

## EPISTEMOLOGY AND THE PERSON

Thomas J. McPartland

Kentucky State University

Frankfort, Kentucky

THE TITLE “EPISTEMOLOGY and the Person” may seem for many seem for many philosophical readers to be an oxymoron. And, certainly, if this essay is a review of Christian Smith’s *What Is a Person?*, then such a description may seem warranted since Smith, in a powerful critique, shows how the “epistemological turn” in modern thought has had a devastating effect on the ability of social science to treat in a serious manner the reality of the person.<sup>1</sup> What is needed, Smith argues, is a “metaphysical turn” to replace the “epistemological turn,” a frank acknowledgment, though in a critical manner, of the existence of a real world beyond the epistemological subject, a real world that includes the reality of persons. What is needed, then, is a “critical realist” perspective.

The term “critical realism” (which Smith takes from the philosophy of Roy Bhaskar) immediately raises the prospects for those familiar with Lonergan of a genuine encounter that can perhaps be more a dialogue than a display of dialectics.<sup>2</sup> It is the thesis of this paper that precisely such an encounter between Smith and Lonergan is an instance of the kind of “further collaboration” to which Lonergan famously offers an invitation at the beginning of *Insight*.<sup>3</sup> For Smith employs his critical realist tools massively in the field of sociology. Lonergan, on the other hand, can provide an epistemology as an alternative to the “epistemological turn” that grounds the kind of metaphysics Smith finds necessary to correct the erroneous

---

<sup>1</sup>Christian Smith, *What Is a Person? Rethinking Humanity, Social Life, and the Moral Good from the Person Up* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

<sup>2</sup>Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *A Third Collection: Papers by Bernard J. F. Lonergan*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 182.

<sup>3</sup>Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, 5th ed., vol. 3 of the *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 7.

assumptions operative in sociological practice – Lonergan can, uniquely, make the “critical” in critical realism more critical.

#### WHAT SMITH OFFERS LONERGAN

Smith is an accomplished sociologist who has discerned the presence of philosophical assumptions at work explicitly, or, more often, implicitly, in various fields and approaches in sociology. These assumptions have, for the most part, led sociological analysis astray and need to be corrected, Smith maintains, by the perspective of critical realism. Philosophical assumptions therefore are not extrinsic to sociological practice; they are embedded in the very enterprise of sociology. The point – against all positivist prejudices – is to get the philosophical assumptions right to do sociology well. Smith mentions Lonergan in a long footnote listing critical realist thinkers, but there is no discussion of Lonergan.<sup>4</sup> It should be obvious to a scholar of Lonergan studies that in his five-hundred page book, Smith is an expert practitioner familiar with the major thinkers, major books, and major articles in the relevant fields. His erudition is matched by analytic precision in framing the philosophical issues and in developing a consistent philosophical theme. The student of Lonergan can, then, find in Smith’s book an excellent resource of contemporary thinking in sociology and an acute dialectical analysis of the main philosophical controversies.

#### *Two Counterpositions: Reductionism and (Strong) Constructionism*

Smith locates two prominent counterpositions.<sup>5</sup>

The first set of assumptions is the positivist reductionist model, still arguably the most pervasive one, rooted in the nineteenth century, and, ultimately Enlightenment, origins of sociology from Comte to Durkheim. This model would have sociologists reduce variables to the “simplest” and

<sup>4</sup>Smith, *What Is a Person?*, 92n.

<sup>5</sup>A counterposition is a claim that “contradicts one or more of the basic positions”: namely, the positions that (1) the real is the concrete universe of being and not a subdivision of the “already out there now”; (2) the subject is known by intelligent grasp and rational affirmation and not known in some prior “existential” state; and (3) objectivity is a consequence of rational inquiry and critical reflection and not a “property of vital anticipation, extroversion, and satisfaction” (*Insight*, 413). “Counter-positions are statements incompatible with intellectual, or moral, or religious conversion” (Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* [New York: Herder and Herder, 1972], 249).

---

“most basic” ones, thereby denying the complex stratified nature of society and of the person; seek “covering laws” to explain all phenomena much as Newton’s Universal Law of Gravitation explains all motions of bodies; and find the “covering laws” in empirical regularities – that is, correlations of observations – or, in a concession to the complexity of social phenomena, in statistical correlations. The emphasis here, then, is on empirical observations or quantification to guarantee scientific validity to the “laws of society.”

Smith’s analysis is much more nuanced than these points suggest. He shows in a wide variety of cases how these ideas inform, often behind the scenes, the researches and the theories of sociologists and how these ideas can insinuate themselves into often competing and even contradictory theories. Smith demonstrates the inevitable consequence of this model: social reality is truncated to fit into the methodological dictates of positivist empiricism, collapsing the complex strata of social reality to the kinds of variables susceptible to the rigors of this kind of method. Most particularly obliterated is the causal agency of persons and the socially constitutive nature and ontological integrity of acts of intelligence, moral will, and loving commitment. The positivist approach can, on one extreme, reduce persons to “social atoms” following deterministic laws of self-interest, or, in a reaction to the former “classic” analysis, reduce persons to the mechanism of social relations that subsume and define the individuals within the network. Smith mentions a sociologist of the latter school, Bruce Mayhew, who sees humans as nothing but ‘biological machines’ and boldly proclaims the positivist credo that “takes human society – human social organization – to be studied in exactly the same fashion as any natural science studies any natural phenomena.”<sup>6</sup>

While positivism, in its various guises, has been given robust, and even devastating, criticism since the nineteenth century culminating in the revolt against “modernity” by existentialists and postmodernists, Smith’s critique is particularly helpful to Lonergan scholars since he provides abundant and specific evidence of the persistence and pervasive influence of this counterposition in sociology. Perhaps its sway is most disturbing in the demands of research to establish empirical regularities. This almost becomes a fetish in the drive for statistical correlations as the measure of genuine scientific legitimacy. Smith assembles an array of impressive arguments, for

---

<sup>6</sup>Smith, *What Is a Person?*, 242-43.

example, that expose the problems when this methodology usurps variables sociology (problems with establishing any substantive causal link to statistical association of variables, problems with inductive generalizations that must come to grips with the inevitable influence of contextual factors, problems with a conflict between the data actually available and the variables actually under scrutiny, problems with confusing the strength of association of the variables with the size of the database, and problems of isolating the variables for “control”).”<sup>7</sup>

The second model, often spearheaded by postmodernism, proclaims a “strong” social constructivism.

This view goes beyond the pioneering work of Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (which Smith applauds for its phenomenological insight, although he cautions that it has nihilist moments from the sprinkled influence of Sartrean existentialism).<sup>8</sup> As Smith points out, the subtitle of Berger and Luckmann’s book, *A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, indicates that the text makes no claims in epistemology or metaphysics; rather it explores the social influences on human beliefs and subjective perceptions of reality – not on actual “knowledge” of “reality” itself. Unfortunately many sociologists go beyond the self-imposed limits of Berger and Luckmann and use the idea of social construction as a springboard for bold epistemological and metaphysical counterpositions.<sup>9</sup>

Social constructionism in its pronounced, strong form would maintain that much of human social life is not a product of nature, not a fixed order, but rather a “variable artifact,” the result of human *cultural* creation through social definition, interaction, and institutionalization. Moreover, not only is human social reality so constituted, but also *reality itself is a social construction*. Human mental categories, linguistic practices (if not the structure of language itself), and symbolic exchanges take on the definition of reality through ongoing social interaction. Postmodernists can add the spice that these interactions are “shaped” decisively by interests and perspectives usually reflecting an imbalance of power. Thus there are radical limits to human knowledge: we can never surpass our socially constructed limits to

---

<sup>7</sup>Smith, *What Is a Person?*, 279-84.

<sup>8</sup>For Smith’s precautionary note, see *What Is a Person?*, 174n103; Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1966).

<sup>9</sup>Smith, *What Is a Person?*, 126-27.

look at some reality-in-itself.<sup>10</sup> Smith correctly sees the influence of Kantian transcendental idealism here, in which there is added a sociological a priori to the constituting of “knowledge.”<sup>11</sup> We can add that since the social factors can be subject to the vagaries of historical contingency, transcendental idealism can morph into radical subjective idealism and historicism. Or much like the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum mechanics, where “reality” has no meaning outside of the experimental situation, the strong social constructivist counterposition could adopt a completely relativistic view, in which “reality” has no meaning beyond the construction of a particular culture at a particular time.<sup>12</sup>

This brief summary cannot do justice to the extraordinarily detailed account Smith gives of the major thinkers and corresponding theoretical types involved in strong social constructionism and his impressive array of arguments against strong social constructivism, most often involving identifying some kind of performative contradiction.<sup>13</sup> While the performative contradiction in this extreme form of relativism has been well noted by many sociologists, not to mention philosophers from Plato to Habermas, Smith points out that these “fringe” views have, in fact, shaped the perspectives and thoughts and researches that operate within the orbit of strong social constructivism. These views, in turn, have radiated great influence on academic life in general and its rhetoric, operating behind the scenes as unacknowledged dogmas.

It should be clear that positivist empiricism and strong social constructionism have acted as dialectic twins, mutually supporting each other as they prey on the obvious weaknesses of the other party, all the while leading scientific culture to ever lesser viewpoints and more fragmented perspectives on the human person.

### *Three Theoretical Resources*

Smith can criticize these counterpositions because he operates with a triad of theoretical resources, defining his position.

---

<sup>10</sup>Smith, *What Is a Person?*, chap. 3.

<sup>11</sup>Smith, *What Is a Person?*, 122n7.

<sup>12</sup>See Smith, *What Is a Person?*, 29n7.

<sup>13</sup>See, for example, his powerful critique of the “linguistic turn” of Saussure and its closed box rejection of the referential nature of language (Smith, *What Is a Person?*, 159-63, 171-73).

The first theoretical resource – and indeed the key one – is critical realism. This is the actual term for the philosophy of Roy Bhaskar.<sup>14</sup> This philosophy of critical realism offers a “third way” as an alternative to positivist reductionism and postmodernist hermeneutics, which have created the intellectual dead end that Smiths finds as the deadlock in the social sciences. The starting point of critical realism is that the “epistemological turn” of modernity has led to the deadlock. Thus critical realism does an end run on epistemology and starts out with ontology: the “real” is a meaningful term. It is not coterminous with the empirical. We not only experience, we inquire; we understand; we try to frame our best case; we revise. While we are fallible in our process of inquiry, we are oriented to what is real. So, as a kind of ontological deduction that adds the “critical” to critical realism, this philosophy proclaims that we can learn about the real in a fallible, revisable manner by commitment to the process of inquiry.<sup>15</sup> Another ontological deduction of critical realism is that reality is *stratified*: it exists on multiple layers, in which each layer, though connected to the others, operates with its own “characteristic dynamics and processes.”<sup>16</sup> In fact, there are higher layers that emerge out of the lower layers, are conditioned by them, but have their own laws. Hence critical realism, against any reductionist tendencies, is a philosophy of emerging reality, including the emergence of such a nonmaterial reality as that of the human mind with its hermeneutical tasks.<sup>17</sup>

Smith applies this notion of emergence through an incredibly nuanced analysis of the emergence of higher layers of organization from unconscious being, to primary experience capacities, to secondary experience capacities, to creative capacities, to moral and interpersonal capacities – in short, to the emergence of the person.<sup>18</sup> The second theoretical resource, therefore, is personalism, the twentieth-century movement associated with certain varieties of existential phenomenology and Catholic thought, reflecting

---

<sup>14</sup>Roy Bhaskar, *A Realist Conception of Science* (London: Verso, 1997); Roy Bhaskar, *Critical Realism* (New York: Routledge, 1998); Roy Bhaskar, *The Possibility of Naturalism: A Philosophical Critique of Contemporary Human Sciences* (London: Routledge, 1979). This paper is restricted to Smith’s interpretation of Bhaskar’s critical realism. The dialogue, of course, at some point must expand beyond Smith and Lonergan to include Lonergan and Bhaskar.

<sup>15</sup>*What Is a Person?*, 93-94.

<sup>16</sup>*What Is a Person?*, 95.

<sup>17</sup>*What Is a Person?*, 95-97.

<sup>18</sup>*What Is a Person?*, chap. 1. See the diagram on page 74.

what Lonergan calls the “turn to the realm of interiority.” The notion of emergence, then, in critical realism, with its nonreductionist, nonrelativistic approach to the person, joins personalism.<sup>19</sup>

The critical realist commitment to fallibilistic knowledge of the real and its consonance with personalism as a result of its notion of emergence leads it to embrace a third theoretical resource – “antiscientific phenomenology.”<sup>20</sup> By this term Smith refers not so much to existential phenomenology as to Michael Polanyi and Charles Taylor.<sup>21</sup> The critical realist, that is, non-naïve realist, approach to knowledge emphasizing its fallibilism but, at the same time, its goal of understanding the real, is also emphasizing the role of personal commitment and fidelity in the process of inquiry – exactly the point Polanyi makes in his celebrated work on personal knowledge. This emphasis dovetails, too, with Charles Taylor’s contention that we must reject scientific, reductionist claims that contradict our “Best Accounts” of our conscious activities as cognitive and moral agents – our “phenomenological” experience. Our Best Accounts, Smith says, are arrived at “by challenge, discussion, argumentation, reflection, criticism, vetting, that is, by testing against the clarity of experience, including through systematic observation and the discipline of reason.”<sup>22</sup> Experience here is not restricted to the data of senses but focuses on the data of consciousness.

### *The Person*

Based on these theoretical resources, Smith argues for the validity of the notion of the person, so conceived, in sociology. What, then, is the person? Smith defines the person thusly:

[A] conscious, reflective embodied, self-transcending center of subjective experience, durable entity, moral commitment, and social communication who – as the efficient cause of his or her own responsible actions and interactions – exercises complex capacities for agency and intersubjectivity in order to sustain his or her own incommunicable

<sup>19</sup>*What Is a Person?*, 98-104.

<sup>20</sup>*What Is a Person?*, 104-14.

<sup>21</sup>Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Toward a Post Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968); Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

<sup>22</sup>Smith, *What Is a Person?*, 112.

self in loving relationships with other personal selves and with the nonpersonal world.<sup>23</sup>

The person is not a social atom but a being inherently related to other persons; the person is not, on the other hand, a creation of society, a mere function of a mammoth social network. The person is a causal agent who constitutes social reality, even as social reality has its own stability and endurance, which conditions the life of the persons within it. Person and society are in a complicated dialectic relationship. Sociology, by giving a nuanced account of the person, who operates on multiple layers and in dialectical relation to society, can in giving such a nuanced account of the “facts” of the person, offer these “facts” to ethics as evidence for reflection on either human – and social – flourishing or human – and social – brokenness.<sup>24</sup> And in the context of such an ethics, sociology can make its contribution in exploring the question of human dignity. Hence Smith’s critical realism can ground a critical moral theory along the lines of Habermas, and, as we shall see, of Lonergan.

#### WHAT LONERGAN OFFERS SMITH

Our brief account here by no means can do justice to the richness and erudition of Smith’s remarkable work. We have focused on his methodological assumptions. But this is quite appropriate if we are to engage him in a dialogue with Lonergan.

What, then, can Lonergan’s critical realism offer to Smith’s critical realism?

#### *Parallel Claims*

It should be obvious to any student of Lonergan that there are huge areas of comparison between Lonergan and Smith.

First, Lonergan, of course, rejects out of hand the counterpositions that Smith sees as still holding sway over sociology – scientism, reductionism, positivism, empiricism, subjective idealism, hermeneutical relativism, and linguistic historicism. Lonergan, however, refutes these counterpositions

---

<sup>23</sup>Smith, *What Is a Person?*, 74.

<sup>24</sup>Smith, *What Is a Person?*, chaps. 7-8.

neither primarily by metaphysical deductions nor by ad hoc arguments revealing their contradictions. He carries on a broad and comprehensive frontal assault. He does so by taking on in *Insight* the most formable thinker of the “epistemological turn” of modernity, namely, Kant. Lonergan’s critique of Kant (and of related counterpositions) establishes his distinct alternative to the “epistemological turn.” More on this later.

Second, Lonergan’s notion of “emergent probability” is clearly consonant with the idea of emerging stratified realities.<sup>25</sup> “Higher integrations” can emerge, both conditioned by lower manifolds but organizing those manifolds according to its own laws. Lonergan’s account of emergent probability is brilliant, metaphysically comprehensive, and supported by vast amounts of scientific data. It is a resource that could hold promise for fruitful dialogue. The universe, in Lonergan’s view, is a directed but open dynamism in which the effectively probable realization of its own possibilities means the emergence of new forms and new, more complex realities. This involves a transformation of universal explanatory patterns immanent in the data, or “conjugate forms.”<sup>26</sup> In Lonergan’s universe, one set of conjugate forms can give place to another. The result: the emergence of new forms. Lonergan argues for a universe that is not only emergent but emergent according to probability schedules. The intelligible principles of natural processes are most often “schemes of recurrence,” in which, in a given series of events, “the fulfilment of the conditions of each would be the occurrence of the others” – as, for example, the planetary system, the nitrogen cycle, and the routines of animal life.<sup>27</sup> Lonergan, however, can also find an intelligibility by abstracting from nonsystematic processes and discerning the ideal frequency from which actual, relative frequencies do not diverge systematically.<sup>28</sup> We can thus combine the intelligibility of statistical laws to the notion of a conditioned series of schemes of recurrence. When the emergence of an actual order at one level (for example, the organic) is the precondition, that is, potency, for the emergence of a higher level order (for example, the psychic), and when the latter is the precondition for a still higher order (for example, the intellectual), we have a conditioned series of

---

<sup>25</sup>See *Insight*, 138-51, 533-43, chaps. 8, 15; Philip McShane, *Randomness, Statistics, and Emergence* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1970); Thomas J. McPartland, *Lonergan and the Philosophy of Historical Existence* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001), chap. 2.

<sup>26</sup>*Insight*, 112-13, 460-61.

<sup>27</sup>*Insight*, 141.

<sup>28</sup>*Insight*, 78-89, 121-23, 152.

schemes of recurrence. And, given sufficient numbers and time, the higher orders will be likely to emerge. What on one level is merely a random manifold of events can on another, higher level be an actually functioning formal pattern of events. In other words, an emergent higher integration systematizes what was merely coincidental on a lower order. Moreover, such a dynamic integration systematizes by adding and modifying until the old integration is eliminated and, by the principle of emergence, a new integration is introduced. The higher integrations always exist as “things,” concrete “unity, identity, wholes,” with their concrete intelligibilities.<sup>29</sup> Such a “thing” that is a “person” will be a complex of concrete higher integrations (such as depicted in Smith’s diagram on page 74 of his text). Lonergan’s notion of emergent probability is grounded in his metaphysical principle of the isomorphism of the structure of knowing and the structure of the known.<sup>30</sup> Here again we need to stress this relation to epistemology.

Third, Smith’s complex analysis of the person can be met almost point by point in Lonergan’s thinking. For Lonergan, the person is embodied, both intelligible and intelligent, both matter and spirit.<sup>31</sup> “Genuiness,” in fact, demands negotiation between the higher order of intelligence and the lower manifold of the psyche and of the organic.<sup>32</sup> Lonergan’s treatment of the psyche and of neural demand functions can indeed shed some light on Smith’s contention that much of social norms operate on the level of the body as “scripted” bodily routines, rituals, and expressions.<sup>33</sup> Here, too, Lonergan’s notions of elemental meanings, intersubjective spontaneity, symbols, and incarnate meaning would add explanatory power.<sup>34</sup> Lonergan, of course, has a precise, comprehensive, explanatory account of cognitive and moral operations – indeed moving through different and distinct levels of operation. Lonergan sees these operations (and their underpinning intentionality) as ultimately going beyond themselves into the state of loving, which embraces what Smith calls, as the highest level of emergence for the person, “inter-personal commitment and love.”<sup>35</sup> The heart of Lonergan’s

---

<sup>29</sup>*Insight*, 271, 460-63.

<sup>30</sup>*Insight*, 47-75.

<sup>31</sup>*Insight*, 538-43.

<sup>32</sup>*Insight*, 499-503.

<sup>33</sup>*Insight*, 212-20, 480-82; Smith, *What Is a Person?*, 350-52.

<sup>34</sup>*Insight*, 237-38; *Method in Theology*, 57-73.

<sup>35</sup>*Method in Theology*, 241-42, 340-41; Smith, *What Is a Person?*, 72-73.

treatment of the person is found in his notion of “personal values,” ranking above vital values, social values, and cultural values on the preference scale of what is worthwhile – based on the criterion of self-transcendence.<sup>36</sup> Personal values cannot be sustained without the gift of spiritual values. As personal operations become social cooperations – in the kind of causal agency Smith identifies with the persona – they set up the structure of the human good.<sup>37</sup>

Fourth, Lonergan sees a definitely dialectical relation between subject and society. Human cognitive and moral agents through common experience, common understanding, common judgments, and common commitments, constitute cultural communities that inform a way of life which becomes common social cooperations; these are objectified, embodied, and institutionalized only to carry on their own existence and, in turn, through acculturation, socialization, and education have massive influence on the growth and development of persons.<sup>38</sup> So persons constitute society, and society constitutes persons.<sup>39</sup>

Fifth, Lonergan sees inauthenticity as well as authenticity in human life and human society. He observes how inattentiveness, stupidity, irrationality, and irresponsibility joined with various biases (neurotic, egotistical, group, and general commonsensical) can lead not only to brokenness and breakdown but to a cumulative cycle of decline affecting all aspects of human existence including the culture.<sup>40</sup> Lonergan in one of his more passionate appeals urges social science not only to be descriptive and not only to be explanatory but also to be normative:

[S]o also human science has to be critical. It can afford to drop the nineteenth-century scientific outlook of mechanist determinism in favor of an emergent probability. It can profit by the distinction between the intelligible emergent probability of prehuman process and the intelligent emergent probability that arises in the measure

---

<sup>36</sup>*Method in Theology*, 31-32.

<sup>37</sup>*Method in Theology*, 47-52.

<sup>38</sup>*Method in Theology*, 48-49, 79

<sup>39</sup>Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Phenomenology and Logic: The Boston College Lectures on Mathematical Logic and Existentialism*, vol.18 of the *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, ed. Philip J. McShane (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 209-210, 302-303.

<sup>40</sup>*Phenomenology and Logic*, 210-12, 302-310; *Insight*, 8-9, 214-27, 244-61; *Method in Theology*, 52-55.

that man succeeds in understanding itself and in implementing that understanding. Finally, it can be of inestimable value in aiding man to understand himself and guiding him in implementation of that understanding if, and only if, it can learn to distinguish between progress and decline. In other words, human science cannot be merely empirical; it has to be critical; to reach a critical standpoint, it has to be normative. This is a tall order for human science as hitherto it has existed. But people looking for easy tasks best renounce any ambition to be scientists; and if mathematicians and physicists can surmount their surds, the human scientist can learn to master his.<sup>41</sup>

This means that sociology, in principle, ought to contribute to the differentiation of practices, routines, and cycles of progress from the practices, routines, and cycles of decline.<sup>42</sup> The task is enormous, difficult, and complex. It requires a sophisticated grasp of the nature of human understanding and its various patterns as well as an equally sophisticated grasp of the nature and forms of the flight from understanding. This requires a sophisticated epistemology.

### *Epistemology and Method in Metaphysics*

To be sure, much more could be said on these topics. These parallels between Lonergan and Smith deserve extensive treatment. And we could anticipate that out of the dialogue would come new insights that would take us beyond just an affirmation of the parallels. As fruitful as that exercise may be, what Lonergan offers most to Smith and to his type of critical realism is something else – method.

Smith has legitimately sought to extricate himself from the epistemological morass of modernity. Cartesian rationalism was but another version of medieval conceptualism and essentialism, which falsely promised a kind of mental picture of reality; empiricism was ultimately but another version of the medieval *via moderna* tending toward nominalism. Kant's cancellation of rationalism and empiricism sought to limit human

---

<sup>41</sup>*Insight*, 261.

<sup>42</sup>For a parallel challenge in the field of historiography, see Thomas J. McPartland, *Lonergan and Historiography: The Epistemological Philosophy of History* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2010), chap. 2.

knowledge to the phenomenal world through the imposition of a priori categories. The idealist attempt to ground a metaphysics in the dynamism of the categories led to the revolt against idealism, ushering in the twentieth century with its ever lesser viewpoints of positivism versus existentialism and later postmodernism. Amid all the complicated movements and counter movements Lonergan sees one dominant epistemological assumption shape all the debates, namely, knowing in order to be knowing of reality has to be something at least analogous to seeing.<sup>43</sup> So Lonergan, too, would reject the epistemological turn.

But in its place he would resort to an extensive and comprehensive phenomenology of the cognitive and moral operations that would provide the data for a cognitional theory, which would, in turn, be the basis for a precise explanatory account of the cognitive operations, each related to each other as part of the emergent self-transcending structure of inquiry with its unfolding levels of experiencing, understanding, and judging. Lonergan expands his enterprise in post-*Insight* writings to include a phenomenological account of moral inquiry, where questions go beyond those of fact to those of value and decision. A brief summary of his expanded cognitional and moral theory of operations, such as he provides in the opening chapter of *Method in Theology*, may seem clear and even commonplace. But that can be deceptive. The entire effort is, in his words, one of “self-appropriation,” and several hundred pages of *Insight* are intended as exercises in such self-appropriation.<sup>44</sup> Lonergan not only details the operations of cognitive and moral inquiry and their structural relationship; he also locates the imperative driving the process. Fidelity to the immanent, self-transcending norms of inquiry would be the road to objectivity. Reality is not something “out there” extrinsic to the process of inquiry to somehow be “seen” (for example, by empiricist sensations or by conceptualist mental perceptions). Reality is a heuristic notion: we are “related” to reality by the directional tendency of our questioning. We know reality by fidelity to the norms of inquiry, issuing in judgments. Our knowing is an ongoing process. It is a process both personal and normative, fallibilistic and objective. Since what we know is through the process of inquiry what we know is isomorphic to the structure of inquiry. We have here a legitimate and critical link between

---

<sup>43</sup>*Insight*, 22-23, 413-14; *Method in Theology*, 238-39; see Michael McCarthy, *The Crisis of Philosophy*, SUNY Series in Philosophy (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989).

<sup>44</sup>*Insight*, 11, 13.

epistemology and metaphysics. Lonergan has a nuanced version of virtue epistemology. Lonergan can show that any attempt to deny the constitutive role of the cognitive operations would be to use them, thus issuing in a performative contradiction (performing, for example, the operations of experiencing, understanding, and judging to deny the constitutive role of any of the operations). This epistemology would ground a metaphysics of critical realism (with the parallels to that of Smith mentioned above). Thus Lonergan in his phenomenology of consciousness and cognitional theory, as he conceives of it, provides a non-foundationalist foundation for an alternative epistemology, which, in turn, can provide a methodical basis for handling issues in metaphysics.

Some of the most sensitive contemporary philosophers have gravitated, hesitatingly, towards metaphysics. Jürgen Habermas, following some analytic philosophers, has had to come to the startling conclusion that there must be a reality that we are seeking to know. He infers – by way of “realist intuitions” – that there is a reality transcending us, that we know something of this reality by encountering it as cognitive agents, and that our linguistic assertions refer to language-independent objects. But he is still under the spell of Kant. We must reject “representational realism” and the correspondence theory of truth, substituting for it a version of the coherence theory of truth rooted in a Kantian pragmatism with the epistemic priority of the “linguistically articulated horizon of the lifeworld.”<sup>45</sup> At this point, so it is evident, the problem of bridging the gap between subject and object (“out there to be seen”) has made its ugly appearance. Charles Taylor seems to be under the sway of Heidegger in fearing that scientific inquiry leads to methodological control. He would replace it with our Best Account, our reasoned attempt to explicate those experiences that truly give meaning and value to our lives and hence point to some reality. But we cannot have recourse to metaphysics; we cannot completely reverse the change in worldview that came with the Cartesian “disengaged subject” confronting the world as an object through representations of the mind and with the now post-Cartesian “engaged subject” unable to disengage from its historically embedded horizon.<sup>46</sup> Indeed Taylor’s hermeneutical explication seems to approximate in many ways Lonergan’s notion of the norms of

---

<sup>45</sup>Jürgen Habermas, *Truth and Justification*, trans. Barbara Fultner (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2007), 10, 30.

<sup>46</sup>Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, pt. 1.

self-transcending inquiry.<sup>47</sup> Taylor nonetheless seems hesitant to pursue the further cognitional, epistemological, and metaphysical questions that might flow from his hermeneutical explication, for to enter the metaphysical terrain would be to encounter the gap between subject and object, for which there is no bridge.<sup>48</sup>

The argument here is that Lonergan leads us to a metaphysics that has critical grounds. We have already seen above how Lonergan's epistemology supports Smith's reversal of counterpositions and argues for a normative sociology that can engage ethical matters about the social good and human dignity as it discerns the difference between progress and decline. And we have seen how Lonergan's metaphysics can support the notion of emergence and stratified reality. Let us address here how Lonergan can handle in a methodical way two strategically important metaphysical issues, the nature of the person and the nature of society.

How can we meaningfully talk about the person, the person as agent, and the person as subject of human rights and dignity if we have no metaphysical view of the self? Lonergan would investigate the self metaphysically in terms of his notions of "central" potency, form, and act as they apply to a unity-identify-whole grasped in data as individual and as acting in particular spaces and times.<sup>49</sup> This "thing" is a person-thing because it has "conjugate" potency, form, and acts, and the conjugate form (the intelligibility) is that of a person-thing, which is precisely the explanatory relations and unity of organic, psychic, and intellectual levels of integration.<sup>50</sup> There is an operator immanent in the person-thing that propels development and makes for the emergence of higher integrations.<sup>51</sup> These metaphysical explanations of the

---

<sup>47</sup>See Brian J. Braman, *Meaning and Authenticity: Bernard Lonergan and Charles Taylor on the Drama of Authentic Existence* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008).

<sup>48</sup>For analysis of sources and both comparison and contrast with Lonergan, see Nicholas Plants, "Lonergan and Taylor: A Critical Integration," *METHOD: Journal of Lonergan Studies* 19, no. 1 (2001): 143-72. Taylor, according to Plants, accepts the representation model as the standard for a realist epistemology.

<sup>49</sup>*Insight*, 456-63. The "central" in central potency, form, and act is the unity of a single thing or existent. Potency, form, and act are metaphysical correlations, respectively, to the cognitional levels of experiencing, understanding, and judging. Since we know the real through the structure of knowing (on Lonergan's critical realist account), there will be aspects of the real proportionate to the structure of knowing.

<sup>50</sup>*Insight*, 271, 275-79, 538-44.

<sup>51</sup>*Insight*, 490-92, 494-504. The operator of the cognitive development is the pure desire to know (*Insight*, 555). Development is in accord with the metaphysic principle of "finality," which is the immanent intelligibility of emerging world process (*Insight*, 470-76). For Lonergan's debt

person are grounded in, and isomorphic with, the unity of consciousness as given and the experience of the dynamism of self-transcending inquiry. Lonergan, then, has precise metaphysical correlates to the dynamic structure of inquiry – explicated in cognitional theory and verified in the data of consciousness. We see here Lonergan’s bold claim that his critical realist metaphysics is verifiable.<sup>52</sup>

Lonergan’s metaphysics, too, sheds light on the ontological status of society. It is not a big thing in which little things (persons) function as cogs in a machine. Nor is it completely artificial. It is neither a thing nor an artifact. It is a reality that is the product of, and endures precisely as self-mediation.<sup>53</sup> As we have seen, cooperations and skills of members of society create a network of relations that function as schemes of recurrence: they mediate social order. The social order through the common experience, common interpretation, common judgments, and common decisions constitute the community that sustains society as an objective order and in that capacity is a framework of mutual self-mediation as it shapes individuals through socialization, acculturation, and education. The common good is neither

---

to Bergson on the notion of finality, see William A. Matthews, *Lonergan’s Quest: A Study of Desire in the Authoring of Insight* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 377. Lonergan, as does Bergson, rejects the “antecedent determinism” of reductionism as well as the “future determinism” of Aristotle’s teleology of an eternal heaven; finality is an open but directed dynamism, where the direction is toward more complex being, given long periods of time. For Lonergan, the parallel in Aristotle is not in his *telos* but in his *physis* (Matthews, *Lonergan’s Quest*, 476). *Physis* (nature) is an internal principle of change and rest, and for the human spirit the principle is the activity of raising and answering questions. But there is more: “And is not that deeper and more comprehensive principle itself a nature, at once a principle of movement and of rest, a tidal movement that begins before consciousness, unfolds through sensitivity, intelligence, rational reflection, responsible deliberation, only to find its rest beyond all of these?” The point beyond is being-in-love (Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *A Third Collection: Papers by Bernard J. F. Lonergan*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe [New York: Paulist Press, 1985], 174-75). For a nuanced treatment linking Lonergan’s notion of development to Kant’s notion of the person, see Patrick H. Byrne, “Foundations of the ‘Ethics of Embryonic Stem Cell Research,’” in *Lonergan Workshop Journal*, vol. 20, ed. Fred Lawrence (Chestnut Hill, MA: Boston College, 2008), 17-69. Byrne, using Lonergan’s metaphysics, argues, cautiously, that the human “thing” throughout the process of development is, in fact, a person.

<sup>52</sup>*Insight*, 5.

<sup>53</sup>Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Philosophical and Theological Papers, 1965-1980*, vol. 17 of the *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, ed. Robert C. Croken and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), chap. 8; *A Third Collection*, 30; Andrew Beards, *Method in Metaphysics: Lonergan and the Future of Analytic Philosophy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 320-26.

reducible to the sum of individual goods nor does it subsume the goods of persons in a super metaphysical essence.<sup>54</sup>

Our brief foray into Lonergan's metaphysics illustrates its methodological grounding in his epistemology, which allows for verification of metaphysical claims in the data of consciousness, that is, in the conscious performance in the process of inquiry with its immanent norms.<sup>55</sup> The strength of Smith's critical realism is that it is a clear alternative to the weaknesses of its main opponents, empiricism and reductionism, on the one hand, and various forms of hermeneutical idealism, on the other. Reality is greater than the object-world of sense experience; and we can know it through acts of linguistic interpretation since language does have reference outside itself. Critical realism can be seen as the mean between the extremes of passive sensation and active hermeneutical reality construction. In this sense critical realism would be a half-way house between empiricism and idealism. Lonergan would have us reconfigure the relationship with his alternative, virtue epistemology. We indeed need to explain (interpret) the data and formulate our ideas. But the exigency of the desire to know raises a further question about each of our formulations and claims, Is it so? We seek insights into what constitutes sufficient evidence to support our claims and marshal and weigh the evidence to make a rational judgment. The self-transcending process of inquiry moves us from experiencing, to understanding, and then to judging. Empiricism focuses on experiencing; idealism focuses on understanding; critical realism focuses on the entire, compound process of experiencing, understanding, and judging as underpinned by the desire to know. Lonergan's critical realist epistemology, in turn, grounds his critical realist metaphysics. Idealism is the half-way house between empiricism and critical realism.<sup>56</sup> Thus the Lonergan enterprise can provide methodological precision to justify the main metaphysical claims of Smith in his extraordinary book about the person. Lonergan offers a distinct method of linking critical realism to phenomenology and to personalism.

---

<sup>54</sup>Relevant here is Lonergan's metaphysical distinction between central and conjugate forms (which are intelligibilities that reside only in things, defined by central forms, in their relations to other things) and his "inadequate" real distinction among potency, form, and act (which means that form, or essence, is distinct from act, or existence, but not as one thing from another thing) (*Insight*, 460-63, 513-14).

<sup>55</sup>These norms Lonergan formulates as the transcendental precepts, be attentive, be intelligent, be reasonable, and be responsible (*Method in Theology*, 20).

<sup>56</sup>*Insight*, 22.

