

MORAL OBJECTIVITY

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The Issue

Among the facts of life that youngsters learn, the one about moral authority can remain unresolved for a lifetime. Once they discover that the list of what's right and what's wrong is not cast in stone, they question the moral authority of their parents, religious leaders and government officials. Eventually, they question even their own moral authority. Life teaches them to adjust their assessments of other people, and to reconsider opportunities they think are worth pursuing. They come to understand that anyone's moral authority is essentially a matter of being objective about what is good.

This opens their perspective on what is arguably the most basic issue in moral philosophy: "How do we know what is good?"

To address this question, we should sharpen our focus. We are not asking, "How can I be sure I'm right about what is good?" This is a common question, but it begs our question about what moral objectivity is in the first place. To address our question – How do we know what is good? – we first need to understand what occurs when we make a judgment that something is good, and why such occurrences are valid for knowing what is good. While this may sound terribly academic, the question is profoundly personal. Every time we use terms like "should" or "ought" or "better" or "worse," we assume that we possess a method for knowing what is good. The more each of us understands how we do this, the more intelligence we can bring to acting like responsible persons.

Judgments about good and bad are instances of human knowledge. And while our knowledge has many aspects, the

same issue about objectivity underlies them all: How does our knowledge reach reality? The question has a cognitive aspect and a moral aspect. The cognitive aspect is about how we can know what exists, what has occurred, or what explanations are correct. The moral aspect is about what is good, what is better, or what we ought to do. We can lay a foundation for understanding moral objectivity by looking first at cognitive objectivity.

Cognitive Objectivity: The Question

To good common sense, objectivity is a bit of a myth. Every day we are reminded of how fallible our knowing is. Scientific theories are overturned. People disagree on what happened at a party – a phenomenon recognised by historians who write “A History of Rome,” rather than “*The History of Rome.*” We misinterpret what others say, and often discover that what we thought was an agreement was based on a misunderstanding.

In the meantime, we have practical concerns. We don’t wonder if it’s really raining when we’re standing drenched on a street corner. We think, not in order to *be* right, but just to *act* right. And as long as our actions succeed, we assume that our thoughts are reaching their goal. No need to prove to ourselves that our knowledge reaches reality. In the long run, what counts is simply that we act in ways that contribute to our well being. “Truth” seems nothing more than ideas that work, not ideas that correspond to reality as it really is.

Still, religious faithful believe that God actually exists. Parents drum into children the importance of telling the truth. International relations are based on the assumption that every party *really* has in mind the interests it professes and *really* does not intend acts of aggression from which it promises to refrain. Law courts lay heavy sanctions on witnesses who lie on the stand.

So philosophers pose the question of how cognitional events in the mind reach reality outside the mind. They picture our minds assimilating and organising the data coming in through our five senses. But data is just what is “given” to our minds, originating in reality out there, but not identical with

that reality. So the question arises, What could our minds possibly be adding to incoming data that turns it into knowledge of reality out there?

The Duality in Knowing

Lonergan proposed an elegant solution to the problem by posing a different question. Since his solution relies not on logic but on a highly personal experiment, readers who expect a rigorous proof will be disappointed. But readers who find the experiment convincing will be intrigued at first by his approach, then personally stunned by the realisation of how their minds actually reach reality, and finally, if they have pursued the matter, liberated to conduct scientific and scholarly studies by using procedures grounded in the methods they have personally verified to be proper to the mind.

Commonsense or Theoretical

Where other philosophers were stumped trying to explain how thinking could possibly reach reality, Lonergan realised that we already know that we perform these acts of thinking. By knowing this, we have already reached reality “objectively.” So the starting point for understanding how thinking can be objective would be a personal verification of a basic truth: We *really* think.

The question about objectivity, then, is not *whether* we can be objective but *how to understand* what makes knowing objective. Once we understand how our acts of knowing can validly be called objective, we are in a far better position to actually be more objective in all our inquiries.

At the very beginning of *Insight*, Lonergan invites us to notice that our acts of knowing can occur in two different modes. We know sometimes in the mode of common sense, and sometimes in the mode of theory.

In the mode of common sense we are concerned about how we live together, and what practical steps we might take to improve our lives. We want to know how other people and things are related to our experience, our use, and our advantage. It’s an opportunistic mode. Where there’s explaining to do, we explain how to work things more than how things work. We point; we remember the appearance of

things. Our expressions are mainly descriptive. They involve narratives rich in imagery, vivid nouns and dynamic verbs.

In the mode of theory we are concerned to understand the inner workings of things. We seek to grasp connections between things without immediate regard for personal opportunities they may give us. We rely on explanations devised to mean exactly the same thing in any time or place. We select those pieces of experience that can be explained, and we put aside the rest. We rely on words with technical definitions, and on well-formulated questions. We make connections between very restricted aspects of things. Where a picture depicts all visual aspects of something from a point of view, an explanation links only a few aspects – and not from a “point of view” but from a “point of *inquiry*.”

(Lonergan uses the adjective, theoretical, to include not only formal theories, but any attempt to understand causes and relationships independent of our personal role. So “theoretical knowing” can include understanding anything, from knowing how computers work to knowing how spiritual events like knowing and loving work.)

In both modes of knowing, earlier expressions are often followed by later expressions, but each mode has a unique relationship between the earlier and the later expressions. In the commonsense mode, we rely on metaphors that shift in meaning as time goes by. “He was going like 60” used to mean someone driving too fast; on expressways today, it means practically the opposite. But metaphors easily coexist. It makes little difference if we find expressions quaint, as long as we get the speaker’s meaning. However, in the theoretical mode, when a better explanation appears, we consider previous explanations not just quaint but imprecise and mainly irrelevant.

Misunderstanding the Duality

Philosophers who don’t understand the difference between their commonsense and theoretical ways of knowing will blend the two. Usually they will *describe* how the mind *explains*. They will rely on a picture of a thinker over here and a reality over there, with only foggy notions of the fact that the thinker already knows that he or she *really* thinks. On the other hand,

philosophers who realise how their theoretical inquiry differs from their commonsense inquiry will conduct their inquiries based on an intelligent grasp of just what their intelligence actually does.

Mathematicians who don't understand the difference between their commonsense and theoretical knowing will find it difficult to picture how 0.999... can be exactly 1.000.... Now most adults can get the insight that $0.333... = 1/3$, and that when you triple both sides of this equation, you get both exactly 0.999... and 1.000.... But only those who understand that insight is not an act of imagining but rather an act of understanding will be comfortable with this explanation. Among them are the physicists who understand what Einstein and Heisenberg discovered about subatomic particles and macroastronomical events – you can't picture them, but they're intelligible.

Neurobiologists who don't understand this duality in their knowing will support research aimed at discovering the exact cluster of neural synapse activations that constitute a thought. Encouraged by discoveries of locations in the brain where chemical activity corresponds to thoughts, they examine these areas hoping to see – actually see – the complexes of chemical changes that we call thoughts. On the other hand, neurobiologists who understand the nature of scientific understanding seek instead simply to *understand* a correlation between chemical activities in the brain and cognitive operations of intelligent consciousness in the mind.

Scriptural exegetes who don't understand their two ways of knowing are not happy with textual interpretations until they have a rich visual picture of what a biblical figure was actually doing. Those exegetes who do understand are happy if they can explain what the authors had in mind when they wrote down these particular marks for others to read.

Puzzle lovers who don't understand this duality cannot solve the old conundrum about the tree falling in the forest: If there's no one around to hear it, does it make a sound? If we picture the tree falling, we see no reason why it doesn't make a sound, regardless of whether anyone is within earshot. But if we define "sound" theoretically as the impact of air pressure

waves on an eardrum, then there certainly is no sound. The conundrum works because the answer is Yes with commonsense knowing and No with theoretical knowing, and not everyone understands the difference.

Parents, educators, and religious leaders who are oblivious of their two ways of knowing inadvertently retard the intellectual growth in children. At first, children have no alternative but to know in the commonsense mode. Only gradually will their minds expand into theoretical knowing. So, while pictures are necessary to educate them on practical living, so too is an attentiveness to their emerging ability to seek explanations in response to intelligent questions. This is true in spades for their understanding of how to live morally and religiously.

Cognitive Objectivity: Commonsense or Theoretical

“Objectivity” is just a word. As an English word, it represents English-speakers’ currency for exchanging of ideas on how our acts of knowing relate to what we know. So, to understand “objectivity,” we are not aiming to understand what the word “really means” – the typical conceptualist’s error. Instead, following the canons of critical realism, we aim to understand how our acts of knowing produce knowledge of reality.

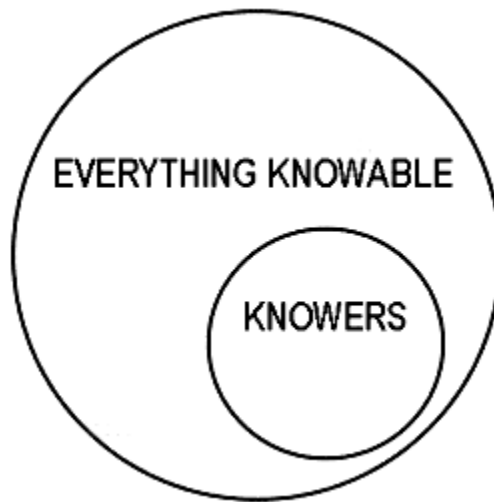
If we have two ways of knowing, it follows that there will be two ways in which our acts of knowing produce knowledge. That is, the term “objectivity” will represent two different understandings of how we know reality. In the commonsense way of knowing, we speak of objectivity to talk about the response of our sensations to what we sense. So we distinguish between a dream and what we see with our waking eyes. The thrill of watching magicians is that they upset our natural sense of commonsense objectivity. What we thought was “out there” really wasn’t “out there” after all.

In the theoretical way of knowing, objectivity will be a property of a relationship between the knower and what he or she knows. In this mode, we need to restrict our speech about objectivity to refer to the response of our intelligence and reason to questions about what really is. To understand this

relationship between knowers and knowns, we should follow the procedures of explanation. I cannot underscore enough how important this is. If, in the commonsense mode, we try to *describe* objectivity, we end up describing the kind of objectivity that goes with commonsense knowledge. But if we want to *explain* objectivity, we must be careful not to expect a description. An explanation does not give a description; it gives an answer to a question for intelligence.

So, to grasp the meaning of objectivity in theoretical knowing, it is important that we remain in an intellectual pattern of experience. This means that we restrict our critical sense to correlations and verifications of conditions, and not also expect that this grasp should include an imaginable picture. We may need images to help give birth to our insights, but our insights don't produce images.

An Image



I believe Lonergan actually does rely on an image when he speaks about objectivity. This image may help us get the insight, but it won't hurt to repeat that the insight itself is not a memory of the image but a grasp of a relationship. I suggest that Lonergan imagined a small circle nesting in a big circle. The image suggests a relationship: The universe of everything

we could possibly know has a unique subclass we call knowers. In this relationship, knowers are not outside of being, since they can also know themselves, but there are many things that are outside of this subclass, namely, everything that cannot know.

In this context, the essential meaning of the term, knower, is someone who knows himself or herself as distinct from other knowers, as well as from beings that cannot know. Lonergan's meaning of the term, objectivity, is based on this relationship between knowers and knowns. This seems to be his point in *Insight*: "there is objectivity if there are distinct beings, some of which both know themselves and know others as others."¹ From this theoretical perspective, then, "being" is understood within a correlation between anything that exists and those existents in the subclass that also want to know. So he defines "being" as "the objective of the pure desire to know."²

The "Notion" of Objectivity

Lonergan proposes that the question of "objectivity" asks about the relationship between our acts of inquiry and the "objects" of those acts. Our initial acts of knowing he names "notions." This is not the commonsense usage, "I have a notion to buy a new car." Nor is it the conceptual equivalent of "idea" – "Where did you ever get the notion that I dislike you?" Rather he uses "notion" to indicate a pre-conceptual inkling. As an inkling, it is the movement of our intelligence heading somewhere by raising questions. As the origin of every question before we conceptualise it, it anticipates some features and excludes others.

Our principal "notion" of objectivity is our assumption that there is a "world" that we know. Within the theoretical perspective, this is not the world "out there" that we know by looking around. It is the world made real to us through the concrete entirety of all correct judgments – our collective judgments about friends, family, clouds, earth, trees, lakes, roads, schools, hospitals, governments, events present and past, events around us and events within us, and so on. We fully

¹ CWL 3, 401.

² CWL 3, 372.

expect that some of our judgments will prove to be wrong, but when we think, we don't start with a universal scepticism. We start by assuming that most of what we know is the product of correct judgments. We expect that any mistaken beliefs and misunderstandings will eventually show themselves as such, at which time we will revise our judgments.

Our expectation that the real world is not pure illusion is the basis for our notion of "objective." But because our knowing is also a compound of experiencing, understanding, and judging, there will be three corresponding secondary "notions" of objectivity. It's easy to see a conceptual correspondence here between three elements in knowing and three meanings of objectivity. But to really understand the different notions of objectivity, we have to validate in ourselves three distinct but related anticipations.

First, we anticipate that there's a world of everything that's merely given to our minds prior to our understanding it. We also anticipate that a purely experiential residue will remain after we understand what we wanted to about a situation. This "experiential notion" moves us to set aside elements that are irrelevant to our question, even though from other perspectives, these elements may be quite relevant. To clarify this with a contrast, the experiential notion of objectivity is not the familiar question about being right: Did I really see the sight I thought I saw? Hear the sound I thought I heard? Rather it's our prior hunch about what data will be relevant.

Second, we anticipate that our curiosity has built-in norms that are prior to all rules and principles – the norms for being attentive, intelligent, and reasonable. Under the pressure of a question, this normative notion of objectivity focuses our attention on some data while ignoring others. It drives us to intelligently grasp a pattern, to identify a correlation, in order to understand. It gives us criteria for reasonably grasping whether all the conditions required for something to be or to occur have been fulfilled – criteria such as what evidence is relevant, when evidence is sufficient, and how X cannot be both true and false. We count on these aspects of the normative notion to guide us through any inquiry. Again, for contrast, the

normative notion of objectivity is not the idealist's questions about rules for understanding: What are the rules that will ensure objectivity? Upon what principles should all thinking rely? Rather, it's our prior expectation that our thinking has built-in norms that direct us toward answers.

Third, we anticipate that we will continue our inquiry until, but not after, we have reached an answer to our question. This absolute aspect of objectivity is our pure desire to know reality. We experience this desire as long as we inquire, and we cease desiring an answer as soon as we reach one. We call this notion "absolute" because our judgment aims to say what is so, regardless of who made such a judgment. By contrast, this absolute notion is not the dogmatist's questions about certitude: About what can we be absolutely sure? Are there truths that are "absolute"? Rather it is the prior experience of wanting to know how things actually stand, absolutely independent of the fact that we happen to know it.

Within our absolute notion of objectivity, we should distinguish two kinds of affirmation. We can affirm that proposition P is true, and we can affirm that explanation E is correct. For example, I can first make the judgment that my car is out of gas, and then explain why. In both cases, my absolute notion of objectivity heads toward knowing reality. In both cases, I can be wrong. In both cases, if I also realise that I could be wrong, then my judgment is based not on a virtually unconditioned, but on a possibly unconditioned. The content of my judgment is a once-removed affirmation about a possible error in a direct affirmation. "I think I've just run out of gas – I could be wrong." And "I suspect I ran out of gas because my fuel gauge is broken – but I could be wrong."

There is another kind of once-removed affirmation, an affirmation crucially relevant to our overall goal of explaining objectivity in the moral sphere. We can make the judgment that explanation E is the best currently available. That is, we propose an explanation that is patently provisional. We have grasped not a virtually unconditioned but only a possibly unconditioned. Theoretical explanations almost always are provisional. In the Middle Ages, for example, the reigning theory of personality categorised people into either phlegmatic,

sanguine, choleric, or melancholy types. Today, there are numerous typologies of personality, which, taken together, explain far more about our personalities. In these cases, our absolute notion of objectivity aims to assert, not a “final answer,” but a “best available explanation.” Strictly speaking, we should express this kind of theoretical knowing in the syntax, “Explanation E explains more about situation S than any other known explanation.” Later, we will draw the parallel to the syntax of moral knowing, which may be expressed, “Assessment A reveals the moral potentials in situation S better than any other known assessment.”

Objectivity and Authentic Subjectivity

These observations about objectivity may cast light on Lonergan’s celebrated definition, “Objectivity is the fruit of authentic subjectivity.” There are two ways to understand this, ways as different as night and day. The first way is prescriptive. It means something like, “If you want to see things as they really are, then follow the steps, Be attentive, Be intelligent, and Be reasonable.” The commonsense character of this approach is evident. It seeks to understand a practical method by which we personally might know reality. It also appeals to the gnostic in us looking for the trick to feeling sure about things.

The second way is explanatory. It might be expressed, “Objectivity is that three-leveled pattern of knowing which results from anyone being attentive, intelligent, and reasonable.” Here, our understanding grasps the intelligibility intrinsic to knowing. That is, we give a personal meaning for a familiar philosophical term – objectivity – by relating it to events in our consciousness. As such, it occurs in the theoretical mode of knowing. Another way of expressing Lonergan’s definition might run as follows: “You will understand how acts of knowing reach reality by attending to the innate method of consciousness – particularly, to the notions, the dynamics, and the objects of being attentive, intelligent, and reasonable.”

If you still have nagging doubts, I can only invite you to inquire more deeply into your hesitation. I believe you will find that it rests on the ever-recurring assumption that knowing

has to be like looking. For example, you may discover that you have assumed what objectivity ought to be and you were searching for an explanation of how it's possible. Lonergan breaks from this assumption by defining "objectivity" as a correlation within being between knowers-impelled-by-notions and knowns-grasped-in-judgments. Similarly, "objects" are what are intended in questions. Each time you rediscover this, you may again be "stunned by the realisation of how the mind reaches reality" that I mentioned above.

Vocabulary

It may help here to talk about the noun "objects," the predicate "objectivity," and the adjective, "objective." We hear these terms among people of common sense everywhere. We also hear them among theoreticians in every discipline – the natural sciences, art and architecture, literary criticism, historiography, psychology and sociology, religious studies and theology, and, naturally, philosophy. Hearing them, we need to understand the speaker's meaning, alert, of course, to the possibility that the speaker is confused about the duality in his or her knowing.

Objects

When we wonder about what is, we intend being, reality, what exists – "objects." A theoretical definition of objects should encompass both the question we pose and that which we question. An object, then, is what is intended in a question for judgment. This is an implicit definition – defining "questions for judgment" in relationship to the "realities intended by judgment." It is meant to appeal directly to our experience of making judgments, rather than to conceptual categories used by the more familiar explicit kind of definition.³

³ In a response to a question posed during a symposium, Lonergan said, "May I add a final word on definition? All defining presupposes undefined terms and relations. In the book *Insight* the undefined terms are cognitional operations and the undefined relations are the dynamic relations that bind cognitional operations together. Both the operations and their dynamic relations are given in immediate internal experience, and the main purpose of the book is to help the reader to discover these operations and

So, in cognitional theory, anything we wonder about – including people – are all “objects,” while in commonsense parlance, “objects” includes people only in an impersonal or demeaning sense.

Objectivity

A definition of “objectivity” is particularly difficult because we often think of it as a property of any object that exists. A good radio has “receptivity.” A prisoner is in “captivity.” A juggler has a “proclivity.” So it seems to follow that anything that really exists must have the property of “objectivity.” What’s important to notice, however, is that we understand properties through insights, in response to the question, What kind of ...? But about whether something really is, we ask, Is it? In other words, “objects” cannot be verified to exist by an insight into some anticipated property of “objectivity” that they may possess. We verify objects by grasping that all the conditions necessary for it to be so are fulfilled – a very different kind of operation, occurring at a noticeably different level of consciousness.

Grammatically speaking, however, “objectivity” is a property of something or other. Lonergan uses it to denote “What kind of knower” and not some anticipated property of the known. Where the knowns happen to be also knowers, their “objectivity” is what makes them self-transcendent, not what makes them exist. So, from a theoretical viewpoint, it’s important to think of objectivity as a way of being intellectually honest. In contrast, commonsense approaches tend to think of objectivity as a way of being right.

Objective

Sometimes we use the adjective “objective” about a subject and sometimes about an object. Regarding a subject, “objective” points to qualities in the knower who wants to know reality, as when we claim to be “objective” investigators. This adjectival usage is the same in both commonsense and theoretical knowing.

Regarding an object, we say that we intend to reach

their dynamic relations in his own personal experience.” See “Theories of Inquiry: Responses to a Symposium” 2 *Coll*, at 34.

“objective” reality or “objective” truth. Here, “objective” points to the real that we intend to know, as opposed to the merely supposed. Even when we make the provisional kinds of judgments found in the sciences, objective reality is what we intend to approach when we validate hypotheses, knowing that a better hypothesis may come along. Again, this adjectival usage is the same for both ways of knowing.

However, when Lonergan uses these terms, he assumes that the reader actually understands “objective” as modifying a noun understood within the context of a correlation between knowers and knowns.

Unfortunately, newcomers to generalized empirical method easily fall short of this understanding and settle instead for a picture. They assume that terms like “objective inquirer” and “objective reality” must refer to someone really seeing what’s really out there.

Moral Objectivity

Besides cognitive objectivity, there’s moral objectivity. Here we enter the realm of values, where the question of objectivity returns in a tempest compared to the calm waters of cognitive objectivity. Now the issue is existential. What counts is both what we are going to do and what we will make of ourselves. When we make decisions, we have to live with the consequences, which include not only the immediate results, but also the praise or blame of people affected. However, they will praise or blame us more for our moral objectivity, or the lack thereof, than about the consequences they enjoyed or suffered. So we also have to live with ourselves, whether as morally objective or as merely self-regarding.

The Passionateness of Being

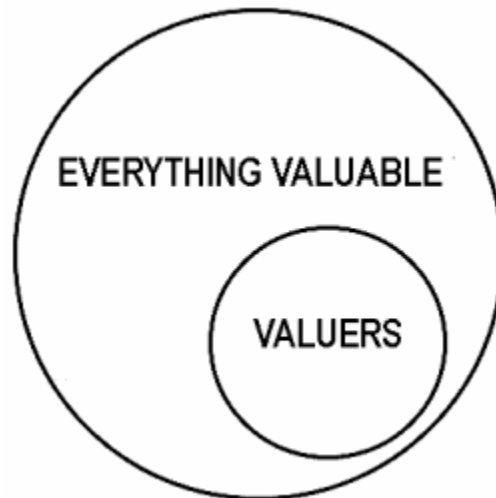
In “Mission and the Spirit,”⁴ Lonergan discussed the nature of morality, particularly how its core norms in consciousness head toward a kind of disinterestedness that’s opposed to mere self-regard. He adds, “The disinterestedness of morality is fully compatible with the passionateness of being.”

⁴ “Mission and the Spirit,” 3 *Coll*, 23-34, especially at 29.

Readers familiar with typical philosophical discussions about “being” will be jarred by this seeming anthropomorphism. How can everything in existence be called passionate? Isn’t “being” simply what’s to be known in correct judgments, the objective of the pure desire to know?

Although Lonergan had always identified being with the good, here, 27 years after publishing *Insight*, he gives an account of the good within a fully moral perspective on human self-transcendence. By articulating the drive toward the good that we experience on a fourth level of consciousness, he completed the foundation for method in the sciences, which formerly he had discussed in light of our drive toward the true. Because theoretical knowing about morality will propose correlations, and not pictures, we can expect that Lonergan’s analysis of the moral dimensions of consciousness will have its total corollary in moral dimensions of all that exists.

An Image



To understand the moral dimensions of the “passionateness of being” more thoroughly, it may help if we return to the image I suggested was at work behind Lonergan’s insight into cognitive objectivity. Besides seeing here a representation of *static difference* within being, we can also see a representation of a *dynamic differentiating*. In other words, this image of the moral order can represent ongoing

improvements. It can suggest to us that within being there is a historical *emergence* of the higher correlative forms of valuers and the valued.

From the vantage of understanding reality as moving, searching, birthing higher and ever higher forms (despite recurring stillbirths), we can envision the knower-known pairs as also emerging valuer-valued pairs. That this emergence is dynamic and blossoming is clear from evolution. That it is also unfinished is attested by the witness of our desires and failures. That it is sadly ambivalent in its outcomes is subtly clear from our consciences and manifestly clear from history. So everything knowable is also everything valuable – either in its present situation or for its potential in a future situation. And every knower is also a valuer – whether by appreciating the good that exists or by intending to capitalise on the potential for the good that he or she envisions.

In this perspective, the field of knowing and knowns linked by the pure desire to know becomes a field of valuing and values linked by the pure desire for value.⁵ Within this more encompassing field, the pure desire for value “sublates” the pure desire to know inasmuch as knowing is itself an improvement of a knower.

We should not restrict “improve” to the products of our actions. The improvements in question are not “out there.” From our theoretical viewpoint, improvements are new relationships emerging between subjects and the realities in their world. They are correlatives of valuing and values. Advertisers may promote a “new and improved” toothpaste, but sales personnel know very well that “improved” really means nothing unless an act of appreciation occurs in customers with teeth. Admiring an evening sunset is likewise an improvement within the field of passionate being, not because “the sun is beautiful” nor, as common sense has it, because “beauty is in the eye of the beholder,” but because a new relationship has emerged between the sun and its beholder

⁵ “Lonergan was asked whether, just as he had spoken of a pure detached desire to know in *Insight*, he would now be willing to identify it with a pure detached desire for value. He answered, yes.” See Introduction, 2 *Coll*, vi

– a link made by the event of admiration. Beauty, we might say, is a burst of passionate being linking the beholder and the beheld.

The Dimensions of Morality

The role of the subject is essential to keep in mind in every consideration of morality. While this may seem obvious, the subject's role is not simple, as anyone familiar with Lonergan's work can attest.

After he referred to the "passionateness of being," Lonergan spelled out some of the complexities in the subject's role: "For that passionateness has a dimension of its own: it underpins and accompanies and reaches beyond the subject as experientially, intelligently, rationally, morally conscious." He went on to describe the various ways in which being expands in the subject: We become aware of deficiency needs; our minds are filled with images that anticipate insights; our internal symbols include the archetypes that guide our emergence as authentic persons. We experience "the mass and momentum of our lives, the color and tone and power of feeling." And we are drawn out of our isolated selves by the offer of camaraderie, of friendship, and of company in our faith.

Within the moral dimension of the total field of passionate being, Lonergan spells out further differentiations as a "structure of the human good." There are the particular objects correlative to our needs and desires. There are the social, technological, and economic institutions correlative to our skills, habits, and insights that ensure the continuing flow of particular objects. And there are the cultural standards correlative to the network of responsible decisions that select among these particular objects and the ordered arrangements that keep them coming. As yet a further differentiation, Lonergan sketched out the dialectic of progress, decline, and redemption that constitutes an intrinsic intelligibility of emergent history. Readers familiar with Lonergan will recognise these analyses. What I want to point out here is simply that they reveal further moral elements within the total field of passionate being of which we are part.

Misconceptions about Morality

Loneragan's theoretical approach clarifies some common errors about morality.

A familiar error is the position that some things like murder and abortion are "intrinsically evil." This view results from the "in here / out there" expectation that some things "out there" are bad "in themselves." This expectation is usually based on the analogy of "facts" considered as sitting in front of a viewer. What makes this erroneous is the assumption that we determine facts by seeing what's there to be seen, along with the inference that we probably perceive wrongness by perceiving wrongness out there in things.

To the theoretical view, however, the only "intrinsic evil" we know of is when a knower judges some act to be responsible and decides not to do it. That is, the intelligible correlation between valuer and valued is corrupted by a failure to let the desire for the valuable drive him or her to responsible commitment.

A similar error is the assumption that while deeds can be wrong, the results of those deeds are morally neutral. So the robbed house, the fooled audience, the changed expectations of an oppressed society are reduced to mere "givens." The moral precept is, "Get used to it." Although some moral philosophers call distorted situations "systemic evils," not all draw the connection from the bad situations to the imperatives felt by anyone being responsible. To the theoretical view, however, shortcomings in the spiritual capital of a community are dynamic correlatives to the pure desire for value – in this case, a pure desire to improve. We are all "responsible" for the evils resulting from basic sin – not necessarily in the sense that we personally committed the basic sin, but in the larger, analogous sense of experiencing the question of what we ought to do to turn things around. Because occurrences of these "ought" questions are realities within the sphere of being, responsibility arises in whomever they occur.

We find a typical religious error in the assumption that "finding God's will" is mainly a cognitive achievement – a judgment of fact about the state of God's mind. This myth has marvellous staying power, despite our scepticism when we

hear self-appointed prophets claim to know what God wants. Lonergan, not surprisingly, includes both the values and the valuers in a single perspective: “The will of God is order in the universe and order within the human soul.”⁶ In other words, what we think of as “God’s will” is not a matter of people doing the “right” things and forgoing the “wrong” as properties determined by the mind of God. It’s people taking responsibility, propelled by their inner moral dynamism. That dynamism is doubly propelled: In the order of spirit, their hearts are flooded with a love for the world and for the people in their particular situation – a love that comes from God. In the order of history, their minds shine with the flesh and blood examples of people who live spiritually exemplary lives. Obedience to these inner moral dynamics doesn’t guarantee certitude about what God wills in any one situation. But God does give moral conviction by pouring forth divine love in our hearts and divine presence in our history in self-transcending men and women.

The fully theoretical viewpoint also clarifies the status of a “right.” The typical view is to consider rights as properties of persons. When they are called “intrinsic” rights, the accompanying observations often convey a picture of rights being “inside” people. This explains, in part, why the idea of rights raises so many unanswerable questions – such as: What exactly are these basic human rights inside us? Do animals have rights inside them? Does a terminally ill man have an inner right to put an end to his inner rights by suicide? If I truly have a right, how could anyone have an opposing right?

From a theoretical approach that anticipates a correlation between values and valuers-with-notions-of-better, we can define basic rights in their correlation with basic duties: *A right is an expectation that others will act authentically.* In other words, the core meaning of “right” is a reasonable expectation about the core duties in others to be attentive, intelligent, reasonable, responsible, and open to love. In the 20th century, there had been a global dawning of awareness of human rights – a significant advance for the race. But from the perspective of emerging being, this dawn has yet to illuminate the core

⁶ CWL 10, 97.

duties we experience as transcendental precepts, how they underlie all progress, how they remain permanently vulnerable to bias, and what the nature of any “redemption” must be. How and when this illumination might occur is anybody’s guess. But it’s certainly clear from Lonergan that “method” in any discussion of rights needs to incorporate an understanding of our notions of the real, of the good, of the affective dimension of all being, and of the phenomena of conversion, bias, and healing.

Moral Objectivity

Within the context of the moral dimensions of the passionateness of being, we can now address our question of moral objectivity. Again, our question is not the conceptualist’s question about the meaning of the word “objectivity.” Rather it is the critical realist’s question, How do our value judgments give us knowledge of what is truly good? What we are doing, by the way, is making our latent metaphysics explicit.⁷ That is to say, we are identifying occurrences in our self-transcending selves, seeing how they relate to each other, and defining the basic terms and the relationships among them with which to speak about how moral judgments can be considered valid.

“Notions” of Moral Objectivity

The validity of our moral judgments rests on our moral notions. Again, we are using “notion” in Lonergan’s dynamic and heuristic sense. So “notions of moral objectivity” will be the anticipations we experience when we wonder about value, the good, improving what we have and eliminating what works against human transcendence.

Our principal notion of moral objectivity is the anticipation that the real world includes a network of responsible decisions consistent with intelligent and reasonable knowing, and the shared world that results. (Again, notice the contrast with the commonsense notion that the real world includes “a lot of things that are good.”) Whether or not we notice it, whenever we think of “better,” we are concerned not only about the products of our decisions but also about the

⁷ CWL 3, 421-426.

changes in ourselves that occur in every decision. In the same manner, Lonergan's "cosmopolis," Teilhard de Chardin's "Omega Point," Jesus' "Kingdom of God," and every past achievement that we consider good encompasses not only the external consequences of people's deliberations but also their deliberating selves as well.

We saw how, besides a principle notion of cognitive objectivity, there are the secondary notions of experiential, normative, and absolute objectivity that correspond respectively to our attention to raw data, to our experience of the norms of mind, and to our intention to know reality. Each of these three aspects has further dimensions when we inquire about value.

Our experiential notion of moral objectivity will include the anticipations carried by our feelings. Feelings, as Lonergan has defined them, are our initial responses to value. We might define them as "notions of value" because they point toward what is better or worse and guide our questions about what is really better or worse. Inasmuch as our feelings spontaneously distinguish between good, bad, and irrelevant, they constitute an experiential aspect of our moral objectivity.

Our normative notion of moral objectivity will include the criteria by which we test better and worse. All the criteria for cognitive judgments still hold, because they bring us to knowledge of situations. Beyond knowledge of situations, the essential criterion for moral judgments is the absence of relevant questions about value. Our experience of this absence is what we call the "settled conscience," but it can as well be called a "settled consciousness," since what occurs in a judgment of value incorporates what also occurs at the levels of reason, intelligence, and attention.

The absolute notion of moral objectivity is our intention to know what is truly good or better. While our experience of this notion is often muddled by self-serving desires, a person in love experiences the absolute notion more purely, more deeply, and more often.

The "absolute" character of our objectivity does not imply that our judgments are "absolutely right." Our judgments will miss the mark when questions relevant to the issue at hand do

not occur to us. What the absolute character implies is simply that we intend to make a value judgment whose content about value is absolutely independent of who makes such a judgment.

Achieving Moral Objectivity

From an explanatory viewpoint, then, our personal achievement of moral objectivity rests on a correlation between our authenticity and the reality of the situation we are evaluating. That correlation may fall short for any of several reasons. When we are considering a course of action, we always fall short of a full understanding of the situation we aim to change. Earlier, we discussed how much of theoretical knowing expresses itself in the syntax, "Explanation E explains situation S better than any other known explanation." In the same manner, most of our judgments about values can be superseded by judgments that meet more of the relevant questions. Their syntax may be expressed, "Assessment A reveals the moral potentials in situation S better than any other known assessment."

Besides the obscurity resulting from the complexities in any situation, are also obscurities arising on the side of the subject. There are the obscurantisms of bias – neurotic fixations, egotism, group loyalism, and a fear of complexity. There are the more deeply rooted obscurantisms that refuse to wonder about ultimate meanings at all, or to commit oneself to objective values, or to consider what occurs when one considers anything. So when it comes to proposed courses of action, our value judgments are always provisional.

Still, we recognise two areas in moral living where we can be fully objective. The first is about facing the past. We can usually be more objective about the wrongs we did than about the good we achieved. For we often experience the humiliation of knowing that we knew exactly what we ought to do and refused to do it – or, its corollary, we knew exactly what we should *not* have done and yet we did it. Here moral objectivity fills us with shame and drives us straight to repentance with no perhapses. The second is about facing the future. Prior to considering concrete courses of action, the morally converted person recognises that it is better to seek what is truly good

rather than merely self-serving. This value judgment, about the value of pursuing value, carries a 100 percent validity as well as a peaceful conscience.

A Complete Notion

So far we have been discussing the meaning of “objectivity” in knowing what is so, and in knowing what is good. We saw how the larger perspective of morality encompasses our anticipations of what is or could be good beyond our anticipations of what happens to exist. But there is a further anticipation yet. When we seek to know what is valuable, we also intend to do something about it. Our very intention to know what is worth doing is incomplete until we decide to do it.

We might call this a “complete notion” of moral objectivity. This is our anticipation that we will go ahead and decide on the basis of what we value. The term “complete” underscores how being authentic will be incomplete if we fail to go beyond what we know, and beyond what we value, to acting responsibly.

Such a complete objectivity is an ideal that no one reaches continuously, owing to the tragic flaw by which we act against our better judgment. Even when we are objective about what is better, we sometimes turn aside from deciding to act accordingly. When we do this habitually, we withhold intelligent solutions to problems. What is worse, we perversely rewire the already complex wirings of our self-transcendence. We begin to hide from ourselves the very value judgment that we refused to act on. We suppress further questions about the situation that required a moral response from us. We turn a deaf ear to moral voices, those of our neighbours and those of our consciences.

Still, we also have the spark of the divine in us, which we experience as an admiration of good people, a hope to become better persons ourselves, and a heartfelt love for our neighbour. These are what concretely constitute the principal notion of moral objectivity that draws us beyond our self-serving preoccupations toward the complete objectivity that intends to improve the world we share.

Intellectual Conversion about Morality

We have explored how we know what is good. Our purpose has been to explain moral objectivity within the theoretical mode of knowing, rather than merely describe it within the commonsense mode. But Lonergan's approach is fundamentally invitational, not argumentative. He invites us to an intellectual conversion about morality. This requires not merely understanding on our part, but also verification of what we understood. It is verification, after all, that makes any difference in what we know to be *really* good.

We undergo an intellectual conversion when we verify how our self-transcending operations reach the real world and true values. This is a real change in us. It is a change in the entire set of questions we are able to ask. Under such a conversion, we discover that knowing is a self-correcting process, both in ourselves as individuals, and in us together as a people. We personally dethrone moral certitude from the high status it held in our childhoods, and take a higher viewpoint on the status it held in the Middle Ages. In its place we crown progressive and cumulative understanding as the leader of progress. We discover in ourselves the biases of neurosis, egotism, group loyalism, and anti-intellectualism, as well as the deeper damage resulting from the absence of intellectual, moral, or affective conversion. With these discoveries, we bring a critical eye to the words and works of others. We pull aside the curtain labelled Truths and Values, and we reveal a dialectic of personal horizons as their real, dynamic, but heretofore unexplored source. A dialectic of personal horizons takes into account the writer and the written, the speaker and the spoken, the artist and the artwork, with an awareness, sharpened through intellectual self-awareness, of the many ways we settle for myth when wisdom is the harder climb.

In *Insight*, Lonergan speaks of intellectual conversion as based on a "discovery – and one has not made it yet if one has no clear memory of its startling strangeness – that there are two quite different realisms."⁸ For years I had expected that intellectual conversion would radically transform how I look at the world. Actually, it seemed to leave my common sense

⁸ CWL 3, 22 .

alone – so that in my daily, practical living, there seemed to be no effect at all. But there was an effect when I investigated anything from a theoretical perspective – in my case, mostly ethics, art, psychology, and spirituality. In retrospect, I can say that these theoretical developments “sublated” my commonsense living. That is, it left my commonsense practicality intact, but gave me an upper set of controls to help me understand what I do when I make moral judgments, or paint, or counsel, or pray. I offer this reflection to help newcomers to Lonergan know what to expect when considering how our moral judgments can be considered objective.

Tad Dunne currently assists Blue Cross/Blue Shield in its efforts to establish programs on quality and ethics by using Lonergan’s structure of the human good and his analysis of historical process. A collection of his writings is available at <http://www.concentric.net/~Tdunne/writings.html>.

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