful that the Christian Intellectual is a coherent ideal. In the following, we will examine the philosophical ground of the theological notion of sinfulness, and its relationship to the notion of the unethical. To begin, we will examine the question of sinfulness. Second, we will place that question in the context of Søren Kierkegaard’s philosophical anthropology of Spirit-as-synthesis. Third, Bernard Lonergan’s cognitional theory will be offered as a differentiation of Kierkegaard’s term, “Spirit.” Lastly,

resources in Maurice Blondel's work *Action* will re-integrate Lonergan's specifically intellectualist emphasis in *Insight*.

The concept of sin begs a question. How can natural, finite, temporal actions bear a supernatural, infinite and eternal significance such that they are worthy of the strange name sin? The concept of sin indicates an apparent disproportion between human action and its moral significance. As Christian, the Christian Intellectual will find the concept of sin imposes itself decidedly in the scriptures and the doctrines of the Christian faith.¹ Perhaps this disproportion is an instance in which, as Bernard Lonergan writes, "there (are) revealed to faith truths that man never could discover for himself, nor, even when he assented to them, could he understand them in an adequate fashion."² However, as Intellectual, he or she might justifiably balk at this disproportion. Isn't there already, in the concept of the *unethical* an adequate and direct measure for the significance of human actions? The natural, finite, and temporal significance indicated by the name "unethical" does not seem to beg further explanation. "Unethical" captures irresponsible actions and implies the objective and subjective effects consequent thereto. Is not the concept of sin rendered unparsimonious by these considerations? Moreover, if the concept of sin must be revealed from a wholly transcendent source, what of its verification?³ It is in this

¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church: Second Edition*. Second. Doubleday Religion, 2003.

² Lonergan, Bernard. *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding, Volume 3*. 5th ed. University of Toronto Press, Scholarly Publishing Division, 1992. 746 If the Christian also happens to be an Intellectual, perhaps she will remind herself that, true as this may be, to accept it in place of (and not in conjunction with) genuine investigation is to hand in one's Intellectual credentials.

³ *Insight*. 102

respect that the specific relationship of the categories of “unethical” and of “sinful” is a crucial one in the more general inquiry into the possibility of the genuine Christian Intellectual.

We could, of course, dismiss the concept of sin outright for being an instance of over-explanation. Standing on the shoulders of Karl Marx and Paul Ricoeur, we could lump sin in with ideology and utopia.⁴ Ricoeur (reading Marx) analyzes ideology and utopia as dialectically related instances of over-valuing the claims of some system of authority to defend its precariousness in the face of criticism. Ideology conceptually fortifies existing schemes and utopia does the same for prospective schemes because any concrete scheme could be caught indefinitely in squabbles about its imperfection. In that same vein, it seems reasonable to unmask the concept of sin as the over-dis-valuing (so to speak) of some practico-ethical instance. In their concreteness, actions can only be ethical or unethical, responsible or irresponsible. Moreover, concrete actions are likely an admixture of both. When it seems efficacious, we imbue them with this weighty dis-valuation called “sin,” which amounts to a kind of moral hyperbole. Perhaps, much like society defends the precariousness of a political order by generating ideologies, the likewise delicate moral order is bolstered by upgrading the honest-but-underwhelming determination “unethical” into the fire-and-brimstone territory of sin. Invoking the absolute might streamline moral deliberation so we can move on with life.

What it means to “move on with life,” with the moral task in its broadest context, is not, of course, self-evident. Though we find ourselves alive and acting, from where and by what power did our life and our activity emerge into being and doing? What is the structure of this life and activity? What is its full fruition? What is its perfection? In the words of Maurice

⁴ Ricoeur, Paul. *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II.* Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007. 308-324

Blondel's Introduction to *Action*, "Does man have a destiny and does human life make sense?"⁵ These are, of course, questions to be taken up methodically in the university as a whole, but the philosopher is burdened to differentiate the characteristics of human life's first order questions at their most abstract. To set out to determine whether "sinful" or merely "ethical" is the appropriate category to classify human actions, we will have proceeded as though we have (at least implicitly) made a determination about what it is to live well. Fortunately, the assumptions about what it means to live poorly will be carried along as well. Thus, it will serve to begin with aberrations in the activity of human living and allow that to produce for us implications about the structure and character of human activity per se.

Complicating matters for the philosopher inquiring into life and the moral task, the object of inquiry is also the subject inquiring. Essentialistic, logical definitions of the relevant terms (life, ethical, unethical, sinful, etc) will be, though perhaps correct, insufficient. No, in order to deal adequately with the concrete self that is alive and acting, we need a philosophical account that considers its development, as well as its aberrations, missteps, failures, etc. A logical definition, such as that man is a rational (and, moreover, moral) animal speaks more specifically to a characteristic of the being that human beings potential are.⁶ We have to become what we are. Or, better, we have to become who we are. Or, better still, we have to enact ourselves. That is a matter of development and there are all sorts of ways that development can go badly.

⁵ Maurice Blondel, *Action (1893): Essay on a Critique of Life and a Science of Practice*, trans. Oliva Blanchette (University of Notre Dame Press, 2004). 3

⁶ Bernard Lonergan, *Topics in Education: The Cincinnati Lectures of 1959 on the Philosophy of Education*, ed. Robert M. Doran, (University of Toronto Press, 1988). 79-80

Rather, as Kierkegaard was a master of analyzing, development is usually always already going badly. Indeed, part of what brings Kierkegaard and his arguments in *The Concept of Anxiety* and in *The Sickness unto Death* to mind is the way in which things can get much worse as, simultaneously, things are “getting better,” i.e. as a person is developing. Kierkegaard unfolds for us, stage after stage, the fire we can land in, having leapt from the frying pan of lower ways of being ourselves. To be in despair willing to be one’s self really is, on Kierkegaard’s thinking, a development on being in despair not willing to be one’s self, and so on. At the apex, Kierkegaard notes (with unnerving brevity, as if in passing), when one is quite nearly saved by faith from anxiety and despair, one has to first resist the impulse to commit suicide.⁷ This getting-worse is not, of course, just Existentialist doom-and-gloom or the effect of Scandinavian winters, but is supported by a quite serious philosophical analysis.

The Sickness Unto Death begins, to the dismay of Kierkegaard’s readers, thusly:

A human being is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self. The self is a relation that relates itself to itself or is the relation’s relating itself to itself in the relation; the self is not the relation, but is the relations relating itself to itself. A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short, a synthesis. A synthesis is a relation between two. Considered in this way, a human being is still not a self.⁸

⁷ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition For Upbuilding And Awakening (Kierkegaard’s Writings, Vol 19)*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton University Press, 1983). 66

⁸ *The Sickness Unto Death*. 13

I am going to argue that this analysis, so eye-crossingly abstract, is the philosophical ground for a theological conception of sinfulness because it suggests the transnatural character of human beings. Though I will not spell it out here, it ought to be implied that our transnaturalness is why human beings may also be Christian Intellectuals. I ought, then, to explain what exactly I think is going forward in this passage, and for that I'm going to appeal to Bernard Lonergan's cognitional theory.

Noesis and Noema. Consciousness of an object. Mind and body. "In-here" and "out-there." In each formulation we have a relation and the explicitation of a synthesis. And so we rightly say with Kierkegaard that a human being is a synthesis. To my mind, even Heidegger's formulation "Being-in-the-world" is this synthesis, though in a way tremendously careful not to reify the terms of the relation. And yet, "Considered in this way, a human being is not yet a self." No, "being a self" is to be the synthesis, the relation considered above in such a way that "the relation relates itself to itself." True, there is what Kierkegaard, in the following paragraph, calls the "negative unity" present in the "psychical" as aware of and present to the physical and itself. But that, as Bernard Lonergan likes to say, "is the consciousness of a kitten."⁹ Such awareness or presence is not identical with the *positive* unity found when "the relation relates itself to itself." That relation relating to its own relation, that linguistic knot and syntactical mouth-full, is a self. And, Kierkegaard says, we are in despair when we fail to be, fail to will to be, and/or (I would add) fail to enact our self. Or, in the terms of *The Concept of Anxiety*, when we fail to realize ourselves as Spirit.

⁹ This is biological extroversion and it takes "already out there now," extended bodies to be the real. This way of conceiving the real makes the syntheses at the top of this paragraph unachievable. *Insight*. 276

As many readers have noticed and Kierkegaard himself commented,¹⁰ the “algebraic” formulation of Kierkegaard’s analysis does not easily offer these conceptual schemes unto the being that we concretely are or to the way we really live. As I said above, one of the complications of asking after life is that the person inquiring is also the object of inquiry. Enter the work of Bernard Lonergan and his exhortations to “self-appropriation.” Self-appropriation, in its full differentiation and articulation, results in a cognitional theory. More proximally, however, it culminates in self-affirmation. It results in knowledge both that I am, but also of what I am; namely, a knower.¹¹ What is self-appropriation culminating in self-affirmation? It is, I would contend, a version of the relation, the synthesis that the human being is, relating itself to itself. It is experiencing, understanding, and judging turned upon, related to themselves.¹² If the complementarity between Kierkegaard’s anthropology and Lonergan’s cognitional theory is to be believed, to be self-appropriated and self-affirming (Lonergan) is to be a self (Kierkegaard).

¹⁰ *The Sickness Unto Death*. xiv

¹¹ If we unpack Lonergan’s conception of knowing and knower, we find a nesting set of terms and their relations, which can be turned upon themselves. So, knowing consists in experiencing, understanding, and judging, but I also experience my experiencing, understanding, and judging. With some effort, I can understand my experiencing, understanding, and judging. What *Insight* was drafted to aid was its readers coming to judge as correct their understanding of their own experiencing, understanding, and judging. The contention I will make toward the end of this essay is that there is a further, moral exigence to *do* the experiencing, understanding, judging.

¹² Chapter 2 of Lonergan’s *Understanding and Being* contains an excellent schematic summary of what constitutes self-appropriation, though, (as mentioned in footnote 11) it is limited to the problem of knowing and does not, as yet, move on to the problem of doing.

However, was not the self I come to know in self-appropriation already there? Asking, “Am I a knower?” and answering, “Yes,” is not the first instance of knowing. We can retrospect and discover that along the way we were knowing, even when we did not know we were a knower. Being a knower, then, cannot be identical with being a self by Kierkegaard’s criteria. We read again, “Considered in this way, a human being is still not a self.” Knowing that I am a knower is still not, on Kierkegaard’s analysis, to be a self, to be spirit. Rather, if we continue beyond the first page of *The Sickness Unto Death*, we find that the problem is not just being a self, but willing to be our self and that is a matter of development in accord with our nature as spirit.

Self-appropriation up until Chapter 11 of Lonergan’s *Insight* is about knowing our knowing. When, however, Lonergan turns to the possibility of ethics in Chapter 18, he identifies an exigence to act in accord with our knowledge.¹³ Acting in accord with one’s knowledge is to be “rationally self-conscious,” to knowingly determine one’s activity and thereby constitute one’s self in accord with those actions. Rationally self-conscious decision, not judgement, is the aspect of Lonergan’s cognitional theory that meets Kierkegaard’s criteria of selfhood, of being spirit and not mere human being. Or, another way, the relation by which the synthesis that human being is relates to itself is self-constitution, not mere self-affirmation.

I am, admittedly, relatively new to Lonergan’s corpus and have largely stuck to his predominantly philosophical works. That said, in preparing for this presentation, I did not encounter and could not recall having encountered Lonergan making explicit what seems a rather profound implication of extending this exigency from our knowing into our doing: that our cognitive, intellectual efforts themselves are inherently moral. I do not just mean to say that they

¹³ *Insight*. 622

are crucial for our moral life, in an instrumental sense. It is, of course, true, that our moral enterprises will be deprived of the necessary conditions for their success if we do not think them through. More fundamentally, Lonergan examines cognition as a dynamic structure of operations, of *activities* and thus the ethical exigence to act in accord with our knowledge applies to our knowing itself. Let me say that again: we have an ethical obligation to act in accord with our knowledge of our knowing. This, after all, is the ground of the Transcendental Precepts to “Be attentive, Be intelligent, Be reasonable, Be responsible.”¹⁴ Knowing is not just epistemological, but also practical, ethical, moral.

This also means that the root problem facing the practical context, moral impotence, applies to cognition. We have already been doing our knowing before we appropriated it to ourselves. Thus, cognitional development is subject to missteps, irregularities, absurdities imbued through habit, education, formation, culture, etc. This applies to cognitional activity as much as to technological, economic or political activity. There is, then, the pervasive likelihood of a disproportion between the ethical obligation to learn and to know, and our willingness to or skillfulness at knowing and learning. There is an ethical demand upon us and we are statistically unlikely to meet it. This is (one aspect of) what Maurice Blondel meant when he argued that the culmination of philosophy is the realization that the products of philosophy are inadequate to the standard of success implied by the practice of philosophy.¹⁵ For Blondel and Lonergan, the hope

¹⁴ Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology: Volume 14*, 2nd ed. (University of Toronto Press, Scholarly Publishing Division, 1990). 231

¹⁵ “Neither sensation, nor science, nor philosophy terminate absolutely in themselves.” (Maurice Blondel, *The Letter on Apologetics & History and Dogma*, trans. Alexander Dru and Illtyd Trethowan [Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995]. 202)

and promise of religious life is the healing, salvation and redemption of our will by the receipt of a transcendent gift. From this philosophical perspective, then, theology is reflection upon the way of life, the activities that constitute the acceptance, cultivation, development of that gift. Theology will, thereby, reflect on the effect of religious life and activity, in and upon the cognitional context among others. For the philosopher, on the other hand, self-appropriation will reveal that disproportion and the ethical (to say nothing of epistemological) need for some resolution of that disproportion.¹⁶

Is there another, more basic disproportion? If the category of sinfulness is going to be survive our analysis, there must be. The above constitutes a merely negative disproportion that might imply the possibility, if improbability, of unhampered attentiveness, intelligence, reasonableness, and responsibility proving adequate to the moral demands of human life. In other words, there is a merely finite task to the moral life which is, unfortunately, tremendously difficult. Failures in pursuit of that task are still only finite failures. They are failures to be ethical, to be responsible. Untrammelled development and authenticity is abstractly possible, even though the concreteness of human being will likely preclude it.

I would argue that the merely negative disproportion is grounded in a more basic, *positive* disproportion. There is a heterogeneity between *untrammelled* attentiveness, intelligence, reasonableness, and responsibility and *perfected* attentiveness, intelligence, reasonableness, and responsibility. Such a conclusion can be extrapolated from the facts of human life, action and consciousness, if only to be later affirmed (and, no doubt, consoled) by the content of special revelation. What constitutes this positive disproportion? In chapter 19 of *Insight*, Lonergan has

¹⁶ That need implies the possible existence of a solution, but cannot determine its existence. It can, however, extrapolate to its characteristics. All of this, of course, is in Chapter 20 of *Insight*.

identified a microcosm in the cognitional context. A (spatio-temporally) finite capacity to answer questions is married to an unrestricted capacity to ask them, the “unrestricted desire to know.”¹⁷ There is a disproportion between the capacity to ask meaningful questions and the human capacity to achieve meaningful answers. Remember, however, that asking and answering questions is activity, and when mediated by self-appropriation and rational self-consciousness, moral action. Thus, the positive disproportion in the cognitional context ought to be drawn out to the full context of life and action. There too, then, is an immediate, dynamic relation to being, traditionally called “the will,” which has an unrestricted desire (in this case to act) married to a restricted capacity to rationally decide its specific expression in action. This includes cognitional action. The restrictions that apply to the cognitional context apply to the full context of action and life, because rational self-consciousness mediates our dynamic activity to us by way of our knowing.

In his own abstract way, Kierkegaard knew this is where we were headed.

The misrelation of despair is not a simple misrelation but a misrelation in a relation that relates itself to itself *and* has been established by another so that the misrelation in that relation which is for itself *also* reflects itself infinitely in the relation to the power that established it.¹⁸ (emphasis added)

Being in despair before the power that established you (namely God) is, for Kierkegaard, sin. In *The Concept of Anxiety*, the remedy is faith, which gets articulated in *The Sickness unto Death* as “coming to rest transparently on the power that established you,” or, as one of my favorite writers translates it: “Resting transparently on the spirit that gave you rise.”

¹⁷ *Insight*. 666

¹⁸ *The Sickness Unto Death*. 14

What strange creatures we are, then? The very thing towards which we are made, infinite willing, is impracticable for us, even if we could somehow dodge the negative disproportion of moral impotence. Maurice Blondel says it thus in *Action*, “All attempts to bring human action to completion fail; and it is impossible for human action not to seek to complete itself and to be self-sufficient. It has to, it cannot.”¹⁹ Our being is essentially caught up in an infinite will that it is unequal to, and thus being a self is a supernatural gift both at our inception and our hoped-for culmination. It is in this sense that, later in his career, Blondel referred to human beings as essentially “transnatural.”²⁰ I, for some time, thought of that transnaturalness as only consisting in our trajectory into the actualization of (or failure to actualize) our potencies. It seems to me that Kierkegaard had a similarly limited conception in *The Concept of Anxiety*. In the course of preparing these remarks, however, it occurred to me that we are transnatural twice, so to speak. Our “whence” is just as much an infinite mystery as where we are headed. When Kierkegaard introduces the relation to a power that *establishes* us in *The Sickness Unto Death*, I believe he too has discovered this dual aspect of our transnaturalness.

I hope it is clear, without much further explication, that our transnaturalness, this disproportion between our desire to do and to know, and our capacity to do and to know, is the condition of possibility for the meaningfulness of the category of sinfulness in and for human life and action. Ethical irresponsibility, then, while remaining a real and meaningful category, with a relative sufficiency of its own, cannot fully explain our moral situation. Rather, for

¹⁹*Action*, pg 299

²⁰Oliva Blanchette, *Maurice Blondel: A Philosophical Life* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010). 232

rationally self-conscious doers and knowers, as Blondel says in *The Letter on Apologetics*,²¹ “the refusal of the state to which (we are) called is not a mere privation for (us), but a positive falling away.” And this “falling away” is not just positive, but infinitely so. This is the significance indicated by the term sin and the category of sinfulness. But transnaturalality is not a pure liability, nor a tragic flaw in our substance. Rather, that same transnatural character is also, we as Christians have the joy to proclaim, that by which the Love of God is knit so intimately into our being.

²¹Blondel, Maurice, *The Letter on Apologetics*. pg 141