Insight & Beyond II, Lecture 11, Part II: Chapter 18: “The Possibility of Ethics”

[0.00]
• Continuing from the previous discussion, student question: since being is to be known by the totality of true judgments, and since people make incorrect judgments, is the realm of meaning therefore greater than the realm of being.
  – Correction – being is what is to be known in the totality of correct judgments
  – Lonergan’s approach would be to say that when one makes and expresses an incorrect judgment, that expression is therefore an act of meaning within being, and the task of the interpreter is to understand and re-express that expression
  – In explanatory interpretation, that involve situating the incorrect judgment in relation to other acts of expression (to understand and express how it is situated in being) using a dialectical method
  – Such an interpretation will be an expression of the disparities between what was expressed, what was meant, and what is (regarding the purported objective referent of the expression)
  – (So this implies that the realm of meaning is not greater than the realm of being after all)

[4:45]
• Difficulty of comprehending Chapter 18 of Insight “The Possibility of Ethics”
• Central claim of the chapter is the existence “an exigence for self-consistency in knowing and doing”

[6:27]
• Overview of the table of contents of the chapter, which seems to indicate that freedom is the central preoccupation of the chapter
• Important distinction between essential and effective freedom
• Kant’s central preoccupation is with the problem of essential freedom
• While Lonergan has his own approach to the problem of essential freedom, his own central concern is with effective freedom
• Because of Lonergan’s divergent accounts of human knowing and science, the scientific determinism that threatened freedom in Kant’s view has been met with the account of the non-systematic character of the scientific knowledge of the universe
• For Lonergan, the question of the possibility of ethics is not primarily the problem of essential freedom; rather, the principal problem is posed by the fact of moral impotence – is ethics possible, given its threat to effective freedom
• Moral impotence is the facticity of human inconsistency between knowing and doing
• The degree of human willingness to act in conformity to knowing is formed by cultures, which de facto include biases
• Cosmopolis does not have the resources to deal with moral impotence

[17:00]
• Chapter 18 is therefore about freedom.
• Lonergan affirms essential freedom, but argues that our effective freedom is impaired
• Therefore, this poses a serious obstacle to the possibility of ethics

[19:17]
• On the other hand, the central point is about the exigence for consistency between knowing and doing
• But the discussion of doing is located oddly in the chapter – he does not clearly differentiate
choosing and doing
• The gap we think we sometimes experience between making a decision and acting on it, is really a matter of not yet having fully made the decision, and this may account for his undifferentiated treatment of choosing and doing

[24:08]
• With what kind of knowing does our doing have to be consistent?
• Up to this point, Lonergan’s treatment has been with knowledge of facts.
• Most pertinent to the problem of ethics, is the factual knowledge of our miniscule but nevertheless real role in the emergence of the universe of emergent probability
• So our doing is the doing of affecting the course of emergent probability, and knowledge of this as a fact affects our doing
• Yet alludes to another kind of knowing: knowledge of what is “morally obligatory”
• Judgments about moral obligation are not equitable to judgments of fact
• The classic “Is/Ought” problem – Hume; knowledge of “ought” cannot be derived from knowledge of “is”

[32:18]
• Yet Lonergan claims that we can arrive at the judgment that a proposed course of action is obligatory
• But Lonergan’s account of knowing in no way prepares us to comprehend how reflection can arrive at knowledge of obligation

[33:42]
• A hint of how to think about knowledge of obligation – that practical reflection has a different dynamic from the dynamic of knowing being – it is always already about “What am I to do?”
• One does not reach the proper term of practical reflection merely in “internal” knowing that stops short of doing
• Yet there is a kind of “internal” term to practical reflection in the grasp of virtually conditioned judgments regarding a practical courses of action, including judgments about obligatoriness.
• But what is the nature of practical reflection that leads to such judgments?
• The terse treatment of practical reflection in comparison to reflection leading to judgments about what is, is disappointing

End of Part II.