

## **“Historical Mindedness, Moral Normativity, and the Workings of Contingency”**

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### **Contribution to Panel: “Lonergan and the Questions of Ethics”**

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“A contemporary ontology would distinguish two components in concrete human reality: on the one hand, a constant, human nature; on the other hand, a variable, human historicity. Nature is given man at birth. Historicity is what man makes of man.”

Bernard Lonergan, “Natural Right and Historical Mindedness,” p. 170

“As human nature differs from human historicity, so understanding human nature is one thing and understanding human historicity is another. To understand the constant, nature, one may study any individual. But to understand the variable, historicity, one has to study each instance in its singularity. So we come to what Alan Richardson has named ‘historical mindedness.’”

Bernard Lonergan, “Natural Right and Historical Mindedness,” p. 171

“Cultural changes, such as the one that gave birth to the modern age, have a definitive and irreversible impact that transforms the very essence of reality. Not merely our thinking about the real changes: reality itself changes as we think about it differently. History carries an ontic significance that excludes any reversal of the present. Nor is it possible to capture that changing reality in an ahistorical system.”

Louis Dupré, *Passage to Modernity*, p. 6

I hope that these passages, two from Lonergan and one from Louis Dupré, will provide a useful set of markers delimiting the conceptual territory I plan to explore in my contribution to today’s discussion on “Lonergan and the Question(s) of Ethics.” In largest terms, this is the territory within which concepts of “nature,” “normativity,” and “history” (and the various grammars in which they function) intersect, engage and interact with one another. These passages suggest that Lonergan and Dupré both see human agency functioning in this “territory” as a key vector in determining, first, the scope and the significance of each of these concepts; second, the “ontological”—or if you prefer, “the metaphysical”—weight that these notions bring to bear upon their engagements with one another;<sup>1</sup> and, third, how that “weight” then enters into and shapes the

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<sup>1</sup> I understand “metaphysics”/“ontology” to encompass efforts to articulate, first, fundamental distinctions regarding what is and what ought to be and, second, appropriate grammars for the use of these distinctions. With respect to the primary importance of distinctions for the philosophical enterprise, see Robert Sokolowski, “The Method of Philosophy: Making Distinctions,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 51: 1998, pp. 515-532. In this parsing of “metaphysics” I include distinctions regarding “what ought to be” as well as “what

conceptual contours that delimit the field of their intersections with one another. Though there are differences in the accounts they each provide of this conceptual terrain, their accounts converge in placing the exercise of human agency and the moral weight such exercise carries into the framework of what I think may properly be termed a “metaphysics of history.” As I will suggest at the end of this presentation, placing the exercise of human freedom and agency into the framework of a metaphysics of history makes it possible to articulate the scope of what is at stake (quite a lot!) for theological and philosophical anthropology when we—individually, but even more so communally—are confronted with questions that are fundamental to ethical inquiry and moral action.

With these factors in mind, my aim in this presentation is to provide a vantage point from which to begin charting that interaction in terms of a conceptual register that is, first, indexed to an understanding of the free, responsible human agency<sup>2</sup> ingredient in such interaction and, second, attentive to the metaphysical/ontological presuppositions in which such an understanding of agency is embedded. A further consideration I have in view in attempting to provide such a vantage point is that Lonergan and Dupré both take it to be the case that the intellectual and cultural conditions of modernity and its aftermath have made possible a significant modulation in the function of the vector of human agency in the interplay of these notions. This modulation is a consequence of the emergence of a distinctive mode of reflective appropriation/awareness of the efficacy and of the limitations of human agency upon the workings of history—i.e., the emergence of “historical consciousness” or “historical mindedness.”

Thus, on my understanding of Lonergan and Dupré, they each take the emergence and development of historical consciousness as a framework for the self-understanding of the cultures of modernity to have effected an alteration not merely in the possibilities it offers for enriching human understanding of history and of humanity’s role in shaping that history. History enacted and interpreted from a reflective horizon of human historical consciousness is not merely an alteration in our ideation, in the way we think about history; it also effects a far more fundamental change in the very character of what is thereby taken to constitute history precisely in its character as an outcome of human intentionality and action. In what I hope is not an inappropriate application of Dupré’s observations, the upshot of this is that we may also need to say that, as a consequence of historical consciousness, not merely our thinking about history changes: history itself changes, in function of our thinking about it differently under the modes of historical consciousness.

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is” so that metaphysics can be construed to encompass what Kant terms a “metaphysics of morals”; see footnote 5, below, regarding the metaphysical significance of the way in which Kant draws the distinction between “what is” and “what ought to be.”

<sup>2</sup> I am using the expression “free, responsible human agency” to stand for “autonomous agency” in order to obviate a common individualistic misconstrual of autonomy in which an agent’s freedom is taken to be unconstrained; I would argue that such a construal is directly counter to Kant’s account of autonomy as precisely the self-governance of freedom that is exercised in view of one’s responsibility as member of a moral community (a “kingdom of ends”) constrained by mutual respect for one another’s moral freedom.

I am thus taking this form of reflective awareness to be more than simply an implicit (or even an explicit) sense that human action and activity is a factor the determination of particular events and outcomes of history. Modernity cannot claim credit for “discovering” that what humans do (or what at least some humans do) plays a role in shaping the trajectory and consequences of events that affect, both now and extending into the future, the weal and the woe, the flourishing and the diminishment, of human communities. Historical consciousness presupposes but is not encompassed by the simple apprehension that human agency is a factor in the complex intersection of vectors operative in processes of historical causation.<sup>3</sup> It enlarges (and by doing so alters) such apprehension to the extent that this reflective awareness of the possibilities and the limitations of human agency in the shaping of history now becomes a factor in both the exercise of that agency and the interpretative accounts in which one articulates the scope and structure of such exercise, as well as of its outcomes. Put simply, what once might have seemed to be the quite ordinary fact that human agency plays a role in shaping the course of history has, in consequence of modernity’s thematization of the human subject’s self-aware reflexivity, now also become a “fact” in and for the reflective consciousness of agents as they act, and understand their action, in history. Historical consciousness alters the horizon within which humans exercise their freedom as subjects who participate with one another in the dynamics that constitute history.

An instance of such alteration that ensues in consequence of an agent’s enlarged reflective awareness can be found in the moral function Immanuel Kant assigns to what he terms a “cosmopolitanism” perspective in his account of politics, culture, and history in the unfolding of humanity’s moral vocation. This perspective provides a horizon from which agents are enabled to envision the exercise of their freedom as encompassing a moral capacity and responsibility not just to give their individual lives a proper moral trajectory, but also to shape, in concert with one another, the direction of history toward the establishment of an international order to bring about enduring peace.<sup>4</sup> Cosmopolitanism, by providing lasting peace as a “regulative” horizon of “what ought to be” for all of humanity thereby enables moral agents to act from the hope that what they do can then be effective for bringing about the conditions for such peace, even if, as Kant significantly notes, no one of us is able (theoretically) to determine whether such an establishment of peace is “something real or a fiction” (MM 6: 354). On Kant’s account, the reality of that which practical (moral) reason proposes to us in such a “regulative” mode—in this case, the conditions for an international order of peace—is effected only through our enactment of it. In terms of a contemporary philosophical idiom, its manner bringing an order of peace into being is “performative.” Cosmopolitanism so

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<sup>3</sup> See Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, Chapter 12, “A Digression on Historical Explanation,” (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) pp. 199-207, as reference point for the complexity and over-determination of historical accounts and for the role that changes in reflective understanding of human self-identity and agency play in the articulation of those accounts.

<sup>4</sup> A particularly important marker of this is the fact that Kant insists in a number of texts published in the 1790s (“Perpetual Peace,” “Theory and Practice” and *The Metaphysics of Morals*) that “there shall be no war” is a categorical imperative binding without exception on everyone.

enacted exhibits moral hope as an ontological capacity to bring the conditions for the peace among peoples that “ought to be” into actuality.<sup>5</sup>

This instance from Kant—which is intriguing on its own terms as an articulation of an emergent historical consciousness—provides the basis for considering two related questions that will serve as the focus for my conclusion:

1. What bearing might this instance from Kant have for charting the conceptual terrain of “nature,” “normativity” and “history” as they intersect with (the freedom of) human agency construed in terms of “historical consciousness” as a mode of its reflexivity and self-awareness?
2. In what way does human agency, so construed in terms of historical consciousness, then engage “nature” and “normativity” in ways that make it possible—or perhaps may even require—a reconsideration of the nature, function, and scope of “metaphysical” claims put forth on behalf of “nature,” “normativity,” and/or “human agency”?

The first question suggests that, in terms of the reflexivity of historical consciousness, human agency stands as the vector through which nature and normativity are engaged historically. To use a theatrical trope, when human agency is construed through the reflexivity of historical consciousness, it no longer functions only as an actor in a drama staged on a “set” provided and designed by “nature” and “normativity.” Human agency can now be construed, at least to the extent that its agency is emergent in nature and acts both within and upon nature, as having at least some role (or roles) in the planning and/or the execution of the whole production.<sup>6</sup> If, moreover, we expand the range of this trope to encompass the workings of contingency as a fundamental vector in the trajectory of history, we will need to engage the question the extent to which we are to construe the productions that result from such interaction of nature and human agency as “scripted” or as “improvisational”—or perhaps as a varying and variable mixture of both. Historical consciousness of such engagement of human agency and nature thus does not obviate, but rather complicates questions about the modality in which providence and grace bear upon the workings of contingency within a world of nature and normativity constituted as a field for the exercise of human moral freedom. These, of course, are each dimensions of the larger set of questions that modernity and its aftermath have pressed in urgent and multiple ways about the extent to which humanity is capable

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<sup>5</sup> For an astute reading of the interrelated metaphysical and moral significance for Kant of the distinction between what “is” and what “ought to be,” see Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> Within this context, Kant’s account of cosmopolitanism, particular as an expression of the self-governance of a human reason attentive to the limits of its finitude, provides an important reminder of the intellectual and the moral humility requisite for humanity to discharge its responsibilities for fulfilling what he sees as humanity’s distinctive moral vocation to serve as the juncture of nature and freedom.

of and/or should shoulder responsibility for very shaping of “nature” and of the normativity for directing action.<sup>7</sup>

For purposes of our discussion, however, the key issue that introduction of the vector of a historically aware human agency into the interplay of nature and normativity raises bears upon how history and metaphysics stand in relation to one another. To what extent does this vector of a historically aware human agency make it possible—or even require—conceiving history as a metaphysical category and, of equal importance, taking metaphysics and, by implication, normativity, nature, and, yes, ethics, as historical categories. This, I take it, is the issue behind my second question—and, in my judgment, it is the “deep” issue at stake in the passages from Lonergan and Dupré that I have suggested as the beginning markers of the territory for our discussion. They are each astute in identifying the need for (re-)articulating these categories, and their relation to each other in consequence of the attention that the intellectual and cultural legacy of modernity and postmodernity requires us to pay to the dynamics of a human agency that has become alert to the thoroughness of its embedding in history. Where Lonergan and Dupré differ, I suspect, may be in how “deep down” they take such an embedding in history to go and what consequences then follow for philosophical and theological anthropology if such embedding in history goes, as I for one suspect it does, “all the way down.” Does such a thoroughgoing historicizing of “nature,” “normativity,” and, indeed, of “agency” as well, simply displace, replace, or abolish “metaphysics”? Or is it, rather, a challenge to transform, at the very least, our understanding of metaphysics (and perhaps thereby metaphysics “itself”) as a dynamic of inquiry—or, as Kant would put it, a “disposition”—embedded into the exercise of our free, finite human agency.

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<sup>7</sup> George Steiner’s *Grammars of Creation* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001) offers a provocative engagement with these questions.