

An Ethics of Philosophic Work¹

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First, I would note that I am writing of *An* ethics, 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, and that 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 serves to clear up this, and other features of this endeavor. What is ethics?² There we have a question disputed among philosophers, constituting ongoing debates between various traditions.³ I start with suggested modifications of the title so as 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?

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

¹ This article is published at <http://journals.library.mun.ca/ojs/index.php/jmda>

² For some insight into the notion of "the ethics" as subject see Bernard Lonergan, **Insight: A Study of Human Understanding**, CWL 3, University of Toronto Press, 1992. Chapter 18: *The Possibility of Ethics*. For our purposes it serves as a distraction from "an ethics".

³ Bernard Lonergan, **Topics in Education**, CWL 10, University of Toronto Press, 1993. See chapter 7, section 3: *The Theory of Philosophic Differences*, pp.176-192. Page 182; "Once the 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 need be understood within the context of section 3 outlining the distinctions and reasons for the three basic philosophic differences.

that philosophic talk does or has done through the ages.⁴ So we exclude philosophic reflection that takes a definite stand on philosophy as ongoing table-talk.

Let me imagine that we are a room-full of people that 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 a 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 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 that the conversation is 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 we lost already some of the people who were with us at the start: anarchists who want no talk of order? A pity, because my minimal view would help them. Solipsists? There is room among them for 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 history as objective, about history as knowable, etc.⁵ 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 it this way: one has an attitude to 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

⁴ I am thinking here of a book by John Passmore, *The Perfectibility of Man*, Duckworth, 1970. Are humans perfectible? Passmore quotes in the Frontispiece D. H. Lawrence; "The Perfectibility of Man! Ah heavens, what a dreary theme!"

⁵ Bernard Lonergan, **Method in Theology**, Herder & Herder, 1972, NJ. Chapter 8 *History* and Chapter 9 *History and Historians*. See especially pages 216-17 on History and perspectivism.

answer is rooted both in fact - this is the way we have always done it - and in habit - I 'm used to this way of doing it, and I like it. I suppose we might think of this in terms of the Luddite movement which was named after Ned Lud,⁶ who smashed labour-saving frames of a Leicestershire employer in 1879 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. 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 don't 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 Ranger⁷ 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 reputable Lone Ranger leaves "footprints in the sands of time / footprints that perhaps another / sailing o're life's solemn main"⁸ etc. Are you something of a Lone Ranger? Yet do you not hope for some effect, beyond your mother cherishing your lonely article 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 labour, and you make a point. I presume you are beyond the

⁶ The Luddites, originally were any of the group of workers of 1811-1816 in England who smashed new labour-saving textile machinery in protest against reduced wages and unemployment.

⁷ I borrow this image from Philip McShane and it would seem to serve well in describing contemporary philosophic psychology.

⁸ An excerpt from *A PSALM OF LIFE* by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

exercise that is writing a thesis, a task which can be done so as to get the union card with, sometimes, the hope that the text 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, if there was 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 - un-healthy - not to want your constructive insight, however small, vanish, a wondrous possible turn of a few notes that yet would have echoed in the symphony of history?

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. He 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,⁹ 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.

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, even purchased, 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

⁹ **Alexander Ivanovich Oparin** 1894 - 1980, was a Soviet biochemist notable for his contributions to the theory of the origin of life, and for his authorship of the book *The Origin of Life*. He attempted to show that cellular life could form from non-cellular forms. See Philip McShane, **Randomness, Statistics and Emergence**, Gill & MacMillan, Dublin, 1970, pages 218-220 for a discussion of Oparin's thought within the context of emerging schemes of recurrence.

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 ... will occur, if either A or B or C or ... 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."¹⁰

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: 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!¹¹ - came up with a quite refined structuring of actual sets of complex events through focusing on the data in a zone familiar to him.¹² 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 a progress; however that is conceived, of meanings.¹³ 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."¹⁴ The real catch is catching how to get out of it with some

¹⁰ Bernard Lonergan, **Insight: A Study of Human Understanding**, CWL 3, University Toronto Press, 1992, page 144.

¹¹ A rather interesting linguistic twist of meaning that I borrow from Philip McShane pointing to Lonergan's lone struggles over four decades.

¹² Philip McShane, **Method in Theology: Revisions and Implementations**, <http://www.philipmcshane.ca/method-02.pdf> for other zones such as Wellek and Warren; Ecology etc.. See chapter 1: *History's nudge beyond Fragmentations and Inefficiencies*.

¹³ Bernard Lonergan, **Method in Theology**, Herder & Herder, NY, 1972, page 55. "...restore the cumulative process of progress." See also **Insight**, *Ibid.*, Chapter 20.

¹⁴ Bernard Lonergan, **Topics in Education**, CWL 10, University of Toronto Press, 1993, page 236.

decent statistics of progress. The problem is posed in the lecture of the summer of 1959 and the spring of 1965 was to bring the leap to an answer.¹⁵ 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".¹⁶ 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. Think of language clarification in its full long history before it became a British preoccupation, and think of the span from researchings of a philosophic school to teachings in a local school. You might say, from putterings 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 re clarification 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? Put the puttering of clarification back into the list from theology and you see that you have 7 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 are paralleled in other areas; [b] that our present interest, this attention to the spectrum of philosophies, seems to be an 8th area.

What might we call this 8th 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?¹⁷ 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 this philosophic endeavor has been puttering, be it Oriental, Western, or Primitive in its patterns of searching? So, we have 8 clusters, not yet connected, but general global puttering nudges us along. Puttering in a kitchen midden can throw up a strange construction:

¹⁵ **Method in Theology** published in 1972 was Lonergan's outline of what he discovered in 1965 and he named functional specialization.

¹⁶ **Insight**, op. cit., page 144.

¹⁷ Philip McShane, **Wealth of Self and Wealth of Nations: Self Axis of the Great Ascent**, Exposition Press, NY, 1975. 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 the subject as ground of human knowing.

what might it be for: cooking or music or divining? What is puttered up needs a cluster of *whatters*¹⁸ around it to interpret its place in the local culture and in global progress or decline. A is puttering; B becomes interpretation in a very basic sense. And, of course, Z becomes H. "A and B and C and ... will occur".¹⁹ 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" [p.3]. 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 reality? Procedure is somehow method, and an analysis of method in 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 game: so 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'²⁰ are seriously foreseen. And that grasp is foundational; it is the becoming of a methodical theologian.

The issue is much bigger, however, as the Quinn essay shows. We are reaching for methodological foundations for all areas of inquiry: sciences, arts, technologies. If you have

¹⁸ 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.

¹⁹ *Insight*, op. cit., page 144.

²⁰ *Method in Theology*, op. cit., page 4.

puttered 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 analysed? 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 ethic of philosophical procedure here? Something of an ethic 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 insignificant, and perhaps finally be regarded as so important that its adversaries will claim that they themselves discovered it."²¹

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 literary 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?

Failure of Lonerganism

Lonergan has been taken with some seriousness by a world-wide community: a website check easily displays this. But it shows little interest, except for some ongoing work of Philip McShane,²² in the collaborative work whose heuristic crowns his life-work.²³ So how optimistic

²¹ Bernard Lonergan, *Healing and Creating in History, A Third Collection*, ed. By F.E. Crowe, Paulist Press, NJ, 1985, page 108.

²² See Philip McShane's website at <http://www.philipmcshane.ca/> for articles and books that have consistently elaborated the need for science and collaboration towards functional specialization. One can trace this line of thought back to his earliest articles. See an early article: "The Contemporary Thomism of Bernard Lonergan" *Philosophical Studies*, (11) 1962, pp. 63-80. McShane's insistence on the need for a theoretical background in order to sublimate present philosophic debates is explicit.

²³ Pierrot Lambert & Philip McShane **Bernard Lonergan: His Life and Leading Ideas**, Axial Press, 2010.

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.²⁴ 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 convenience to me in my old-style Thomist reach - or leap - for forms that are really only descriptive indications or forms to be sought slowly by 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."²⁵ This Lonergan statement, sadly, captures the direction of present Lonergan studies. What happened? There are many ways to search for the meaning of the 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 committedly descriptive: 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 heavens 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!²⁶ Such a theology or philosophy, of course, can talk of science, economics, modern technologies and arts: but the talk is a descendant of Fontenelle,²⁷ a haute vulgarization which leaves effective understanding aside in favour 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.

²⁴ See Thomas Aquinas, *Prima Secundae*, Questions 6 -17 have been missed by the tradition.

²⁵ *Insight*, op. cit., pages 528-9.

²⁶ See my "A Spirituality of Obedience: Equal in God's Eyes Only?" at <http://www.roberthenman.com/articles.aspx> for a discussion on the ordination of women.

²⁷ Fontenelle was a popularizer of 16th century France. He managed to play both sides and offered little in terms of advancement of philosophy or of himself.

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