

Lonergan on the Edge: Panel on Lonergan and the Human Good

In my comments I would like to pick up on one or two salient points that Lonergan makes in his chapters on the human good in *Topics in Education*.¹ I will highlight them and then introduce some examples to illustrate some of these points.

In Chapter Two of *Topics in Education* Lonergan points out that only God is the essence of the good. Any *human* good is a good by participation and is therefore imperfect and finite (31-32). The human good therefore is always concrete and occurs and is known in particular places and times that come along with their cultural and social sets of meanings. These include different levels of intellectual development, sin, and its reversal in redemption (the differentiations he discusses in chapter. 3).

So the ultimate good is God in Godself but the human good is finite, concrete, and subject to aberrations. In this regard Lonergan makes a telling point: the human good is not a system of ideas, not a system of legalities or even of moral precepts. Rather, “it is a history, a concrete, cumulative process resulting from developing human apprehension and human choices that may be good or evil. And that concrete developing process is what the human good in this life is, the human good on which depends man’s eternal destiny” (33).

The notion that the human good is a *history* I find fascinating. It is not that it *has* a history, as in a set of family photo albums. It *is* a history. It involves recurrent social practices and their attendant meanings as they unfold in the here and now. Lonergan’s outline of the Good of Order touches on this element of recurrence. “The most

¹ Bernard J. F. Lonergan, Frederick E. Crowe, and Robert M. Doran, *Topics in Education*, Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan, vol. 10 (University of Toronto Press, 1993); Lonergan, Crowe, and Doran.

conspicuous aspect of a good of order is a regular recurrence of particular goods” (34). But this is not a matter of mechanistic planning. Instead it is “a matter of alternative sets of schemes of recurrence” (35). He likens it to the circulation of water on the face of the earth, which occurs not mechanistically but as a matter of probabilities: what actually occurs changes from day to day, week to week, generation to generation, depending on the underlying conditions of possibility. These probabilities do not negate the regularity of the good of order, they simply indicate that this good of order itself takes place in concrete and changing circumstances. In other words, it is a matter of history.

Another point about the good of order is that the recurrence of particular goods only occurs through the coordination of human operations, that is co-operation. “There is a recurrence of particular goods because men operate, and operate in some sort of coordinated fashion, with a certain interdependence” (35). This co-operation occurs only if certain conditions are fulfilled. The first is habits developed in the subject. These habits are themselves schemes of recurrence that have become routine in a person’s mind, will, and practice. One develops habits of inquiry and understanding, willingness to learn and do what is right, and the skills to perform the required actions. “Habits are a condition of coordinated human operations. If every time something had to be done people had to take a year off to learn, or to be persuaded, or to acquire the skills, nothing would ever be done” (35).

The second condition of effective coordinated action lies in institutions. “Institutions are like habits but in the objective order” (35). They are mechanisms for making decisions and promoting the common good, whether governmental structures or the mores of socialization. Institutions provide traffic lights. They are also evident in

teaching youth, at least in the south, to address their elders as “Ma-am” or “Sir.”

Community wide education requires educational institutions: coordinating teacher training, procuring text books, setting up classrooms and curricula according to abilities, and so on.

A third condition of co-operation involves material resources. A system to organize traffic patterns is a good idea, but if there is no budget for traffic lights or stop signs chaos may unfold. We meet today in a building that is part of an institution, a building that required funds to be built, depends on a heating and air circulation system so we can breathe and not freeze, and needs material upgrades and repairs as equipment ages.

A final element in the good of order is personal status. This is not an element that is commonly obvious. But the point is that in any kind of co-ordination of operations different persons play different roles and those roles give people a status in the social system. Lonergan uses the example of a family as a good of order. Each person has a place in the system, jobs to do, tasks to perform, roles to play. The parents have a different status than the children and each child has a different status depending on abilities and age. As persons change over time so do their tasks and abilities, as do their roles and their status in the family. When a daughter gets her driver’s license her role will change dramatically as will her sense of self. The same is true of teachers and pupils—graduate students and their mentors -- doctors and patients, priests and parishioners, and so on.

Lonergan concludes as follows: “So the good of order involves four aspects: a regular recurrence of of particular goods, coordinated human operations, the triple

condition of these coordinated human operations -- habits, institutions, and material equipment – and finally, the personal status which results from the relations constituted by the cooperation” (36).

While the discussion of value that follows in *Topics in Education* is important, I am going to move on to Lonergan’s discussion of evil. Here he notes that just as there are particular goods there can be particular evils: privations, suffering, harm, destruction (43). And just as goods can be organized through coordinated operations so too can the good of order suffer aberrations. The good of order can break down so that particular goods are not forthcoming. Or coordinated action itself becomes disoriented so that habits become vicious and willingness or skills are directed at perpetuating prejudice and/or violence. Institutionalized evils can become entrenched so a few are educated or fed at the expense of the many. There can be outdated equipment, or well-built schools where teachers are tyrannical. Finally, there can be people with no personal status. Lonergan puts it thus: “There can be the destruction of personal relations through hatred, envy, jealousy, lust, resentment, grievance. People with grievances, nations with grievances, very easily can become warped in their entire outlook” (44). The point is that evil can penetrate the good of order and can do so in as many ways as there are aspects of the good of order.

Let me pause at this point and come at the human good from an entirely different angle – that of women’s welfare “on the ground” in a variety of circumstances. Here I am relying on the work of Nicholas Kristoff and Sheryl WuDunn, both journalists – a married couple – who have spent their lives working for the *New York Times*. After long careers of traveling the world covering current events, they began to realize a

common thread in many parts of the world – women are suffering and dying on an incalculable scale due to oppressions of many sorts, from sexual slavery to lack of access to education to honor burnings or deaths in childbirth. In fact, they discovered that “more women have been killed in the last fifty years, precisely because they were girls, than men were killed in all the battles of the twentieth century.”² They have gathered stories of oppression and its reversal from around the world in a book entitled *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide* (New York: Vintage Books, 2009).³ A few of their case studies illustrate the complexity of the “good of order,” its distortion, and efforts to turn it around.

One example of good intentions based on the right values that nevertheless overlooked cultural and religious systems of meaning has to do with women in Nigeria. A UN project in Nigeria set out to empower women through their cultivation of cassava, a root vegetable similar to a sweet potato. The women mostly used this to nourish their own families but when there was excess they would sell it for cash. The project introduced a new variety of cassava that yielded three times the harvest per hectare as the type originally grown. The women then did not have the capacity to process this yield and the men would not help since growing cassava was women’s work. So the UN project introduced processing equipment. But a further difficulty lay in the fact that cassava always produces a cyanide-related compound. When this new variety was processed it in fact produced larger amounts of this toxic substance so further systems

² Nicholas D. Kristof, and Sheryl WuDunn, *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide* (New York: Random House, 2009), xvii.

³ This title is based on the Chinese proverb, “Women hold up half the sky.” There is also a documentary on these cases. See <http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/half-the-sky/>.

had to be introduced to prevent toxic contamination of the water systems. Once that was dealt with the project seemed to be a raving success. The women were making a lot of money in their cassava production. But because they were now making money, the men moved in and took over. The cultural assumption was that women dealt with subsistence crops and men were in charge of cash crops. In the end, the men spent the money they earned on beer and the women had less income than when they started (177).

Another concern that Kristoff and WuDunn address is sexual slavery – the kidnapping and retaining of women and girls to serve as prostitutes against their wills. They are often beaten and drugged to make them compliant. This kind of practice occurs around the world and usually targets girls or women who are poor and uneducated. While the previous example indicates how aid that is well intentioned can fail to grasp schemes of recurrent meaning that undergird a “good of order,” in this case the “big stick” approach of using regulations and legal tactics illustrates how institutions can change probabilities. *International Justice Mission* is a Christian organization founded by a lawyer named Gary Haugen.⁴ It works specifically against human slavery of all sorts but will only go to work in countries where there are already laws on the book against such slave practices. Among other things, they give legal training to local police, educating them about the laws they can enforce. IJM local staff members infiltrate brothels under cover and help to instigate interventions. They also create and run healing programs for girls rescued from brothels. To monitor the impact of their work, IJM uses independent

⁴ See Gary Haugen and Victor Boutros, “And Justice for All: Enforcing Human Rights for the World’s Poor,” *Foreign Affairs* 89 (2010): 51-62, and Samantha Power, “The Enforcer: A Christian Lawyer’s Global Crusade,” *The New Yorker*, Jan. 19, 2009, 52-63.

auditors to track changes in various places. For example, they found that in Cebu, in the Phillipines, prior to the casework of IJM, it took one of their undercover workers just under two hours to find a child for sale for sex. After IJM had done its work, relying on and strengthening the legal systems that in fact were in place in the Phillipines, it took such a prospective client seven and a half hours to find his “goods.” In the words of an IJM staff person, this “dramatic increase in time greatly decreases the likelihood that someone will put in the time and effort to find a child to abuse.” (private communication).

In a similar institutional move, in 2000 the U.S. Congress put into place a requirement that the State Department put out an annual Trafficking in Persons Report – a TIP report. This ranks countries in terms of their handling of trafficking of persons practices, and countries that rank lowest are sanctioned. This meant that for the first time U.S. embassies had to begin collecting data on trafficking. American diplomats had to begin discussing these practices with their foreign ministry counterparts and the foreign ministries had to begin making inquiries of their national police forces.

This shift in institutional accountability led to a shift in practices on the ground. When Nick Kristoff first visited a Cambodian village named Svay Pak, notorious worldwide for its sex slavery, there were brothels with seven and eight year old girls for sale. Virgins were sold as premium goods. On one occasion fifteen years ago Nick was taken as a presumed customer to a thirteen-year-old-girl who had been sold to the brothel and was waiting in terror for the sale of her virginity. But then the U.S. State Department began demanding TIP reports and openly criticized Cambodia for its practices. At the same time IJM opened an office there and media reports put a spot light on Cambodian

sexual slavery. Cambodian authorities decided that the bribes paid by brothel owners weren't worth the hassle and sent in police to crack down. The last two times Nick has been to Svay Pak and made enquiries as if a prospective client, he found it hard to find the brothels and virtually impossible to find any virgins available for sale.

These are only a few case studies meant to highlight some of the elements of the good of order upon which Lonergan has shed such light. The point is that the human good is embedded in cultural systems of meaning as well as practices supported by institutions, whether those institutions are codified or merely common sense assumptions. Thus, to name aberrations and set about changing them involves not only clear discernment of value, and choosing value over satisfaction, it requires savvy understanding of systems of meaning and practice.

Let me then pick up one more quote from *Topics in Education* that points to the ground on which we can build claims of value and insist that some practices and sets of meaning need to change. In discussing "sin as aberration" Lonergan asks, "In what consists the aberration of consciousness or history?" (63) He distinguishes between the ideal tendencies of the human spirit toward the true, the right, and the good, and the "concerns" that can deform and misdirect these aspirations. "Every closing off, blocking, denial of the empirically, intelligently, rationally, freely, responsibly conscious subject is also a closing off, a blocking, of the dominance of the higher aspirations of the human spirit and the human heart" (63). It is this basic, *empirically grounded*, set of aspirations, this wonder, this upward mobility of the human spirit that lays a foundation for why systems of meaning and practice that denigrate women are problematic. One of the most influential ways of changing systems involves the education of women, indeed, "One

study after another has shown that educating girls is one of the most effective ways to fight poverty” (*Half the Sky* 169). But it is precisely the systemic blocking off of educational opportunities that prevents many girls and women from following their basic human aspirations.⁵

Lonergan goes on to say:

“The objectification of sin in social process provides the objective empirical evidence for the false philosophy or degrading myth. The incomplete development and the sins of the philosopher or the bard make them incapable of conceiving and expressing a true philosophy or a true symbolic vision of life. Moreover, those who do uphold what is true give scandal by acting and writing unworthily . . . There is in man a demand for false philosophy, for degrading myths, because of his moral impotence. What is needed in man to break away from the aberration of sin is a leap – not a leap beyond reason, as irrationalist philosophers would urge, but a leap from unreason, from the unreasonableness of sin, to reason” (64).

With regard to redemption, Lonergan speaks of faith as the fundamental answer to the problem of sin: “Against sin as aberration . . . faith reestablishes truth as a meaningful category” (67). Further, “Again, against sin as a component in the social process, sin as changing social process from a matter of freedom and creativity to routine and drudgery with all its determinisms and pressures and in the limit violence, there arises hope, which liberates the pilgrim in us” (67). Though I have had to restrict myself to a few examples, over and over again in the stories told in *Half the Sky* one encounters a newly generated hope in girls and women once the “truth is told” and the “pilgrim is liberated.” Lonergan

⁵ See Kristoff and WuDunn, chapter 10.

refers to a heroism involved: “To have that heroism there is needed the virtue of hope; and without that heroism there is no victory over the cumulative effects of sin as a component in social process” (67). Then, finally, he notes, “Against sin as self-perpetuating, as a chain reaction, there is love of one’s enemies and the acceptance of suffering” (67). In Cambodia there is a young woman who was rescued from a brothel and functions now with only one eye, since the brothel owner punctured her eye to get her to obey. When rescued she was returned to her family who said they no longer wanted her. She has now taken on new name, which -- translated into English -- means “forgiveness,” because she wants to leave the past behind her. She works with other former prostitutes to educate young men about safe sex and to find and free women held in prostitution against their will.

The point of my comments here is not to provide a reasoned thesis about Lonergan’s ethics, but to bring forward a few of his most salient points and to generate insights by providing examples of systems of meaning and practice that fail to support the naturally given aspirations of the human spirit. If one wants to further explore Lonergan’s ethics, one could not do better than to find examples of aberration and liberation and discover his invariant structure and its differentials within them.

Kristof, Nicholas D., and Sheryl WuDunn. *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide*. New York: Random House, 2009.

Lonergan, Bernard J. F. , Frederick E. Crowe, and Robert M. Doran. *Topics in Education*. Vol. 10 *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*: University of Toronto Press, 1993.