

# An Ethics of Philosophic Work

Robert Henman

## 1 Introduction

First, I would note that I am writing of *An* ethics,<sup>1</sup> not *The* ethics: as a possible way of, a possible norm for, pursuing work in philosophy. I might even take the word *ethics* out entirely and simply talk of an *ethos*. Why am I quibbling over the word *ethics*? Because some traditions of philosophy even dispute the relevance of ethics to the pursuit of philosophy, or reduce the meaning of the word to a minimal meaning unacceptable to most schools of philosophy. *Ethos*? Perhaps just "a strategy" would be acceptable to all? But even that is a debated issue. There are views on philosophy that emphasize its random character in a way that is not even thinking of the creative role of such randomness. Think of the view that regards philosophic work as anarchic.

Why do I begin an essay with such an apparently positive title in this fashion? Because in this essay I wish us all to arrive at an extremely minimalist operative view of philosophic work, one that nonetheless would be beneficial to most schools or brands of philosophic work. Beginning the essay with the title used here serves to clear up this and other features of this endeavor. What is ethics?<sup>2</sup> There we have a question disputed among philosophers, constituting ongoing debates between various traditions.<sup>3</sup> I start with suggested modifications of the title so as

---

<sup>1</sup> Special thanks to Philip McShane who suggested the topic, offered suggestions, and provided editorial advice in the completion of this essay.

<sup>2</sup> For some insight into the notion of "the ethics" as a subject see Bernard Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, ed. Frederick Crowe and Robert Doran, vol. 3, *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992) (hereafter, *CWL* 3). Chapter 18 is titled, "The Possibility of Ethics."

<sup>3</sup> Bernard Lonergan, *Topics in Education*, ed. Frederick Crowe and Robert Doran, vol. 10, *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan* (University of Toronto Press, 1993) (hereafter *CWL* 10). See chapter 7, section 3, titled "The Theory of Philosophic Differences," on pages 176-192, especially page 182: "Once the

to show that we are not getting into such debates immediately. Could I even be bordering on a type of value-free view of philosophic work? Indeed, yes: might we push that and think of valueless philosophical work? And I would note that there is such a view, most notably evident in what we might call recreational table-talk. Yet even then, has not table-talk the value of relaxing tired minds?

## 2 Towards Foundational Philosophic Work

Let us, then, allow that such table-talk philosophy is out of our zone of interest, and so too the extended version of such philosophy that is supported by the view that this is really all that philosophic talk does or has done through the ages.<sup>4</sup> So we exclude philosophic reflection that takes a definite stand on philosophy as ongoing table-talk.

Let us imagine that we are a room-full of people who consider themselves philosophers. I have my view of philosophy, and what I am about here is the sharing of a minimal element in that view. Indeed, what I am about is noting that my minimal view might well be conveniently shared by all of you. Might it even be shared by table-talk philosophy or even by what might be called anarchic philosophy or its cousin, a philosophy of anarchy? We shall come to that later.

So, adding to that imagining, let us think of you and I here talking about the doing of our two types of philosophy, and think of our conversation as shared by a room-full of people with other views. I will not now venture into the question of what view I hold or you hold. Have I lost already some of the people who were with us at the start: anarchists who want no talk of order? My minimal view would help them. Solipsists? There is room even for them in my minimal view.

Now surely you are curious about this minimal view that suits all. Like the suspicious sock-size in dollar-stores, “one size fits all.” Well, let us make a beginning on this minimalism in my suggesting to you that the first convenient division is the simple one that divides any philosophical group into two: those with a focus on the past, and those with an eye on the future.

This seems simple enough but I anticipate that people in our imagined room-group would object. There are all sorts of subtle objections that I can think of: about history as real and written, about

---

two sides are split, the problem is to put them together again.” This comment is more to my point in this essay and the comment needs to be understood within the context of section 3 outlining the distinctions between and reasons for the three basic philosophic differences.

<sup>4</sup> I am thinking here of a book by John Passmore, *The Perfectibility of Man* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.)(Indianapolis: The Liberty Fund, 2000). Are humans perfectible? Passmore quotes D. H. Lawrence in the book’s epigraph: “The Perfectibility of Man! Ah heaven, what a dreary theme!”

history as objective, about history as knowable, etc.<sup>5</sup> But let us by-pass questions of realism and think with simple pragmatism of the fact that the division is artificial. The focus on the past must go with a general view of history, and also the eye on the future cannot be amnesiac.

This is a serious objection, but what I want you and I to think about is whether this is what I might call a close-down objection. There is a question of attitude here. Think of the attitude lurking in the question: “Might there be a better way of collaborating in my philosophic group’s doing of philosophy?” The easy and conventional answer is, “no way.” That answer is rooted both in fact (this is the way we have always done it) and in habit (I am used to this way of doing it, and I like it).

We might think of this in terms of the Luddite movement, which was named after Ned Lud, who smashed labor-saving frames of a Leicestershire employer in 1779 in protest against reduced wages and unemployment. But my situation is worse here, for I don’t have any frames or any machinery. I am talking about an idea of being somehow more effective, and indeed not in such a concrete enterprise as making pins but in the elusive airy business of using pens. Some two hundred years later, the Luddites are a source of amusement. In 2211 who will be smiling among the penmen or the computer women when it comes to the state of your school of philosophy or mine?

But have we lightened up and thrown light on the serious objection? I would say so, but I would also say that the objector is most likely to remain in his or her conviction, and of course the objector may well be you.

Let me stay with you, then, as an objector. You are objecting, not because there is a possibility of reduced wages or unemployment, but because you do not see how your lone work on the fruits of past writing and thinking in your style of philosophy can be replaced; and indeed you do like to have it that way. The Lone Ranger<sup>6</sup> replaces the Luddite, and furthermore the Lone Ranger has nothing to break: there is no set-up bearing witness to a better way.

The history of philosophy is full of Lone Rangers. Pick a few in your own school, or range around (lone ranging!) and note a couple like Kant or Nietzsche. As help to our muddling along I am going to pick a Lone Ranger in my own tradition of philosophy, which is the tradition that runs up through Aristotle and Aquinas. First I would note that Kant and Nietzsche both gave a twist to previous traditions, though I am not going to enter into the character of the traditions or the twists they gave. But I am drawing attention to the reality of *effect* and of *hope*. A

---

<sup>5</sup> See Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (London: Herder & Herder, 1972), chapters 8 and 9. Chapter 8 of that work is entitled “History” and chapter 9 is entitled “History and Historians.” See especially pages 216-17 on history and perspectivism.

<sup>6</sup> I borrow this image from Philip McShane and it would seem to serve well in describing much of contemporary activity.

reputable Lone Ranger leaves “footprints in the sands of time / footprints that perhaps another / sailing o’er life’s solemn main”<sup>7</sup> etc. Are you something of a Lone Ranger? Yet do you not hope for some effect, beyond your mother cherishing your lonely article or book on her coffee table? The Lone Ranger wishes, perhaps with implicit subtlety, to win the West or East, or at least to be remembered as dying at the Alamo or near the glorious end of the Long March. But here, certainly, is something each of us can pause over: would you not like your article, or book, to be remembered effectively? You labor, and you make a point. I presume you are beyond the exercise that is writing a thesis; a union card task that we sometimes hope will be buried and forgotten. But now, beyond the desire to get the Ph.D., or to publish rather than perish, you have legitimate interests and you wish to be heard. Indeed, you may even wish to change history, quite beyond the history of your school of philosophy. Would you not like, honestly, a structure that rescued your insights and suggestions so that they changed the course of history? At a minimum there would be the bright-eyed admiration of grandchildren; at a maximum there could be some such voicing as “well done thou good and faithful servant.” Think of it in some basic sense: would it not be somewhat insane and un-healthy to want your constructive insight, however small, to vanish? Would you want your wondrous possible turn of a few notes that would echo in the symphony of history to go unheard?

I leave you, and me, with that issue to brood over, and turn to the Lone Ranger that interests me—and I hope eventually you—in this essay towards an ethics of philosophy. My Lone Ranger was, I would suggest, not in fact thinking of grandchildren, nor too worried about a heavenly posthumous welcome. He had his eye on changing history and was thinking of the possibility and probabilities of changing history. Indeed, he wrote of such probabilities in quite neat terms, terms that echoed the best of evolutionary reflections like those of Oparin,<sup>8</sup> terms that include some systematics of recycling. How does Mother Nature arrive at stable progressive structures? Well, think of various versions of the rhythms of subatomic and atomic events, or of non-hyperbolic moves in the cosmos. How might your article or book and its great insights survive? It has a lift of possibilities of surviving if there is a supporting structure of its cycling and re-cycling.

---

<sup>7</sup> These lines come, of course, from *A Psalm of Life* by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

<sup>8</sup> Alexander Ivanovich Oparin (1894-1980) was a Soviet biochemist notable for his contributions to the theory of the origin of life. See Alexander Oparin, *The Origin of Life* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) (Chemsford, Mass.: Dover Publications, 1953). He attempted to show that cellular life could form from non-cellular forms. See Philip McShane, *Randomness, Statistics, and Emergence* (Dublin: Gill & MacMillan, 1970), 218-220 for a discussion of Oparin’s thought within the context of emerging schemes of recurrence.

And this much my Lone Ranger figures out in refined detail, yet not thinking of the survival of his figuring out, of his book. The figuring out, the book, is a singular event. Libraries and bookstores are full of them, and sets of them have probabilities of surviving into the third edition or being permanently remaindered within the first year of appearance. The singular events of the shop-shelved book here and there on the globe have theoretic probabilities of being de-shelved, read, purchased, and even read effectively. And note that these four are not the same. But let us not lose our train of thought there. What I would have you and I do is think of the possibility of setting up some cycle whereby the book, the particular book, even your book, could be built into a salvific cycle. Your mother has a copy, which you gave her, but now the set-up is such that your granddaughters find it in the hands of friends. What happened, or rather what would need to happen? There needs to be a combination of sets of events, printings and sales, and interests that somehow whirl your book, the book, into some kind of orbiting use. What combination, what book-circulation-scheme, what patterns of recurrences would salvage it? Well, let's think of that later. But first note what my Lone Ranger came up with as a general idea.

If there is, and is effectively invented or implemented, some curious combination, then “we may suppose that the probabilities of the single events are respectively the same as before, but we cannot suppose that the probability of the combination of all events in the set is the same as before. As is easily seen, the concrete possibility of a scheme beginning to function shifts the probability of the combination from the product  $pqr \dots$  to the sum  $p + q + r + \dots$ . For in virtue of the scheme, it now is true that A and B and C and  $\dots$  will occur, if either A or B or C or  $\dots$  occurs; and by a general rule of probability theory, the probability of a set of alternatives is equal to the sum of the probabilities of the alternatives.”<sup>9</sup>

The Lone Ranger in your zone, or in other traditions' zones, may have come up with a general idea of a shift in probabilities without even mentioning mathematics: a larger focus on immediate phenomena, a fuller clarification of language, or a deeper dynamic of charity. But if the shift is/was to be effective there must be, implicitly, events somehow connected as to bring probabilities from products to sums; for example, cycles of better seminars or regular better lectures. My Lone Ranger—already no doubt identified, at least from the previous quotation, as Lone R'gan!<sup>10</sup>—came up with a quite refined structuring of actual sets of complex events through focusing on the data in a zone familiar to him.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> *CWL* 3, 144.

<sup>10</sup> I borrow this rather interesting linguistic twist of meaning from Philip McShane; it points to Lonergan's lone struggles over four decades.

<sup>11</sup> See Philip McShane, *Method in Theology: Revisions and Implementations*, <http://www.philipmcschane.ca/method-02.pdf> for other zones

So, we find ourselves back at that problem of history, and at the suggestion of a focus on the past as different from a bent towards changing the future. But I cannot emphasize enough the climb towards “came up with,” because *a posteriori* it can seem all too simple. You might do well to pause over stages in his struggle, or the struggle of your own Lone Ranger, to get a glimpse of effective shifting towards progress, however that is conceived, of meanings.<sup>12</sup> But the struggle is nicely summed up in a single phrase of one essay on the topic, a topic of humanity’s education: “the problem of general history, which is the real catch.” The real catch is catching how to get out of it with some decent statistics of progress. The problem was posed in a lecture of the summer of 1959<sup>14</sup> and the spring of 1965 was to bring the leap to an answer.<sup>15</sup> There were the complex events of theology—courses and concerns, theses and tomes—named doctrinal theology, pastoral theology, systematic theology, dialectical theology, history of theology and its effects, interpretation as a broad theological task. Might these be the A, B, C ... of a probabilistic cycling? “A and B and C and . . . will occur.”<sup>16</sup> But what is the order, and where is the cycling? And is the list suitably complete?

If this were a decent pedagogy of me to you—for my Lone Ranger’s data is echoed in every other zone, and in every other brand of philosophy—then we should pick up on your interest and muddle along from there. You might think of language clarification in its long history before it became a British preoccupation, and of the span from the researching of a philosophic school to teaching in a local school. You might say, from puttering to pastoring. And then you note the closing of the cycle. The pastoring, the teaching, is never 100% organized or effective: so the community must putter with the output of pastoring.

In a short essay I cannot be pedagogical even in one zone, but you see how we might find both a collection of A, B, C . . . and their ordering? From the little effort we see that we have A as puttering and, say, Z, as pastoring. But what of the sequencing in between, and how many clusters of events are there? Include the puttering of clarification into the above list of six clusters from theology and you see that you have seven clusters. If you were being thoroughly empirical you would putter—and note the recurrence of the word *putter*—in the full flow of history and see (a) that the clusters of theology or language-clarification

---

such as literature, ecology etc. See chapter 1: “History’s Nudge Beyond Fragmentations and Inefficiencies.”

<sup>12</sup> *Method*, 55 (noting the need to “restore the cumulative process of progress.”) See also *Insight*, *CWL* 3, chapter 20.

<sup>13</sup> *CWL* 10, 236.

<sup>14</sup> *CWL* 10, 176-92.

<sup>15</sup> *Method in Theology*, published in 1972, was Lonergan’s outline of what he discovered in 1965 and named functional specialization.

<sup>16</sup> *CWL* 3, 144.

are paralleled in other areas; (b) that our present interest, this attention to the spectrum of philosophies, seems to be an eighth area.

What might we call this eighth area? Well, “philosophy” of course, but some of us might prefer to dodge that word, since indeed there is a spectrum, and think of Procedural Analysis?<sup>17</sup> For is not procedure (global procedure for some schools) what we are interested in, be we phenomenologists, pragmatists, or linguistic analysts? But we might prefer something more neutral, like the name *Foundations* or *Foundational Analysis*? And is that not close to the zone in which all philosophic endeavor has been puttering, be it Oriental, Western, or Primitive in its patterns of searching? So, we have eight clusters, not yet connected, but general global puttering nudges us along. Puttering in a kitchen midden can throw up a strange construction. What might it be for? For cooking or music or divining? What is puttered up needs a cluster of *whatters*<sup>18</sup> around it to interpret its place in the local culture and in global progress or decline. A is puttering; B becomes B and C and ... will occur.”<sup>19</sup> But now we replace the dots and have “A and B and C and D and E and F and G and H will occur.” Might you now WHAT around our puttered products and find some plausible order, some convenient pattern?

But I must return to the problem of history, which we have bounced in and out of throughout this essay so far. Recall the earlier discovery of a problem, associated with the claim that “the focus on the past must go with a general view of history, and also the eye on the future cannot be amnesiac.” The problem persists, and has its own version in any of the schools of philosophy that exist, even for an anarchist for whom history lacks form and so does not invite an objective view. There is needed a general view of history, whatever one’s philosophy. Indeed, might we not agree that such a general view of history is pretty basic to any philosophy? Might it not even be called a philosophy? Within it one talks of language or logic, dance or dogma, whatever: but in some fundamental way, in a way that we tentatively called *procedural analysis*, but it could be called, more handily *fundamentals* or *foundations*. Or *method*? Or *methodology*? Here we seem to be bubbling forward into a plethora of words. But do they not hover round the same

---

<sup>17</sup> Philip McShane, *Wealth of Self and Wealth of Nations: Self Axis of the Great Ascent* (New York: Exposition Press, 1975) (hereafter, *Wealth of Self*). See the Postlude: “Prelude to Process: A Paideiad.” McShane uses the words “Procedural Analytiks” in place of the traditional term philosophy. The “k” transfers the emphasis from the *philosophy* to the *philosopher* in an effort to push for an empirical turn to you and me, the human subject, as the ground of philosophy.

<sup>18</sup> See my three articles on “How to Grow a Child?” at <http://www.roberthenman.com/articles.aspx>. These articles are foundationally developed on the emerging quest, the whatting, if you will, of the child.

<sup>19</sup> *CWL* 3,144.

reality? Procedure is somehow method, and an analysis of method is methodology.

But the ramble around words helps us forward towards an understanding of any of the Lone Rangers of philosophy. What the Lone Rangers seek is a basis of life, perhaps their own and perhaps others, even all others. Why clarify language? Well, it is a good game, and well paid in the right university. But, secretly, there is more to it than that for any participant. What my Loner Ranger sought was a basis that would make theology more, much more, than a relatively effete intellectual interest. He was looking for—and I would claim that he found—a method for theology, a methodology of theology, a foundation for theological work: an ethics of theology. Did he claim that it was, in some way, the best method, the best ethic? Not at all: he points to a convenient division of theological work. The convenience appears, is shown to you and me, when the operational linkages between A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, are grasped, and when “cumulative and progressive results”<sup>20</sup> are seriously foreseen. And that grasp is foundational; it is the becoming of a methodical theologian.

The issue is much bigger, however, as Quinn’s essay shows.<sup>21</sup> We are reaching for methodological foundations for all areas of inquiry: sciences, arts, and technologies. If you have pattered sufficiently with the order of A, B, ... H, you have found that plausibly E is in fact the area we are now talking about, and that Lonergan uses for that area the title *Foundations*, but he might well have used the phrase *Procedural Analytics*. What procedures are analyzed? E-procedure: Every Procedure. The search is for a basis of all progress, one that surely resonates with the ambition of many varieties of philosophy. So: many varieties of philosophy seek philosophies of X, where X covers all procedures. Will this philosophy be a philosophy of philosophies? This question surely pushes our elementary ramble way too far.

But have I done enough to persuade you that there is something of an ethics of philosophical procedure here? Something of an ethics in the sense that this would be an improved way of doing your type of philosophy, a way in which duplication would be avoided, where the Lone Ranger would be replaced by a collaborative union, a way in which results of philosophic efforts and successes would actually hit the streets, and even ground, through the cycling, their own revision and improvement? I do not think so. “Is my proposal utopian? It merely asks for creativity, for an interdisciplinary theory that at first will be denounced as absurd, then will be admitted to be true but obvious and

---

<sup>20</sup> *Method*, 4.

<sup>21</sup> See the essay by Terry Quinn, “Invitation to Functional Collaboration: Dynamics of Progress in the Sciences, Technologies, and Arts” in this volume.

insignificant, and perhaps finally be regarded as so important that its adversaries will claim that they themselves discovered it.”<sup>22</sup>

While, as Quinn has shown, there is a need for, and signs of emergence of, such collaborative structures as I have hinted at, there is little concretely going on in this direction. Eventually, indeed, some area will pick up its own hints. Ecological studies or economic studies will be pushed internally so that the cycle A to H to A “will be admitted to be true and obvious” but not “insignificant.” Indeed, the people in the zone “will claim that they themselves discovered it.”

But my pessimism about persuading you has broader grounds. My Lone Ranger has a following in both philosophy and theology. But what is the nature of that following?

### 3 Failure of Lonerganism

A worldwide community takes Lonergan with some seriousness. A website check easily displays this. But it shows little interest, except for some ongoing work of Philip McShane, in the collaborative work whose heuristic crowns his life-work.<sup>24</sup> So how optimistic might I be, about broader philosophies, or Quinn about the spectrum of other areas, being effectively and operatively open to this re-structuring suggestion?

It is difficult to understand the limited enthusiasm for Lonergan’s work. Perhaps it helps to notice that his appeal was originally to a re-discovery of Thomas Aquinas, and this in Catholic circles has provided a non-theoretic trail of misunderstanding and a devaluing of his major discovery: functional specialization. The rediscovery has been picked up and cherished, but this only in limited ways.<sup>25</sup> His philosophic effort, his reach for a philosophy of philosophies, has not been taken seriously, indeed has been cloaked by so-called dialogue with other views in philosophy and theology. Studies like “Lonergan and Gilbert Ryle” and “Lonergan and Karl Rahner” abound. The convenience of his global collaborative dynamic has been replaced by the old-style Thomist reach or leap for forms that are really only descriptive indications of forms that emerge slowly through a set of developing sciences. “Such blind leaping is inimical not only to science but also to philosophy. The scientific effort to understand is blocked by a pretense that one understands already, and indeed in the deep, metaphysical fashion.”<sup>26</sup> This Lonergan statement, sadly, captures the direction of present Lonergan studies. What happened? There are many ways to search for the meaning of the

---

<sup>22</sup> Bernard Lonergan, “Healing and Creating in History,” in *A Third Collection*, ed. Frederick Crowe (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 108.

<sup>24</sup> Pierrot Lambert and Philip McShane, *Bernard Lonergan: His Life and Leading Ideas* (Vancouver: Axial Publishing, 2010).

<sup>25</sup> So, for example, Thomas Aquinas, *Prima Secundae*, Questions 6 -17 has, on the whole, been missed by the Lonergan tradition.

<sup>26</sup> *CWL* 3, 528-9.

flow of sincere work that yet missed the massive pointing to a new culture. The recipients belong, on the whole, to an old Catholic arrogance of knowing where history is and was going, and that knowing was committed to description: what possible connection could heavy economic theory have with the need for a family wage? What could neuroscience have to contribute to our grip on contemplative prayer? What in heaven's name might chemistry have to contribute to Trinitarian theology?

A theology or a philosophy solidly committed to descriptive adequacy has really no need for the complex collaboration that Lonergan sought and found. Its basis can remain a grouping of renaissance men and women, although very few women of course, and no priestesses!<sup>27</sup> Such a theology or philosophy, of course, can talk of science, economics, modern technologies and arts; but the talk is a descendant of the 17<sup>th</sup> century French popularizer Fontenelle, an haute vulgarization which leaves effective understanding aside in favor of empty slogans and sermons. And, of course, it helps more serious contenders for civilization's guidance to ignore the global pointing of our Lone Ranger.

So, no, the chances of persuading you to consider seriously this ethics of philosophy are quite small. But **you** might be the exception.

### 3 Conclusion

To lift us beyond the pessimism of our present situation let us reflect briefly on the surge of history, which is the possibility of *you* as exception. Is there not more to you and me than the routine patterns of philosophic talk? Is there not deep within you and me a desire to break the chains of our existential loneliness that is trapped in philosophic eclecticism and yet desires cumulative and progressive results of our work? Can we legitimately ask the question: What are we doing? And more existentially: What am I doing? What sequence of events might occur if I took a stand and became an exception?

Robert Henman, the author of *The Child as Quest*, is the General Secretary of The Society for the Globalization of Effective Methods of Evolving <[www.sgeme.org](http://www.sgeme.org)>. He has been lecturing in philosophy of education and ethics for 25 years and has published articles in theology, psychotherapy, and philosophy in various journals.

---

<sup>27</sup> See my "A Spirituality of Obedience: Equal in God's Eyes Only?" at <http://www.roberthenman.com/articles.aspx> for a discussion of the ordination of women.