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The Idea of a Descriptive Equality: Lonergan Explains Jefferson

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THE IDEA OF
A DESCRIPTIVE EQUALITY:
LONERGAN EXPLAINS
JEFFERSON

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PART I: THE IDEA OF A DESCRIPTIVE* EQUALITY

FORREST GUMP WON the 1995 Academy Award for best motion picture; some critics have even called it a Christian movie. It is, all the same, a rather good film. Here is the gist of the story: Gump, a young man of good looks but scant intelligence survives a dozen moral encounters, always choosing the right course while nimbler minds are bedazzled by doubt or fear. A kind of moral idiot-savant, his intuition for the good saves him from the confusions to which his subtler fellows succumb. Gradually they are drawn into his naive agape and find their fumbling humanity restored. Gump himself winds up morally fulfilled, rich, and loved by all—especially the girl. There is more to the story, but this is sufficient to our purpose, and we hesitate to spoil it.

The movie would come off better as one episode in a soap opera; for to appreciate the moral issues raised by this puerile prodigy requires at least two sequels. In Forrest Gump II we would witness the mentally marginal hero again doing his moral best. This time, however, he would keep getting the content of the objective good all wrong. When Lieutenant Dan orders Gump to let him die, Gump would follow orders;
when his beloved little son is bad, he would beat the child, supposing this
good for his character; he would buy drugs for the addict to relieve his
suffering from withdrawal; and he would sleep with the prostitute
because he feels responsible to help her. We would have him behave like
the nincompoop he is trying desperately not to be. And each of his
miscues would earn him contempt from his associates. We could call
this sequel *Forrest Stump*, remembering meanwhile that this bungler is
really the same wonderful guy inside.

This thought, however, suggests the third version in which the
blundering hero of *FG II* would get judged solely by his good intentions.
The other characters would somehow recognize his honest effort and
display the same love and respect they showed him when he was a man
of good deeds as well as good heart. But this third perspective introduces
more difficult questions. Even if the victims of his moral miscues could
grasp his good intention, are we clear that this should matter? Is Stump
really as good a person—as admirable as Gump? Or was Samuel
Johnson correct in supposing the road to hell to be paved with such
intentions?

That is the question we would put to Bernard Lonergan. Do honest
mistakes about the content of the moral law make a person less perfect
in moral terms than he would be if he were to recognize the real good and
proceed to do it? What, for one very stark example, is the consequence
for one who becomes a conscientious, *pro bono* abortionist?

There are three possible answers. Honest errors of chosen behavior
are either morally: 1) damaging, 2) excusing, or 3) self-perfecting. That
is, with each bungled but bona fide choice the actor is, morally speaking,
either worse off, the same, or advancing. This issue—let us call it the
Gump Difficulty—remains unsettled after two millennia of moral
theology. It is a question whose importance over-matches the amateur
strokes of a couple of lawyers. We have had to confront it, nonetheless,
out of simple necessity. For therein lies the only solution to a problem
that is more in the lawyer’s line—one that has long vexed us.

We are looking for the coherent meaning, if any, of the claim that
humans are equal. Since Jefferson, this assertion has remained as
unexplained as it is common. We emphasize that the equality that is
claimed is metaphysical and descriptive; it is declarative, not
imperative, and has nothing directly to do with ideal social conditions or
The Idea of a Descriptive Equality

Theories of justice. Of social inequality too much has already been said, while the possible fact of human equality has been curiously neglected. Egalitarians refer off-handedly to the "fact" of human equality, as if it were the self-evident premise for some utopian scheme of morals or policy. But even John Rawls is keener to avoid than to clarify the notion. We don't blame him; for the only coherent interpretation of a descriptive human equality would pose serious problems for liberal theories of moral obligation. Indeed, a clear view of human equality makes many Scholastics distinctly uncomfortable, though for different reasons, as we shall see.

It is, therefore, gratifying that human equality finds apparent asylum in the moral metaphysics of Bernard Lonergan. We come here to test this insight (if such it be) and to consult, and be corrected by, those who understand Lonergan so much more profoundly than we. However, in order to see how we cross his trail, and how he offers us aid and comfort, we must tell you exactly what human equality means as a descriptive term. We will boil what could be a rather extended synthesis to its barest essentials.

Equality, Dignity and Relativity

Every instance of equality is a relation between two or more things that are different in certain ways (not identical with each other) and the same in regard to some specific property. Of course, two things that are distinct still can be equal in many respects. A pound of sugar and a pound of nails though different, bear the relation of equality in respect of weight and possibly in respect of other properties such as distance from my eyes. Indeed, like every pair of physical substances, they have an infinity of equalities; on some plane in space there is an unlimited number of points from which they are equidistant. Of course, the relation of equality—like every relation—is non-empirical; pure relation has no sensible properties. On this very ground its reality is denied by many, though not by the authors (nor by anyone who would believe in equality as a descriptive reality).

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* "Descriptive" is used in this piece not in Lonergan's sense as the opposite of "explanatory;" but in the common post-Weberian sense as the opposite of "normative." (Editor)

The many descriptive equalities that hold among humans come in two forms, only one of which is sufficiently significant to be the human equality that was invoked by Jefferson. Here are three examples of the first (and trivial) type: All humans are equal in possessing bodies; most are equal in possessing intelligence; most adults are equal in possessing wealth. Thus, Mother Theresa and Donald Trump are related as equals, since both have wealth—she fifty dollars, he fifty million. Likewise Lonergan and I are equals, both possessing intelligence. These genuine human equalities, however, serve mainly to distract us from the more interesting relation that holds between Theresa and Trump and between Lonergan and me—namely, inequality. Grasping the reality of this disparity, we realize that equalities of mere possession have little human significance; the meaningful species of the equality relation is the double equality that arises whenever persons are uniform not only in possessing a property but uniform also in the extent or degree to which they possess it.²

This distinction between single and double equalities is carefully avoided by the egalitarian moralists—even by those who purport to rest justice upon a factual or descriptive equality. Thus (following Hobbes's example) John Rawls first tells us to look for a factual basis for equality, then settles instead for a “range property” (the capacity for “moral personality”) that he quietly recognizes to vary in degree among us.³ It is a great cross for the egalitarians that they can find no empirical sameness of human persons that holds in both possession and degree.⁴ Mankind varies in every measurable dimension.⁵

This exclusive reliance upon empiricism happily is an academic fetish to which we owe no allegiance. To us a relation of double human equality founded upon some immeasurable but plausible characteristic would seem an interesting discovery. It might be inappropriate as an object of scientific proof but still worthy as an object for rational belief or disbelief. Equality may be one of those possibilities to which persons (or societies) can give or refuse allegiance as a core premise of our identity and connectedness.

Beginning the search for this relation we will for convenience here simply assume something basic on which we expect agreement: If a non-demonstrable (and irrefutable) relation of human equality were to exist, it would entail the same ontological elements attributed to that other elusive property, “human dignity.” Equality, if real, is benign; it will rest upon the premises of free will and reason that allow the belief in a real morality. Equality is, in this respect, a Christian and not merely a modern conception. In its religious versions its ultimate source is humanity's creaturely privilege as God's image and likeness; we share finitely in his knowledge and freedom, and it is this which makes us interesting.

Curiously, the idea of dignity remains to this day an ambiguous and even dangerous premise for believers and unbelievers alike. No one has yet asked whether dignity is uniform in degree; but as a trait reserved to thinkers and choosers, dignity seems prone to wax and wane with the cognitive endowments of individuals. Maybe prodigies like Forrest Gump can get by on intuition; the rest of us are stuck with reason, as we go about the daily business of moral decision. And if reason comes in all sizes, our chance to participate in our own moral self-perfection (or salvation) through correct choices may be highly variant from person to person. We could easily differ in our moral powers precisely as we differ in natural intellectual gifts. We would be subject, as some philosophers like to say, to “moral luck.”

Whether one's capacity to grasp the intelligible content of the good affects the degree of one's potential for moral self-perfection is an ancient question. If the answer turns out to be yes, human dignity

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becomes relativized; intellectual horsepower is moral horsepower. Conceived thus in comparative terms, that dignity which is the medium of moral significance becomes potentially the medium on the one hand of the moral triviality of an individual and, on the other, of his ascendancy above the herd.

If dignity is to avoid being transmogrified into such a gnostic hierarchy, human persons must enjoy the same capacity for moral self-perfection. Though it is variable in potentia, this capacity must in fact be uniform in nature among rational humans. That it would be uniform seems at first implausible. Reason holds a central place in man’s status as “image and likeness,” and this could make the uniformity of capacity conceptually difficult. How can the marginal mind have equal opportunity for self-perfection in a moral economy that—like any other—emphasizes getting things right? We suspect that, if we manage to answer this question, we will simultaneously rescue human dignity from gnostic relativity and establish the meaning of human equality.

**Giving Equality its Plausible Meaning**

The initial step toward identifying the structure necessary to human equality appears in Jacques Maritain’s *Redeeming the Time.* Maritain commences with the familiar brace of descriptive elements—reason and will—that are the precondition of morality and love, hence the stuff of dignity. That the relation of human equality requires a realist metaphysics is a necessary first insight. That is, the relation itself must exist, and to do so it must rest upon a host property in the moral structure of the related persons. We are grateful to Maritain for the ontic foundation but disappointed that he stops there and leaves our question unattended; his view of equality allows the shared possession of a capacity for perfection that varies in effectual range from person to person. Far from establishing a substantive human equality, it would in that case provide a medium for a possible moral hierarchy based upon cognitive power. Human equality needs a host property that would

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plausibly be uniform among us in its potency for moral self-perfection (and for salvation).

We identify seven criteria for such a host. That the criteria are met in the real world is beyond showing; what can be shown is that nothing less will do. That their satisfaction in this world is plausible can be argued in a systematic way, but this short essay is not the place to relate all the evidence that supports the authors' belief.

Here then are the criteria or necessary premises for any conception of a real human equality:

1. Relation must constitute a distinctive category of being, one that is sustained by host properties in the things related;
2. Human equality must be a relation that is grounded upon a host property present in all rational human persons;
3. The host property of the relation must be a natural capacity the free exercise of which is sufficient to determine the moral self-identity of the person;
4. That capacity must include the conscious imperative freely to seek and attempt those actions that affect others and are correct in a way that is not dependent upon our knowledge or consent;
5. Honest misperception of the specific content of this order of correct actions must be possible in spite of diligent inquiry;
6. Moral self-perfection (and salvation) must be attainable by free commitment to the quest for correct actions in a way that cannot be identical with their actual discovery;
7. The capacity for this self-perfecting commitment must be uniform in degree among rational persons.

These criteria are partly our interpretation of the Western linguistic convention about human equality; it is what we think people implicitly mean—and what Jefferson perhaps consciously meant—by "created equal." Note that linguistic convention itself includes an reference to reality; in this case the convention refers to a metaphysical state of affairs. It further supposes that human equality relates one person to another in their distinctive human capacities freely to affect one another's circumstances. Human equality is about our power to
shape our own moral identity within the reciprocities of human-to-human experience.⁹

What it is not about is our actually and contingently developed ability to find the correct answers. Equality cannot concern our personal achievement of the external or common good; we are too varied and vulnerable in our mental and other circumstances to have the same talent for practical achievements. What could be uniform—and all that could—is the capacity to commit in accord with what light he or she has to that order of the external good as our ideal. If every person recognized the authority of the order of correct actions, he could have the plenary power freely to commit to or to reject the search for them. Human equality necessarily assumes this commitment itself to be the only act relevant to the moral self-perfection of human actors. It insists that Forrest Slump is every bit as morally fulfilled as Forrest Gump, though he perpetrates ever-so-many good faith violations of what would be the common and commutative good.

Now, one could believe in such a capacity for moral self-fulfillment through best effort and still not be certain that the capacity is uniform. Potentially it might be diuniform for reasons such as the distribution of divine grace that have nothing to do with relative intelligence or education.⁰ Again, the claim here is only that this concept of moral self-perfection by sheer effort allows the possibility of human equality. It just might be the case that the variable capacity for moral self-perfection through best effort does not in fact vary. This could, then, be the double equality that satisfies the seven criteria. The plausibility of sameness in possession and in degree allows us to conceive and to affirm by believing in a descriptive equality; that belief delivers human dignity from relativization and hierarchy.

Certain Catholic theologians might be inclined at this point to slip into the language of “fundamental option.” The idea of subjective personal commitment as the act which determines our personal moral state invites the comparison. However, we strongly urge resistance to

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that impulse for the simple reason that the term "fundamental option" is ambiguous about the reality and authority of the order of the good. As a matter of language, human equality implies that there is an order of proper treatments of others; this is part of the definition. It would not be enough merely to recognize that all persons have the same capacity for moral effort apart from there must be a genuine object of that effort. It must be a moral order that obliges independently of the actor's own preferences and inventions.

There is an old English word for the specific decision to be made in respect to that moral order. Its infinitive form is "to obtend." The act of commitment is an "obtension." The word nicely suggests the objective dimension of personal choice that alone can morally perfect, so that it denotes the subjective act of committing to the search for the real good. Human equality is the relation that is based upon the uniform capacity of Everyman to obtend—to respond yes or no to the recognized imperative to hunt for the true good in the environment of human interdependency. We are connected by our uniform capacity to try to identify and to carry out correct behaviors in relation to other persons.

Jefferson Distinguished

According to Garry Wills, Jefferson believed something like this when he drafted the Declaration. He had been much influenced by Thomas Hutcheson and the Scottish moralists who wrote vaguely of a "moral sense" supposed to resemble the physical senses. This impulse and this instinct for correct treatment of others were conceived as a universal trait. Jefferson applied the notion to slaves, arguing in support of their moral (as opposed to political) equality. This application of the Scottish idea, however, did not produce anything like a coherent notion of equality. Neither the Scots nor Jefferson was clear about the crucial questions whether 1) a well-intending person always gets the right answers; or 2) if not, whether one who tries to get them but fails is morally marred, unchanged or perfected. In short, Jefferson was unclear about the morally fulfilling act and thus was in no position either to believe or disbelieve that the crucial capacity was uniformly distributed.

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11 The O.E.D. ascribes this to "Higden (Rolls) V. 53."
"Created equal" was at best a vague intuition about the specific premises necessary to a belief in human equality.

However, if the fact of our being created equal is not exactly self-evident, this remains as true for us as for Jefferson. Far from being self-evident, it is beyond proof one way or the other. Yet, once again, if it were plausible that its criteria are met in the real order, equality could be a relation worthy either of belief or disbelief.

The linguistic convention that has been shared by the humblest citizens and the noblest statesmen bears testimony that the seven criteria of equality are satisfied. One can believe in the uniform capacity of persons to achieve moral self-perfection by the act of obtension. Still, does such a belief affect attitudes and behavior? If not, we can consign equality to the remotest philosophical limbo and forego any personal judgment on the question. Conversely, if belief or disbelief matters, we shall have to choose. With Jefferson, Lincoln and John Courtney Murray we shall have to hold the truth either of equality or of disequality and act upon it in spite of its open texture.\(^{13}\)

**The Harvests of Belief in Equality: I. The Two Kingdoms**

The first consequence of a belief in human equality is the implicit division of practical reality into two realms. Regarding the act which morally perfects from the standpoint of the moral agent's intention has the effect of precising personal moral achievement from the perfection of the social order. A person may do social evil while saving his own soul. If we suppose that Aquinas, for example, committed a serious practical injustice in the external realm by supporting the burning of heretics; nevertheless, in honestly advocating that policy, Aquinas was morally perfecting himself. Likewise, Saul conscientiously persecuted Christians; our understanding of the belief in equality allows us to assume that Saul thereby improved his own moral state and prepared himself to become Paul. Men today volunteer for wars they mistake as just. We can be morally fulfilled by the honest choice of evil acts. It is possible to be good while doing the bad.

We call this "obstensional disjunction." We believe the bungler simultaneously succeeds in one realm and fails in the other. Does this

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\(^{13}\) John C. Murray, *We Hold These Truths* (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1988).
belief that honesty suffices for moral self-perfection affect the social order? Or in other words, will the common good be better served by the behaviors of those who reject equality, believing instead that only those who are correct can be good?

Our brief and speculative response is that the believer in obtensional morality is, if anything, more likely than the traditionalist to achieve the common good. Limiting self-perfection to correct knowledge and performance tends toward the moral minimalism of seeking the rule qua rule and resting too easily in its apprehension. While obtension too looks for the rule, it does so as but one part of an unceasing commitment to the order of lateral or social good. Obtension does not rest in the rule, for not activity in accord with the rule but the constancy and sincerity of the quest determines the moral state of the obtending actor. To satisfy the rule, then, is no guarantee of the necessary intention. For the obtending actor has been given as his mission is more than a discovery of specific right answers: it is a vocation. And vocations are open-ended so that there is no safety in the minimum. One may find oneself called to transcend the rule.

The objectivist response to this claim is that men commonly delude themselves about their good intentions. We would agree but observe that self-delusion is a state that is incompatible with good intention; and it is a state freely chosen. It can corrupt either intention or our knowledge of correct behaviors. Once we have willed to blind ourselves, self-delusion is easily managed in respect either of acts or of intentions. While we take seriously the warning of the extreme objectivist, our overall conclusion must be that belief in moral self-perfection by honest quest for the good is no serious threat to the realization of social good and may well be its most efficient instrument.

**The Harvests of Human Equality: II. Five Bonuses**

The belief in equality affects our ideal picture of how we should regard and actually treat one another. We shall specify five such effects. First, however, we reemphasize that human equality is not a premise for any particular policy. We have discovered no inference from the structure of the moral person to any specific form of social order. God may be an equal opportunity creator, but his is not the kind of opportunity that the state can either advance or retard. It is one that simply goes with the human territory. Conversely, the question for the state is not moral self-
perfection but justice; and people who are by nature equal in their capacity for moral self-perfection may differ in many ways that the law can justly reward, discourage, mandate or punish.

The practical implications of equality are mostly matter of perspective and attitude. That does not diminish their importance, as we can now illustrate. Note that in every example the specific pathology for which equality is the cure is the gnostic reduction of the capacity of any person to achieve the highest moral state to his cognitive achievement.

1. **Human Dignity** As already noted, the benign moral thrust of the concept of human dignity has been virtually reversed by its vulnerability to relativization. If the extent of one’s capacity for a free morality is hostage to his IQ, dignity entails not automatic respect, but only hierarchy. Its injection into a legal order as a ground of justice would at best be ambiguous in implication.

Belief in descriptive equality forestalls this gnostic interpretation of dignity. Equality of access to moral perfection is a belief that simultaneously humbles and exalts. Dignity survives both as a plenary moral opportunity and a responsibility for all.

2. **Church and Community** We shall later suggest that equality is a permissible belief for Catholics, even though it entails the admission that persons in every stage of ignorance and unbelief have full access to salvation through honest inquiry. The Church, then, is challenged not only to reconceptualize the effect upon the person of access to (and isolation from) the sacraments but even to perceive itself as encouraging religious disbelief in cases where honest belief is impossible. The pilgrim community turns out to be everybody who is doing the best he can, and this has more implications than we can here pursue. None is a challenge to orthodoxy.

3. **Racism** Racism ultimately is the conviction that genealogical segments of the species are on average deficient in the capacity for moral perfection. Generally the deficiency is seen in gnostic terms: Moral capacity varies by cognitive power, and “they” have less of it than “we.” Hence the inordinate passion of the responses to *The Bell Curve* which was taken by much of the professorate and the media as a
moral statement. Gnosticism is a special temptation for the academy; there the environment makes it possible to believe Kennedy's unfortunate conflation of the "best and the brightest." It is also a belief that is peculiarly painful for those gnostics whose "liberal" political commitments require verbal assent to human equality as a fact. This contradiction between moral hierarchy and liberalism makes affirmative action and similar ventures in the university deeply conflictual and helps explain the taboo that has inhibited the study of cognitive racial differences. The awful logic of the gnostic makes affirmative action into an artificial moral elevation. It also implies that, when at last the world is truly ruled by cognitive merit, we will have created a new moral underclass consisting of the dull of every race.

All this painful hierarchy is displaced by the belief in human equality. Intelligence is still allowed its role in the distribution of responsibilities (and, if necessary, incentives) but is never mistaken for moral superiority. Cleverness loses its cosmic significance.

4. **Moral Evolution** Among the several forms taken by the idea of "progress," none is more gnostic in spirit than the claim that mankind is on its way toward an earthly moral perfection. Teilhard de Chardin, for example, would have the race constantly drawn on by a cognitive elite that grasp more and more and thereby perfect themselves more efficiently than their ancestors. Equality flatly rejects this interpretation of the human condition. There is no variation in the capacity of individuals to achieve moral self-perfection; there is no variation either across time or among contemporaries. Whatever our own epoch, each of us faces the same invitation to submit to the obligation to search for the good as best we can. That is the one task for which every rational person is as prepared as any other. However much the race increases in sophistication, the vocation of personal goodness and the capacity each of us brings to it are exactly the same.

5. **World unity** The modern idea of one world is distinct from that of moral evolution; it is a political state of affairs that could be (and may be) achieved. Though sometimes associated with equality, world unity is a very different conception. It vaguely supposes a polity in

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which justice is done both privately and publicly according to rules set by reason. This does not necessarily imply the descriptive equality of persons. Those different in their natural capacity for moral perfection might be governed by a universal rule of political equality; and vice versa. And, even within a world order, for believers in human equality the only uniform factual element would be our individual capacity to choose or refuse the quest for the good. Those free choices—for and against—will always divide mankind into two invisible cities. Unlike Augustine’s cities there will be no impermeable boundary set by predestination; but there is no reason to expect that all of us will freely choose to seek and realize the moral ideal in relation to our neighbor. Some will choose one city; some the other.

The Harvests of Belief in Equality:
III. From Equality to Fraternity

Finally, as we tally the practical consequences of the belief in human equality, account must be taken of equality’s historic relation to fraternity and its peculiar promise to restore and vitalize that concept. Fraternity barely survived the French Revolution whose friends and foes alike preferred to discourse exclusively in terms of a liberty and an equality that were conceived less as facts than as social aspirations. Men were to be made politically free and equal; whether nature had already made them so—or even what a descriptive liberty and equality could mean—was never made clear.

The egalitarian energy of those times filled the available moral space, and fraternity never made itself felt as a serious political norm. Marx rejected it as bourgeois sentiment; the individualists rejected it as a restraint on liberty; the aristocrats rejected it as a form of leveling; and the levelers have rejected it as inconsistent with a rigid egalitarianism.10 Over the two centuries there is almost no serious literature on the subject.

10 Take Rawls for example. After astutely observing that “in comparison with liberty and equality, the idea of fraternity has had a lesser place in democratic theory....” Rawls completes fraternity’s demotion by allowing only as much of it as can be squeezed out of his concept of justice: “We have yet to find a principle of justice that matches the underlying idea [that is fraternity]....” *A Theory of Justice*, 105-06.
Of all political symbols, fraternity comes closest to capturing the authors’ notion of the ideal civic perspective. Committed neither to conservative nor to liberal policies, it transcends both attitudes in a personalism that brings out the best in any legal structure. Its familial metaphor invites society to treat persons with respect and even affection in accord with their differences in needs and gifts. In its concern for the unique it utterly rejects the barren arithmetic of egalitarianism.

To understand human equality as a descriptive instead of a normative term is to grasp its unrealized importance to both liberty and fraternity. First of all we see that liberty—like equality—can be a descriptive term; specifically it identifies our capacity for free and reasoned choice. Liberty is personal power and is fueled by knowledge; under ordinary circumstances every increment of knowledge enhances the power by which a person alters his environment and himself.

Conceived as a metaphysical reality, it is human equality that puts the necessary moral brakes on this connection between knowledge and power. Equality severs our moral self-perfection from our practical sophistication. In the task of morally perfecting ourselves the only knowledge that is efficacious is the bare grasp of our obligation to seek the real good, and that we all possess in the same degree. Equality thus closes off the gnostic threat. It tames liberty’s alliance with intellect, making its variations in magnitude irrelevant to the moral self-perfection of the actor.

But descriptive equality also gives liberty its moral marching orders. Equality channels the capacity for free moral choice, making it precisely the capacity to say either yes or no to the search for the lateral order of our obligation to fellow humans. And, for the content of that order we know of no better name than fraternity. The three-cornered French slogan thus turns out to be a pyramid with the twin facts of human liberty and human equality at the base supporting the moral ideal of fraternity. We do not suppose that this metaphor will tell us how to revise the welfare system or the Internal Revenue Code, but as a collective aspiration, it is a cut above Hobbes.

But, after all this wind-up, where is the pitch about Bernard Lonergan? We have at last arrived at our central point.

We claim to have sculpted our interpretation of human equality from common usage. But if this belief in human equality is popular, it is almost undiscoverable among the premises of the perennial geniuses of philosophy and theology. In search of allies, we have canvassed the tradition from Plato to Pufendorf to the present Pope. The roster of friends is a short one. A strong gnostic current ever pulls the intelligentsia in the direction of inequality and exclusivism, the theologians being willing to defeat even God's revealed will that "all men be saved" (I Tim. 2:4). The favorite equality stoppers include such unscriptural devices as double predestination, the extra ecclesiam nulla salus, the "fragility" of goodness, and the inexorable obligation to get the details right. To find a luminary innocent of every barrier is no mean feat.

In Bernard Lonergan, however, we may have located human equality's rare intellectual ally. Our thesis is not that Lonergan was an equality bandstander; indeed, we lack evidence that he explicitly embraced human equality or even recognized it as a consequence of his premises. Our hypothesis, rather, is that in Lonergan's fateful shift from logic to method, from concepts to transcendental precepts, human equality quietly comes as a bonus. The ballast of Lonergan's life's work commits him and his intellectual progeny to human equality as we have interpreted it. If we fail to show this, please send us back to California understanding why it is better to hold Lonergan a believer in disequality.

There is difficulty enough. We recognize tensions in Lonergan's thought, sentences on which no Gnostic exclusivist could improve. We know of no thinker so given-to call folks silly and stupid. For Lonergan, moreover, this is no mere epiphenomenon. Lonergan wants people to get things right.

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17 See, e.g., Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae, Ia, q. 19, a. 6. Cf. H.U. von Balthasar, Dare We Hope "That All Men Be Saved"? (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988).
18 See infra footnote 47.
Like the tradition that begat him, Bernard Lonergan believes in right answers and acts. Unlike that tradition, however, Lonergan reckons that those right answers and acts are the contingent achievements of a personal struggle. Lonergan’s epistemology requires a good word for everyone who quests for what is correct—a word whose utterance is not contingent upon the luck of discovering and performing correct actions.

Aristotle, Thomas, and The Traditional Predicament

Equality demands that people be celebrated exactly for their commitment to and search for the good—not for the fine fortune of finding it. Discovery and performance of the good cannot, alone cannot for the advance of a person’s moral cause; morally, at least, results cannot be all that matters. Human equality requires that the good faith bunglers among us be as morally perfected as those clever casuists who identify and dutifully perform correct acts.

Any less flattering a judgment of the involuntary perpetrators of harm, and disequality ensues. Such judgments do come, however—and in two widely available flavors: one bitter, the other bland. The first is pagan, the second Christian. We consider Aristotle and Aquinas in turn.19

The niceties of the Nicomachean Ethics, Magna Moralia, and Eudemian Ethics to one side, Aristotle’s ethics is basically simple. There is a constellation of more or less determinate excellences of which certain men20 are capable, and these they must achieve if they are to be happy and good. In Aristotle’s cosmos, goodness and happiness are solidary. In Alasdair MacIntyre’s words, Aristotle asks, “What am I to

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19 There is, of course, a third flavor—the one congenial to equality, but it has been virtually unobtainable. Even its leading—and enthusiastic—proponent, St. Alphonse Liguori, couched it as we do in terms of probabilities: “Non solam autem qui operatur cum conscientia invincibilitur errorea non peccat, sed etiam probabilissim acquirit meritum . . . .” (Theologia Moralis 1.I, par. 6; in Opere Morali di S. Alfonso Maria de Liguori [Turin: Marietti, 1846], vol. 5, 2). For a statement of the prevalent Thomistic anxiety with such a position, see Dominicus Prümmer, O.P., Manuale Theologiae Moralis, (13th ed.) (Rome: Herder, 1958), I.IV, Ch. II, sec. 313, vol. 1, 205.

20 Notice that with Aristotle already we are accepting the inequality of natural slaves and of women.
do if I am to fare well?"\textsuperscript{21} Should my intellectual limits or some other form of bad luck prevent these achievements, I remain unfulfilled, unhappy and, for that very reason, not good. There is, as Martha Nussbaum says with an unsavory relish, a "fragility" to goodness. For those who involuntarily fail to do what the \textit{phronimos} would, there is neither consolation prize nor solace. The unlucky are condemned to wander with Oedipus. Tragedy—unchosen moral catastrophe—prevents human equality.\textsuperscript{22}

As he was appropriating Aristotle's biology and metaphysics in the service of a Christian self-understanding, Aquinas was aware, of course, that there are limits to how far Christians can go with the Greeks and even with the Stagirite. Belief in God's loving providence preempts the conclusion that some men are tragically damned simply through bad luck—Augustine's and Calvin's spin on the \textit{decretum absolutum} notwithstanding. God created humans with the capacity freely to choose beatitude; \textit{moral} evil is chosen and so, too, is the consequent damnation. Thus Thomas raises the question whether the will that is specified by involuntarily erroneous reason is good ("\textit{Utrum voluntas concordans rationi erranti sit bona}"). Were it, Oedipus could come home, equality would be possible, and that would be the end to the story.

But to that sharply honed question, Aquinas provided only an evasive reply, and so the story continues. Instead of answering, Thomas rephrased the question as "whether an erroneous conscience \textit{excuses}" ("\textit{utrum conscientia errorea excuseat}"). With a single, obscure stroke Thomas gave this new question and its answer their canonical form: an involuntarily erroneous conscience binds and the person who follows it is "excused."\textsuperscript{23} Little is known or said of the "excused." He never is celebrated. Neither morally advancing nor regressing, the "excused" is—for aught that appears—dispatched to a new Limbo. Moral theologians

\textsuperscript{21} Alasdair MacIntyre, \textit{A Short History of Ethics} (New York: Macmillan, 1966) 84.
\textsuperscript{23} \textit{Summa Theologiae}, Ia-Ilae, q. 19, a. 6, c. If the error concerns the moral law (rather than a "circumstance"), the error, as we shall see, is deemed voluntary and, for that reason, unexcused. A sustained and persuasive critique of Thomas's refuge in excuse is Eric D'Arcy, \textit{Conscience and Its Right to Freedom} (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1961).
in the Thomistic mold confirm the existence of this elusive place\textsuperscript{24} but without details. We are left wondering whether the Limbo of the excused is any less parched than the present haunts of Oedipus and other tragic wanderers.

Whatever the quality of Thomas's Limbo, however, he likely imagined it as quite compact. Only the unchosen ignorance of a "circumstance" admits a wrongdoer to the house of the excused, for this is the only sort of error Thomas deems involuntary. The paradigmatic example proffered by Thomas is the archer in the forest. Having taken "proper precaution" ("diligentia adhibita"), he shoots and kills an undetected passerby on the road.\textsuperscript{25} The archer's lack of access to the crucial fact, as it were, earned him an excuse.

Ignorance of fact is to be distinguished from ignorance of the moral law. Mistake about the rules of behavior never is excused, because it always is voluntary.\textsuperscript{26} This judgment of voluntariness springs from Thomas's general optimism about the knowability of the moral law. Access always is possible. Thomas's occasional opinion, exaggerated in our own day by Grisez and Finnis, is that the first principles of morality are self-evident.\textsuperscript{27} And, even when he does not speak the language of self-evidence, Thomas holds that the moral law is perspicuous even to minds darkened some by original sin. Rather than collect and parse all the relevant Thomistic passages, we quote one of Thomas's leading modern expositors, Josef Pieper:

Moral action is "doing the truth," \textit{veritatem agere}. The knowledge of the theoretical reason is in the identity of its "what" with the objective world of being, with the "things" from which it receives its "measure." This is an unbroken chain of providing and

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item In the \textit{Catechism of the Catholic Church} (1992), the Limbo of the excused is, instead, the land of "unimputed evil." § 1793.
\item \textit{Summa Theologiae}, Ia-IIae, q. 6, a. 8, c.
\item \textit{Summa Theologiae}, Ia-IIae, q. 19, a. 6, c. "For instance, if erring reason tell a man that he should go to another man's wife, the will that abides by that erring reason is evil; since this error arises from ignorance of the Divine Law, which he is bound to know. But if a man's reason errs (\textit{ratio erret}) in mistaking another for his wife, and if he wish to give her her right when she asks for it, his will is excused from being evil: because this error arises from ignorance of a circumstance, which ignorance excuses, and causes the act to be involuntary."
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
receiving the measure. Knowledge is reality become subjective, the “command” is directive knowledge, and moral action is command that has become real.... Objectivity as an attitude in knowing means that the subject, as subject, refrains from taking any part in determining the content of knowledge. This attitude on the part of man guarantees true knowledge.28

On this, the Thomistic view, man certainly can reach reality by his being “objective,” and reality, in turn, provides the “final criterion” against which to measure man’s knowledge.29 Man is to “mirror” reality, first in knowledge, then in action.30 It’s that simple.31

And when it seems as simple as that, there is little incentive to tarry over those who, for whatever reason, don’t get it right. An extreme example of the Thomistic nonchalance is Francisco Suarez’s assertion32 that any obscurity in the moral law is of only “slight importance” in determining the agent’s culpability.33 Rather than explicate the process by which darkness is dispelled and the moral law is known, Suarez tells us not to worry: “every judgment derived from the natural law is of such a character that it rests either upon self-evident principles or upon deductions necessarily drawn therefrom.”34 Ethics is made easy. By imagining these self-evidences as little nuggets accessible to every man, Suarez and similar “Thomists” slight the difficulty of moral understanding.35 Error and its consequences never get sensitive treatment, because obscurity is written out of the moral law, by fiat.

29 Pieper, Living the Truth 177.
30 Id. 146.
31 Gratian encapsulates the traditional view: “ignorantia juris naturalis omnibus adulti damnabilis est.” See Mahoney, The Making of Moral Theology, 193-94 n.60.
32 Perhaps fueled, ironically enough, by a creeping insecurity as to the knowability of being.
33 Francisco Suarez, Tractatus de Legibus, II.XIV.6.
34 Id. at II.XIII.3
35 Conceptualism of this sort is, of course, one of the errors Lonergan was most eager to annihilate. See, e.g., Bernard Lonergan, Insight: A Study of Human Understanding (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1958), 604.
Not surprisingly, it is the one who most appreciated the “slow, if not ... bloody entrance”\textsuperscript{36} of knowledge, who pauses to appreciate those who do their best. Aristotle and Aquinas had their reasons for condemning or merely excusing good faith bunglers. The question will be why Lonergan, who was “reach[ing] up to the mind of Aquinas,”\textsuperscript{37} does not share them. The answer will be that, for Lonergan, the “final criterion” cannot be reality itself but rather the authenticity of the personal search for that reality.

* * * * * *

Lonergan starts, as you know, with the problem of knowledge and ignorance, and he attacks it, as he does every other problem, on the most fundamental level. Lonergan gives no quarter to the metaphors and images that ordinarily do service as a theory of knowledge and being. The real is not what is out there waiting to be seen and mirrored in the mind’s eye. There are no intuitions of being. Life is not like the 	extit{Posterior Analytics}. A person’s fundamental obligations are found neither in logic nor in things nor in concepts nor in nuggets of self-evidence. They emerge, rather, from the exigencies of the unchosen human drive for understanding. Questions arise; they can be evaded or answered. The eros of the mind is for answers, for being, for the real. By us the real is reached only through experience, understanding, judgment. But the eros of the mind is not satisfied, questions are not answered, the real is not reached, by just any experience, understanding, judgment. The self is transcended, immanentism is avoided, the real is reached, questions are answered, exactly when one is faithful to the specific transcendental precepts: Be attentive (when one experiences)! Be intelligent (when one understands)! Be reasonable (when one judges)! But after one has been attentive, intelligent and reasonable, it is not time to rest. We sense, inquire and understand in order to choose and to act. So, fourthly, be responsible (when you deliberate, choose, and act)! Conform your choice and action to your knowing; choose what is of real value. The only four acts that Lonergan enjoins us to perform are the very acts our own cognitive structures already enjoin upon us: Be attentive! Be intelligent!

\begin{footnotesize}
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\textsuperscript{36} Id. at 186.
\textsuperscript{37} Id. at 748.
\end{footnotesize}
Be reasonable! Be responsible! These, "the transcendental precepts," are the law of the human spirit. They, and they alone, are rock.  

In the shift from concepts to transcendental precepts, we meet the possibility of equality. The law no longer is a code, a series of deductions, or a congeries of inferences. The measure of men is not given over there (where I am not), but internally. To discover the four universal precepts one need not, indeed cannot scour the cosmos, nor even Sinai. One need only advert to the exigencies of the internally given demand for understanding to discover the transcendental precepts. Ignorance of the transcendental precepts, therefore, never asks to be excused for impossibility. The transcendental precepts are there, inside each of you, to be known. They are universally accessible; no angelic missionary must bear them to the isolated rustics. Often they may go unnoticed (submerged within the parade of the objects of consciousness), and often they may be evaded; but already they are there waiting for recognition, already pulling for compliance. No person with a faint flicker of rationality can plead invincible ignorance of a law that is within himself and already operative. Finally, it is plausible to hold that ignorance of the law is not involuntary and is, for that reason, unexcused.

But what of the archer's ignorance of circumstances? Lonergan has registered the observation that the moral law is internally given, but Lonergan has not internalized circumstances. This is not idealism. The world—that of facts and circumstances—lies beyond the subject, and the subject's only access to it is the data of experience. So far Aquinas would agree.

38 Because the preceding paragraph was written to summarize Lonergan for the Lonergan experts, those less familiar with Lonergan may find it opaque. For our fuller exposition of Lonergan's basic stance, see Coons and Brennan, "Nature and Human Equality," supra. As will be apparent, the preceding paragraph's contents are drawn broadly from Insight, Understanding and Being, chapters 1 and 2 of Method in Theology, and Lonergan's many collected essays. This summary, moreover, ignores the development of Lonergan's moral theory from Insight to Method.

39 To be sure, a code can be created. The difference, however, is that it is not the last word but, rather, ever subject to the higher law of the transcendental precepts. See "Theories of Inquiry: Responses to a Symposium," Bernard Lonergan, A Second Collection (ed. W. Ryan and B. Tyrrell) (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), 33, 39-40 (Response to Michael Novak); Insight, 595.
But the agreement ends when Lonergan concludes that the real world is not available as a sure justification—Pieper’s “final criterion”—of our knowledge. Not only are the transcendental precepts universally knowable, they are all that anyone can know with certainty. What behaviors are truly good, what one really ought to make of oneself, what is of enduring value, never are fully, finally and definitively apprehended. What is and what ought to be are never, so long as this life shall last, finally settled in an exhaustive way. The real and the good remain “emergent probabilities.”

Yet the subject’s eros for the real and the good presses for more than probability. It demands that she stay in the search. No one is exempted from the search, nor is anyone privileged to hold a casuist’s map. Owing to their different horizons, some pilgrims set out for Canterbury, others for Mecca, still others for Delphi. Despite their differences, however, all are obligated to search and are provided with a common compass. The desire for understanding presses for the real and can be satisfied only by fidelity to the transcendental precepts.40 “Emergent probability is,” in a word, “the great equalizer . . . .”41

If emergent probability equalizes humanity, it does so not by sending the whole lot of us on a picnic. Responsible living in a cosmos of emergent probability is the devotion to maximizing the real good, and this makes it indistinguishable from obtensionalism. The moral life is not a series of pitfalls to be avoided, with the prize for the clever and the lucky being supine repose upon the insipid interstices. The eros of the mind summons every subject to move to understand the real correctly and, then, to act in responsible conformity with that true understanding.

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40 “We have no choice but to follow the advice of John Henry Newman—to accept ourselves as we are and by dint of constant and persevering attention, intelligence, reasonableness, responsibility, strive to expand what is true and force out what is mistaken . . . .” Bernard Lonergan, “Merging Horizons: Systems, Common Sense, Scholarship,” Cultural Hermeneutics (Boston College) I (1973), 98.
41 Tad Dunne, Lonergan and Spirituality (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1985), 66. Ignorance, as John Mahoney astutely observed, always has provided the “major escape clause in objective morality.” (The Making of Moral Theology, 193.) The difference militated by Lonergan’s analysis, however, is that what the tradition knew as involuntary ignorance now is understood, instead, as probabilistic knowledge. Appreciated not as the (rare) exception but as the rule, hard-won probabilities, and behavior in conformity therewith, are not merely to be excused. As the apex of human achievement, not an aberration, they command reward and praise.
That final exigence for responsibility, moreover, is met not by autonomically executing a discovered plan, but by choosing a potential good (previously grasped by intelligence and affirmed by judgment) and deciding, thereby, what to make of oneself. No less than a relentless struggle is required.

There is, now, just one ultimate question about a person: viz., whether he or she has been authentic, that is, faithful to the transcendental precepts. No other standard appears; every subordinate question has been rolled into this decisive moment: have I been authentic? Where I have failed to be either attentive, intelligent, reasonable or responsible, I am unauthentic. I am guilty of basic sin.42

**Authenticity as the Perfection of Which We Are Capable**

Re-consider, now, the consequences for our hapless archer. Examined with reference to whether he has satisfied the transcendental precepts, it appears that he was attentive, intelligent, reasonable, responsible—“diligentia adhibita.” Thomas, I think, would confer every one of these accolades upon him, but, scrambling to avert the coronation, would protest that the archer is not perfected. Equality has been bought on the cheap, by changing the relevant standard from perfection to authenticity. Perhaps the archer is “authentic,” but surely he is not perfected by authentically taking the errant shot that kills an innocent. LonerGAN alone would step up and complete the job by crowning him authentic.

The shift we have been considering under the aspect of knowledge or epistemology has its metaphysical correlative in horizontal finality.43 With Aristotle, Thomas supposed that a person’s natural finality is to participate in a constellation of excellences by acts (behaviors) of a determinate kind. According to Thomas, natural moral goodness occurs

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42 Basic sin “consists, not in inadvertent failure but in advertence to and in acknowledgement of obligation that, none the less, is not followed by reasonable response.” *Insight*, 667.

exclusively in reasonable acts. The person is perfected exactly by doing those acts; where a person is prevented from doing them, as by ignorance or bad luck, the person remains unfulfilled, unhappy and unperfected. When the Thomist excuses (rather than judges "perfected") a person who involuntarily does incorrect acts, he does so exactly because the necessary "perfecting" acts simply have not been performed. The dogged struggle to perform them passes unnoticed and never appears as a candidate for the crown of perfection. There is no fund to reward best efforts; only correct deeds pay and perfect.

For Lonergan, by contrast, the performance of this or that "perfecting" act must be a subordinate moment in a larger process that is itself dispositive. Man's nature is not timelessly specified with reference to a host of good acts that he must perform if he is to be perfected. Such good acts may emerge in history, and with the passage of more time they may lose their lustre; indeed, what was once required now may be prohibited (e.g., persecution of heretics). But man's nature continues, and so does the single criterion of its satisfaction and perfection:

Now Aristotle defined a nature as an immanent principle of movement and of rest. In man such a principle is the human spirit as raising and answering questions. As raising questions, it is an immanent principle of movement. As answering questions and doing so satisfactorily, it is an immanent principle of rest.

A person must let questions occur. He must answer satisfactorily the questions that do occur to him, and to be attentive, intelligent, reasonable is to answer them satisfactorily. To avoid irresponsibility, he then must act in accord with those satisfactory answers. When a person has let questions occur, and when a person has satisfactorily produced an answer to the questions that in fact have arisen, he has

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45 Contemporary Thomists perpetuate this narrow focus upon "perfec tion" behaviors. Robert George, for example, holds that "men can make themselves moral only by freely choosing to do the right thing for the right reason." Robert George, *Making Men Moral: Public Liberty and Public Morality* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993) 1.

done the act his nature bids, and with that he is authentic, that is, perfected.47

Equality's rescue occurs in the shift from acts to persons, from deeds to the subject that does them. When behaviors are what is being evaluated (as by Aquinas), the only question is whether they are reasonable; questions about the good faith and long efforts by which they were chosen do not arise; the opportunity to commend the good faith bungler is systemically excluded. But when it is the subject that is evaluated, his struggle can appear and be gauged. Lonergan, deprived of an ahistorical super-perch from which abstractly to evaluate actions, turns to the subject and asks not about this or that act but, instead, the only question he can: has the subject been authentic? Neglected by the tradition in favor of logic and concepts and static abstractions, the subject has returned. What he makes of himself, through fidelity to the transcendental precepts, is what counts.

**Perfected but not good?**

But is the subject Lonergan praises “good?” So far we have seen that he is authentic and perfected. The tradition, as we observed at the outset, describes the (morally) perfected person as good. What of “goodness” in Lonergan’s cosmos? As to when the subject is good, Lonergan has this threatening observation:

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47 To put the matter otherwise, knowing (i.e., answering questions satisfactorily) is the ontological perfection of the subject. But this emphasis draws Lonergan to a conclusion potentially hostile to equality: “A fellow who knows something is better off than a fellow who is ignorant; an intelligent person is better off than a stupid one, and he is more likely to know something. Knowing is a perfection of the subject that knows.” (Bernard Lonergan, *Understanding and Being: The Halifax Lectures on Insight*, Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan, 5 ed. E. Morelli and M. Morelli [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990] 159). While we cannot utterly explode the possibility that by this sentence Lonergan commits himself to gnosticism, a plausible alternative reading is available: Smart people generally can have better insights—insights that lead to further understanding. But everybody—given certain assumptions about grace (see infra)—can try to advance from experience to understanding, and in the measure he does so authentically he will know more than he did before, even if his advance in knowledge is not as great as Einstein's. It's not knowing as much as Einstein but, rather, being a committed knower—instead of an obscurantist—that perfects a person.
Just as the existential subject makes himself what he is, so too he makes himself good or evil and his actions right or wrong. The good subject, the good choice, the good action are not found in isolation. For the subject is good by his good choices and good actions.48

Could it be that, after all we have seen, Lonergan nevertheless holds personal goodness hostage to correct acts in the world? Could it be that our tireless archer is authentic and perfected but not good? Lonergan is clear: "The subject is good by his good choices and good actions." The only question is what are "good" choices and actions; but even the answer to that question is clear enough: "Good" actions and choices are "right" actions and choices. The moral is inescapable: If he chooses wrong acts, the subject makes himself evil. There looms a cognitive-moral hierarchy that would prevent human equality.

The escape, which may be obvious enough, lies in Lonergan's understanding of right and good decisions and actions. They are those that intend what is intelligent and reasonable (or, if you like, what is of enduring value):

[Decisions are right not because they are the pronouncements of the individual conscience, nor because they proceed from this or that type of social mechanism for reaching common decisions, but because they are in the concrete situations intelligent and reasonable. Again, . . . decisions are wrong, not because of their private or public origin, but because they diverge from the dictates of intelligence and reasonableness.49

But where there has been divergence from intelligence and reasonableness, there has been an unauthentic subject. The question whether a decision or an act intends what is good or valuable, then, has been transmuted into the question of whether it is the fruit of an authentic subject. By fidelity to the transcendental precepts, the subject freely determines concrete instances of the good. But "[t]hat subject is not just an intellect or just a will. Though concerned with results he or she is more basically concerned with himself or herself as becoming good or evil . . ."50 And the measure of the success of that

48 "The Subject," A Second Collection, 69, 83.
49 Insight, 628.
50 "The Subject," A Second Collection, 84.
struggle is the transcendental precepts—authenticity. Authenticity is both the low road and the high road—the only way.\footnote{Another description of what a person must achieve is, as Aquinas and Josef Pieper properly would contend, “objectivity.” For our analysis of how Loevinger’s re-understanding of objectivity as the product of authenticity makes human equality possible for the first time, see Coons and Brennan, “Nature and Human Equality,” supra.}

\textit{Other DifficultiesResolved}

But if we almost have convinced you that authenticity makes human equality possible by shifting focus from acts to persons, from correspondence with static abstractions to personal fidelity to the interiorly given transcendental precepts, from what only some can do to what everyone, everywhere can do, it is time we meet two problems that we have postponed. We have been suggesting that authenticity is something everyone can achieve exactly because it is a standard that fits like a bespoke suit:\footnote{“The method, offered by our critique, asks no one to believe that he subscribes to mistaken beliefs. Without undue optimism it expects people of even moderate intelligence to be able to discover for themselves at least one mistaken belief. Again, the proposed method does not offer anyone a putative list of his mistaken beliefs; it does not even offer a list of alternative lists, as the clothing industry offers a range of ready-made suits of different sizes. Rather it aims at the perfect fit . . . .” \textit{Insight}, 717.} the measure of what I must do is what I am internally prodded to do by the unrestricted desire to know and love the real; the case of the unknown, unfulfilled obligation never arises, except in radical self-contradiction.

But though given internally, the transcendental precepts are not received and understood in splendid purity and isolation. Men live in history and are shaped—willy-nilly—by their traditions. There exist traditions that encourage authenticity. There are, however, unauthentic traditions, and some must live in them. They may purport to hasten us along the path of virtue, but instead they retard growth and impede progress. As such a tradition mistakes what counts for attentiveness, intelligence, reasonableness, or responsibility, so soon its participants will too. “If, in such eventualities, anyone were to accept a tradition as it
stands, he could hardly do more than authentically realize unauthenticity.\textsuperscript{53}

Here, according to Lonergan, the subject is nevertheless authentic, even as he critically appropriates a mass of unauthentic meaning that will further mire him down and prevent him from doing correct acts and attaining concrete goods. Human equality would be safeguarded, because the bogus tradition in which one woke up and necessarily operated would have no capacity to prevent one's being personally authentic. Still, whether this is Lonergan's judgment again is not so clear. Elsewhere he repeats the sentence quoted above and then goes on ominously:

\begin{quote}
[If one takes the [unauthentic] tradition as it currently exists for one's standard, one can do no more than authentically realize unauthenticity. Such is unauthenticity in its tragic form, for then the best of intentions combine with a hidden decay.\textsuperscript{54}
\end{quote}

Could it be that Lonergan holds women and men that authentically appropriate unauthentic traditions truly "tragic"—with Oedipus, moral failures despite their attentiveness, intelligence, reasonableness, responsibility? Were Lonergan to hold men and women to a standard higher than personal authenticity he would abandon his own moral epistemology. He would require them—on pain of moral obliteration—to step outside and get a clear look at how the real ought to be; this is exactly what he has told us is impossible.

Lonergan has not been seduced. He keeps himself and the rest of us in the universal struggle that makes equality possible:

\begin{quote}
So it is that commonly men have to pay a double price for their personal attainment of authenticity. Not only have they to undo their own lapses from righteousness but more grievously they have to discover what is wrong in the tradition they have inherited and they have to struggle against the massive undertow it sets up.\textsuperscript{55}
\end{quote}

To discover "what is wrong" in a tradition could be a tall order, but presumably the requirement is not one of exhaustiveness, since in any case, all we can know is whether we have been faithful to the

\textsuperscript{53} "Pope John's Intention," \textit{A Third Collection}, 224, 233.

\textsuperscript{54} "Religious Experience," \textit{A Third Collection}, 113, 121 (emphasis added).

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid.
transcendental precepts. To struggle against the massive undertow of a
tradition is an act we are all, plausibly enough, capable of performing.
But those who have spent time in the sea (had Lonergan?) will recognize
that as mightily as one may swim against an undertow, one sometimes
finds oneself carried, exhausted, to the distant end of the shore (or even
goals—for all their novelty—will bear the imprint of their past.
outside the sea). Equality insists that where one ends up on the beach of life
is not the moral question, and in the end Lonergan comes back to affirm,
is the struggle of authenticity against unauthenticity, and that struggle
sufficient to equality, that what morally matters is the struggle:

However much we may react, criticize, endeavor to bring about
change, the change itself will always be just another stage of the
tradition, at most a new era, but one whose motives and whose
The issue is not tradition, for as long as men survive there will be
tradition, rich or impoverished, good and evil. The issue is the
part and parcel of the human condition, of our being animals
yet equipped to live not just by instinct but principally by the
symbols by which we express our self-understanding and our
commitments.66

The intonation of the note of tragedy, then, may have been improvident.
In the end Lonergan seems satisfied to observe that we are all on the
inside of being, that we live historically, that all we can do is to insist
upon our personal authenticity and hope that it will stave off or reverse
the decline of tradition.67

This brings us to the second problem we postponed. Human
equality, as we interpret it, requires a double equality, viz., 1) the
common possession of the capacity for moral perfection that is 2)
uniform among all rational persons in its possession. Lonergan's
morality of authenticity is an appealing candidate for that double

66 Id. at 122.
67 See, e.g., “Dialectic of Authority,” A Third Collection, 5, 9: “The fruit of
unauthenticity is decline. . . . There is no use appealing to the sense of responsibility
of irresponsible people, to the reasonableness of people that are unreasonable, to the
intelligence of people that have chosen to be obtuse, to the attention of people that
attend only to their grievances. Again, the objective situation brought about by
sustained unauthenticity is not an intelligible situation. It is the product of
inattention, obtuseness, unreasonableness, irresponsibility. It is an objective surd,
the realization of the irrational.”
equality, because authenticity is an act all of us at least plausibly are uniformly capable of. But whether such uniformity is a fact, we cannot know. The potentially disqualifying forces are legion. One is particularly threatening. So far we have concentrated on the usual route to goodness, perfection and authenticity—the route from experience right up to responsibility. But, of course, there is the unusual route where God, to whom man already is connected in the relation of vertical finality, floods man’s heart with the grace of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 5:5); then man falls in love with God and neighbor and learns—in the reverse order—to be responsible, reasonable, intelligent, attentive. That flood of grace, says Lonergan, “[m]ight awaken such striving and groaning as would announce a new and higher birth . . . .”58

The question for human equality, then, is whether those whose hearts are flooded certainly have a relative advantage. On that question we invite the comments of the experts on Lonergan’s theory of grace, but we cannot resist two observations: First. Lonergan portends a universalist response when he observes, in the context of I Tim. 2:4 (the inclusivist’s locus classicus), that the gift of charity may be how the Christian accounts for the religious experience of “any and all men.”59 Second. Lonergan urges that, “It could be the grace that God offers all men, . . . that explains how those that never heard the gospel can be saved.”60

The end of the day has come and, with it, the need to conclude. The jury (of Lonergan experts!) will have to decide whether Lonergan really has everyone equally equipped, by best efforts, to snatch the moral crown from the hands of the gnostic exclusivists who would reserve it for Martha Nussbaum’s lucky elite. Be the details as they may, Lonergan clearly has brought us beyond the disqualifying trichotomy of acts that perfect, damn or excuse. He did so by looking to the subject and his struggle to know, and by asking not whether he has gotten the answers right, but whether he is following the method universally necessary and sufficient to human authenticity. By taking the longer view of the man and the method by which he morally advances, rather than the occasional snapshot of this deed or that misdeed, Lonergan shifts focus

60 Method in Theology, 278; see also 282-83.
from "interim results" to the ongoing process of self-correction and conversion. For Lonergan, the person who is all that he should be is not one who has been converted, but one always on the way: "The authentic Christian strives for the fullness of . . . conversion." This wide-angle view of persons finally makes equality possible, for instead of acts abstracted from people and from their struggles, at last we behold the very people who might be moral equals.

So next time you find yourself in the wilds of Maine, about to launch a shaft, take heart. If you've been attentive, intelligent, reasonable and responsible—"diligentia adhibita"—but still skewer some passerby, your perfection shall remain unsullied. But when the sheriff allows you one call, dial some other lawyer, as neither authenticity nor obtension is a recognized legal defense, and that is as it should be.

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61 See Method, 288-87. See also Insight, 729-30
62 "Unity and Plurality," A Third Collection, 239, 248. "[C]onversion is from unauthenticity to authenticity. It is total surrender to the demands of the human spirit: be attentive, be intelligent, be reasonable, be responsible, be in love." Method, 268.
63 "Freely the subject makes himself what he is; never in this life is the making finished; always it is still in process, always it is a precarious achievement that can slip and fall and shatter. Concern with subjectivity, then, is concern with the intimate reality of man. It is concern, not with the universal truths that hold whether a man is asleep or awake, not with the interplay of natural factors and determinants, but with the perpetual novelty of self-constitution, of free choices making the chooser what he is." "Cognitive Structure," Collection, 205, 220.