

The Dynamism of Ethics
Patrick H. Byrne
Philosophy Department
Boston College

Germans greet one another, saying *Wie gehts?* We say “How’s it goin’? What’s goin’ on?”

What do we really ask when we greet one another this way? How would we respond, if we thought people really wanted an answer to this question?

What is the “it” that we are asking about? What do we mean by “going”? What are we seeking to know when we ask “how”?

I think Lonergan’s is an ethics of how it is going, and his ethics can thought of as a deep exploration of that question. This is highlighted in the titles of the three principle chapters of his illuminating *Topics in Education*: “The Human Good as the Developing Subject,” and “The Human Good as Object.” As these chapter titles indicate, the human good is the “it” implicit in the question, How is *it* going? The human good is going. When we greet each other, to the extent we really are serious, we are asking how the human good is going. Our own lives always partake of and are caught up in something much grander than ourselves – the human good. In their full and rich concreteness, our own lives must be understood as parts of a whole, the whole of the human good. So “how’s it going?” as a question of ethical intent is concerned with whether we are on good terms with the human good. Whether we are going its way, or not.

Again, by “going” Lonergan would mean that ethics is dynamic. Lonergan’s ethics is not a static ethics of static rules or natures, although both rules and natures do play an important roles in ethics. But to be ethical, the rules have to be grounded and

interpreted within the more fundamental context of the dynamics. And the nature of the human good is a dynamic.

Finally, by “how” Lonergan would mean “developing” – the human good as *developing* subject or *developing* object. Or, to be more precise, I should say “dialectically” is the best answer to “*How* is it going?” “It’s going dialectically.” Our individual and communal ethical lives are not just one smooth, uninterrupted path of development. Our ethical lives are messy, screwed up, conflicting paths of development, with no guaranteed outcomes. But we keep at the business of trying to live ethically nonetheless. In so doing we commit ourselves to an ethics of risk, as Cynthia Crysdale has shown so poignantly in *Embracing Travail*.

Let me now turn from this colloquial way of speaking and elaborate what I have been saying in terms more familiar to us as students of Lonergan’s thought. What are we doing when we are being ethical, or at least striving to be ethical? Being ethical is following the immanent, self-transcending dynamic norms that operate in the structures of our consciousnesses. This is why being ethical in the most fundamental sense is not merely a matter of following rules. Rather, discerning and acting in accord with the norms immanent in consciousness is itself the very origin of all rules insofar as they are genuinely ethical, as well as of all ethical acts that accept and obey rules. The ethical dynamism of consciousness is more fundamental than rules of ethics.

Furthermore, to the extent that each of us does discern and act in accord with this normative dynamism, we contribute, little bit by little bit, to the realization of the whole human good. The human good is the whole matrix of social and cultural structures that

embraces the vast array of comings and goings of individual human beings. Even more concretely, the human good is the whole of human history that embraces the all of the specific societies and cultures that in turn enfold all human thoughts and actions. In every effort at ethical discernment, choice, and action, we make our own indispensable contributions to whole of the human good, the whole of human society, culture and history.

We make authentic contributions to the human good if we discern and act attentively, intelligently, reasonably, responsibly, and lovingly. As Lonergan has shown, there is an inherent dynamism of self-correcting that flows out of successive acts that are attentive, intelligent, reasonable, responsible and loving. When we discern and act this way, we add more intelligibility and more value to the course of our own lives and the course of the world. In this way we make our specifically human contributions to the grand, intelligible process of emergent probability. Because both natural and human history are shot through with non-systematic processes, we do not know with any certainty just where *emergent probability* is headed, or what the whole is that is being fashioned by means of this strange form of intelligibility. Yet when we add unconditionally valuable and intelligible courses of action to the existing human and natural schemes of recurrence, we align ourselves with the whole of emergent probability, without being certain or able to control its outcomes. Nevertheless, this is what ethical action truly is. This is why Cynthia Crysdale characterizes our authentic ethical action as the ethics of risk.

So if we as individual subjects knowingly discern and act in accord with the norms of consciousness, at least implicitly we also operate so as to contribute to

realization the whole human (and natural) good as object – generalized emergent probability; history.

To be still more concrete, let us ask just what are those operations of discerning and acting, and what are those norms, which constitute the dynamism of ethics? Many of the operations of course are already familiar to those who have taken up Lonergan’s call to self-appropriation: seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, tasting, imagining, understanding, conceiving, reflecting, weighing the evidence, judging what is so. But ethical life includes additional operations, some perhaps not quite as familiar – practical insight, value reflection, reflective understanding of value, value judging, deliberating, choosing, acting. In addition to the operations of ethical intentionality, there are the norms to which the operations respond, more or less authentically. The norms arise as questions for intelligence – “What is going on?” and “What could be done?” – questions for factual reflection – “Is that really what *is* going on?” – questions for value reflection – “What good is it?”, “What is it worth?” “Would it be good for me to do it?”, “What should I do?”, “How should I do it?” – and finally, questions for decision and action – “Shall I do it?”

Because the operations come precisely as responses to one of these questions, the questions themselves establish the norms by means which those responses are to be measured. Lonergan says that insights release the tension of questions for intelligence. The same is true for acts of reflective understanding and judgments, whether of fact or value. They too release the tensions that arise in questions for reflection. This is also the case for acts of choosing and acting. They respond to questions for choice and action. If these various acts of response genuinely do release the tension of their corresponding

questions, then the operations are ethically responsible, because they respond to the norms established by the tensions of the questions. This is what we are doing when we are being ethical. We are responding to the tensions introduced by ethical questioning. But if judgments of fact or value, if choices or actions do not actually meet the tensions of the questions, then they are not authentic responses. Such operations are *not* properly contributions to what we are doing when we are being ethical. Such operations are responses to something other than the conscious norms immanent in consciousness. They are responses to biases against those norms.

In one sense, the question for decision governs the entire flow and structure of ethical intentionality, even though it comes last in the sequence of ethical questions. The question for decision depends upon answers to all of the prior questions, and yet each of the prior questions is oriented so as to make a contribution toward answering the question for decision. In other words, all of the questions and the acts that they both presuppose and lead to are situated within an overall dynamic structure that ultimately culminates in the acts of responsible, ethical deciding and acting.

This dynamism of ethics is parallel to, and in fact includes, the dynamism of cognitional structure. Lonergan says that human knowing has a “formally *dynamic* structure,” (“Cognitional Structure,” 206) a structure whose dynamic is to modify and correct itself. It is a self-correcting structure, and its capacity for self-correction resides in its capacity for unlimited questioning about what is and is not. So if our thinking comes up with a flawed idea, the inevitable further questioning that leads to corrections is the root of the dynamic, self-correcting of cognitional structure. This is why the dynamic,

cognitional structure of human knowing is “intrinsically objective.” (“Cognitional Structure,” 211, 213)

Just as cognitional structure is “intrinsically objective” when performed in harmony with the norms of inquiry, so also, so also the structure of ethical intentionality is intrinsically good when its activities are performed in fidelity to the norms immanent in ethical consciousness. The unrestrictedness of further question about what we could do, what is truly valuable to do, what we should do, and whether we should do or should have done it, also exercises a dynamism toward self-correction. If we operate in ways that genuinely resolve the tensions of these questionings, then we act ethically and bring about virtually unconditioned goodness. But if our ideas, judgments, decisions or actions fail to resolve these tensions, then the questions remain and nag at us to correct and amend our ways.

But there is one further set of norms in addition to ethical questions that I have not yet mentioned, and that is the class of feelings as intentional responses. Such feelings also play indispensable roles in being ethical. But their role is complicated because the realm of feelings is so complicated. To put this complicated matter simply, feelings determine what will count as further pertinent questions for a person engaged in value reflection, and especially for a person engaged in ethical reflection about whether a course of action is or is not ethically valuable. At bottom, feelings as intentional are responsible for the fact that “How it’s going” is messy and dialectical. Our ethical life is messy and dialectical because our feelings are conflicted. And this is why being ethical inevitably involves conversion – especially moral conversion, although moral conversion is practically impossible without religious conversion, and unlikely to be sustained without

intellectual and psychic conversion. All conversions involve transformations of the conflicts within our horizons of feelings, and this is especially true of moral conversion. If biases reverse the good developments that normatively oriented questions and feelings would otherwise bring about, moral conversion is a reversal of this reversal. This is why ethical living is dialectical. We suffer reversals because of our biases, and we further suffer through the often painful processes of having our biases reversed, like Eustace Scrubb in C.S. Lewis' *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*.

The ways that feelings as intentional responses enter into value reflection and decision is complicated. In fact, what distinguishes feelings as intentional responses from other kinds of feelings is itself quite complicated. But let me elaborate just briefly on feelings as intentional responses and the roles they play in value reflection and choice.

First and foremost, there can be no authentic knowledge of values or authentic ethically valueable decisions without this kind of feelings. This does *not* mean that ethical knowledge is had entirely or solely in feelings. Feelings alone do not suffice. But neither can reasoning alone, in the absence of all feelings, yield any knowledge of value whatsoever. We need both feelings as intentional responses as well as reasoning in order to arrive at authentic knowledge of values, and especially ethical values. By reasoning Lonergan means the self-correcting structures of consciousness: experiencing, intelligent inquiry, direct insights into matters of fact and courses of action, questions for factual and value reflection, insights into the virtually unconditioned, and virtually unconditioned judgments of fact and value.

But just what does he mean by feelings as intentional responses and what do they contribute, over and above “reasoning” in Lonergan’s sense? Lonergan himself leaves a

great deal unclear on this matter, and it has taken me a long time to arrive at a satisfactory answer to this question. But in my view, intentional feelings are the acts of consciousness by means of which we come to awareness of value. Just as we can have no awareness whatsoever of intelligibility without having insights, so also we can have no awareness of value without feelings as intentional responses. To give simple examples, a person who has no feeling of excitement over a play just executed in a sporting event has no awareness of its value. A person who is insensitive to the someone else's act of self-sacrifice has neither feeling nor any awareness of its value. A person who has no feeling about an act of political betrayal has no awareness of its evil.

But feeling of value is not yet knowledge of value. Value-feelings respond to sights, sounds, smells, touches, and tastes. But such feelings can and more frequently do respond to insights, especially insights into potential courses of action. They respond to judgments of fact, especially facts concerning human achievements or destructions. When such feelings emerge, they endow the sensations, insights, facts, and especially potential courses of action with values.

Once they arise, such feelings enter into ethical reflection in a crucial way. If I consider a possible course of action – say, whether to tell a friend that her behavior offended a third party – how do I reach a judgment about whether I should choose to follow that course of action? Just as in the case of judgments of fact, my ethical reflection strives to attain a reflective grasp that my proposed course of action is virtually unconditioned. In the case of questions of fact, the virtually unconditioned is reached when there are no further pertinent questions as to whether the insight is or is not so. But in matters of ethics, the course of action under consideration is not yet so. There is no

virtually unconditioned of the kind encountered in judgments of fact. But nevertheless, there still is a striving to responsibly answer all further pertinent questions about the potential course of action.

However, what determines whether a further question is or is not pertinent to the proposed course of action? It turns out that our feelings as intentional responses determine pertinence of questions. They do so because our feelings hold before us the values that we are seeking to implement. Our feelings “know” what value or values we are seeking to realize by the idea of a course of action we are entertaining. Those feelings will elicit from the depths of our consciousness questions that must be taken into consideration if we are to realize the felt values. The feelings will screen out and dismiss as irrelevant or silly questions that could have no bearing on the realization of the values they feel. So our grasp of a course of action as virtually unconditioned is a grasp of it as unconditionally a means to the realization of values as we feel them.

Courses of action and the new schemes and institutions they bring about may be quite intelligible in themselves. But these intelligible innovations may not realize the values as they are being felt. Our feelings for values will lead to questions that seek alternative intelligible solutions to the situations at hand, solutions that are realizations of the values as felt.

The difficulty, of course, is that our feelings can be not merely wrong but horribly screwed up. Our feelings can feel goods to be evil and evils to be good. We can feel something trivial to be of the greatest importance, and can feel the most sublime of values to be wretched. When such value distortions take over the whole of a person’s

consciousness, this is the state that Nietzsche, Scheler and Lonergan refer to as *ressentiment*.

So although feelings are essential to our value knowledge, and although *de facto* they always determine for us what will count as further pertinent questions as we engage in ethical reflection and deliberation, our feelings can be and often are conflicting and distorted. Remedy of these conflicts and distortions is what is meant by moral conversion. Moral conversion consists in a decisive embrace of *the whole realm of all values in their objective hierarchy of preferences*. In Lonergan's terms, this means that vital values are preferred over mere satisfaction with my present, comfortable state of being; the vital values that are harmonious with social values of cooperation are preferred over vital values that are not; social arrangements that promote cultural values, even if they are more complicated, are preferred over social arrangements that are merely efficient; cultural values that promote the dignity of self-transcending human subjectivity are preferred over cultural values that merely glorify conquering heroes; and the religious value of an unconditionally loving being are preferred over the personal values attainable merely by self-transcending human actions alone.

Moral conversion in this sense is only accomplished through a dramatic shift in the horizon of all one's feelings for values. The tensions between the feelings that feel values in their proper preference and those that feel values out of order are gradually resolved in the process of moral conversion. A person can make the decision to become morally converted, but this is only the beginning of the process of moral conversion. The actuality of moral conversion will be a long and difficult process where feeling

distortions one did not even realize one had surface, cause shame, and only with sustained and difficult effort, are replaced by new feelings of objective value preference.

The condition of objectivity and goodness in ethics, therefore, is moral conversion. Moral conversion is a decisive process whereby the conflicts in our horizon of feelings are gradually resolved, and only the dynamics of the unrestricted notion of value and unrestricted being-in-love prevail.

Rights: We were asked to address our remarks on this panel to themes raised in *Topics in Education* and in the essay “Natural Right and Historical Mindedness.” In particular, we were asked to comment about how we should understand Rights, Subjects, Cultures, Meanings, Values and Powers. So far I have touched at least briefly on all of these, except the topic of rights. So I would like to conclude with at least some very brief comments about rights.

The terminology of rights is an intellectual and rhetorical construct of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Western Europe. It traces to Hobbes and Locke, and arose in response to real failures of European political arrangements to secure the human good. Hobbes in particular was outraged by the devastation of the wars of religion, while Locke was sought to redress unintelligent and irresponsible interferences of monarchs into the economic and social schemes of recurrence. Whether they thought of it in this way or not, what they achieved was the erection of a system of checks and balances by playing individual desires and fears off against one another. They did this through philosophical arguments but especially through rhetorical devices. Those rhetorical devices elicited strong feelings of allegiance to a certain image of selfhood and

human dignity. Central to that image is the way freedom of choice is conceived, in abstraction from the structure of ethical intentionality to which it is intrinsically related. In so doing, this rhetoric of rights excites and intensifies certain feelings, especially the fear of death and the desire for comfort and prosperity. It also diminishes feelings and desires for values on other levels of the scale of value, especially social, cultural, personal and religious values. It would take longer than I have time at present to explain why I am making these claims, so I will have to leave that for another time.

There has been undeniable success in the various stages and syntheses in what has come to be called political liberalism, and which derives from the seminal works of Hobbes and Locke. In comparison to other social, political and economic systems, political liberalism has produced profoundly valuable progress regarding freedom of expression and investigation, and the growth in standards of living and life expectancy. In addition, by elevating the desires to do as one pleases as long as one does not “harm” anyone else, the rhetorical power of “rights” language has gradually exposed the unintelligent and irresponsible biases of classism, racism, sexism, and so on. It has become exceedingly difficult for these biases to be sustained by social acceptance and therefore maintain the social power they once had.

All this is to be lauded about the record of the rhetoric of rights. But it also has a downside. Rights talk does *not* take its stand on the self-correcting conscious dynamics of attentiveness, intelligence, reasonableness, responsibility or loving. It does not conceive of human freedom or human dignity in terms of the reciprocal relationships between the human good as developing subject and the human good as developing object. It does not respect the normative scale of value preferences. Instead, by elevating the fear of death

along with the desire for prosperity, it cleverly mobilizes individual biases against one another in a balance of powers that mitigates the effects of some of the worst group biases, but is ultimately ineffective against the longer term consequences of general biases reinforced by those individual biases. In the long run, people who are formed by the rhetoric of rights language in liberal societies gradually come to believe there is no such thing as objective truth, or objective right or wrong. As such, the very allegiance to rights talk itself is undermined.

It remains, however, that something comparable to the rhetorical success of rights language will need to be developed for an ethics and politics grounded in the dynamism of ethics that is immanent and operative in the human good, both as subject and as object, no matter how much that dynamism is distorted or betrayed.