Hume's "Is-Ought" Problem: a solution

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David Hume first raised the "is-ought" problem in this famous passage from *A Treatise of Human Nature:*

> I cannot forbear adding to these reasonings an observation which may, perhaps, be found of some importance. In every system of morality, which I have hitherto met with, I have always remark'd, that the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary way of reasoning, and establishes the being of a God, or makes observations concerning human affairs, when of a sudden I am surpriz'd to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, is and is not, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an ought, or an ought not. This change is imperceptible, but is, however, of the last consequence. For as this ought, or ought not, expresses some new relation or affirmation 'tis necessary that it shou'd be observ'd and explain'd, and at the same time that a reason should be given for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it. But as authors do not commonly use this precaution, I shall presume to recommend it to the readers; and am persuaded, that this small attention wou'd subvert all the vulgar system of morality, and let us see, that the distinction of vice and virtue is not founded on the relations of objects, nor is perceived by reason.[1]

Behind Hume's quietly persuasive comments lie at least two questionable assumptions. The first is that the way language is ordinarily used is wrong; rather than take note, in an empirical fashion, of how moral discourse is normally conducted, Hume chooses to be negatively prescriptive in respect of "all the vulgar system of morality". This is ironic in so far as it indicates a performative contradiction in Hume: that is, a contradiction between what he is saying and what he is, in effect, doing. For the clear implication of what Hume "recommends to the readers", based on his empirical observations of how moral discussion is normally conducted, is that we *ought not* to talk in certain ways! A clear *ought not* can be inferred from Hume's empirical observations on the way *ought not* propositions are apt to follow on the

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heels of *is* and *is not* propositions, with the result that he is clearly failing to follow his own recommendation. The second assumption—and in technical terms the more telling—is that the transition from *is* to *ought* is or could only be in the form of a "deduction"; such a deduction he argues to be erroneous since there is no way in which "this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it". As a statement of the restrictions imposed by logic, Hume's comments here are unassailable, for in logic we can only take from our premises what is already there, and there is no way in which *ought* is implied by or entailed in *is*. What is open to question is Hume's assumption that the relationship obtaining between *is* propositions and *ought* propositions in ordinary moral discussion is or is intended to be one of logical deduction. It is this second assumption that I wish to address in this article. The first assumption has been challenged by Wittgenstein who encourages us to test the meaning of words in the contexts which are their usual homes. The second—technical—assumption has been challenged most powerfully by Bernard Lonergan through his notions of sublation and the four levels of consciousness.

The best way of grasping what Lonergan means by the terms "sublation" and "four levels" is to see the process by which we arrive at a value judgment as comprising four distinct but related stages of conscious operations. The first three of these stages are the steps by which we reach cognitional judgments or knowledge claims—experience, understanding and judgment[2]. The fourth stage—the stage at which we arrive at value judgments—and hence moral judgments—was a position Lonergan arrived at some time after writing *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* (published 1957) and before completing *Method in Theology* (published 1972). Lonergan himself did not address the "is-ought" problem directly in his later writings but he indicated in interviews that he was aware that his notion of four levels was pertinent to the problem. It is my belief that Lonergan's notion of the four levels of consciousness and how they relate to each other is a major contribution to the debate that has surrounded the "is-ought" and the related fact/value controversy since the Enlightenment. What then does Lonergan mean by the four levels of consciousness'?

Lonergan contends that as human beings we operate naturally and spontaneously at four different levels of consciousness. The first level is the experiential or empirical level, the level of conscious awareness we enjoy through our senses—through hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting, touching. So long as we remain at this level, our minds are relaxed, uninquiring, quite limp, reduced to what the poet Marvell describes as "a green thought in a green shade". At this level we are in what

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Lonergan describes as the "lotus land" of sensation, simply enjoying the flux of sensory impressions, without a care in the world. This dreamlike mode of consciousness is interrupted when something catches our attention and we ask What is that? With the arrival of a question, our mind is aroused, it stirs itself and begins to probe. No longer limp and at rest, the subject has begun to inquire, to exercise intelligence, as her mind is trained on a question and straining for an answer. What should be noted here is that the transition from the first, experiential, level of consciousness to the second, intellectual, level is effected by a question. It is the question that has raised the level of my conscious awareness; I have, so to speak, passed through the gate of the question to a higher level of consciousness—"higher" because with each new kind of question there is a higher degree of personal involvement. Having embarked on the pursuit of an answer to the question, for instance, I cannot just spin ideas and hypotheses out of the air but am obliged to measure my ideas and suggested meanings against the data of sense—against the available evidence. This requires an exercise of my personal freedom not required at the level of mere sensory experience, where what I see or hear depends on the happenstance of what falls within my range of vision or comes within earshot. The concentration and control required by intellectual effort, as we attempt to find meaning in the data of sense, will be recognised by most of us.

Should an answer to the question What is that? be forthcoming—if I form a hypothesis or guess—another question arises, Is that so? This new question raises a whole new set of considerations, looking for confirmation or disconfirmation of the hypothesis or guess. This question raises the stakes, putting me onto a higher level of consciousness, for it seeks a definite affirmation or negation, a clear Yes or No—and, as any lawyer will tell you, it is to assume greater responsibility to say that something is definitely the case or is definitely not the case than to say *it might* be the case but then again *it might not* be the case. To move from the merely hypothetical level of consciousness to the level of making ontological claims about the universe is to heighten one's personal involvement because it requires one to take a stand on what is or is not so. Once more, the transition from one level of consciousness to the next is effected by the question: Is that so? Can this hypothesis be verified?

But besides questions for understanding (What? Why? When? How? Where? How often?) and questions for reflection (Is that so? Is it probably so?) leading to verification and a knowledge claim, there is another type of question, the question that is preparatory to action: Is that right? Is it good? How good is it? These are the questions that shift

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the subject from the third to the fourth level of consciousness. With the arrival of value questions, it is no longer a matter of taking a stand on a knowledge claim; it is a matter also of determining what *I stand for*. Lonergan sees this fourth level of consciousness as comprising evaluation, choice, decision and action. The heart of the fourth level is action since the other operations of evaluation, choice and so on are the means by which the subject determines which action would be most appropriate in the circumstances. The fourth level is characterised as a level of deliberation, freedom and responsibility and because of the deep level of involvement of the subject, Lonergan considers that at this level consciousness becomes self-conscious. Consciousness at this level becomes conscience[3].

These are the four levels of consciousness depicted by Lonergan. Each level builds on and subsumes—or, to use the technical term, *sublates*—the previous level or levels. The subject passes beyond the previous level through the question gate and enters the new, higher level. It is the question that introduces and *governs* the new level. For example, because of the value question asked at the fourth level, the *facts* established at the third level become standards by which an answer will be formed at the fourth level—the athlete's times taken to complete a series of races, for instance, will become the *standards* by which he or she is assessed against the performances of other athletes. This in turn will determine which athlete will be selected, say, for a country's olympic team, and so on. By means of the value question, facts are transmuted into standards and become relevant to the decision that needs to be made to bring a specific course of action about. The *absolute quality* of facts is retained in the sense that at the fourth level the facts become the fixed reference points by means of which an answer to the question, Is this good? can be found or a measured response can be made to the question, How good is it? For unlike facts, the issue of value is not an either-or affair; values admit of degrees and value judgments have an elastic quality that factual judgments do not share. In answering the question How good?, it will be the rigid nature of the facts-as-standards at the fourth level that will provide the measuring rod by which a precise answer will be determined.

The athlete's recorded times may be such as to put him in a class by himself, away out in front, or, on the other hand, they may be so close to those of other athletes as to suggest that he is only marginally better.

Questions are easily overlooked and it is noticeable, for example, that while Wittgenstein asks a lot of questions in his philosophical writings, he has very little to say about the function of questions. Lonergan places great importance on the function of questions. For the

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question determines the answer we are looking for and the answer we are looking for determines the area of discourse we find ourselves in. Hume was right in claiming that we cannot deduce *ought* from *is*; but he was wrong in assuming that the transition from *is* to *ought* could only be effected by means of a logical deduction. Hume overlooked the role of the question.

Lonergan's notion of sublation does not only hold that each succeeding level passes beyond the previous level or levels. It also holds that what is normative at each level connects up with the levels above it. So, as I have said, the absolute quality of the facts established at the level of cognitional judgment is shared by the standards by which an answer is found to the value question at the fourth level. To take another example, if someone asks if X is a 'good school', we immediately attempt to *justify* our answer—It is, or It isn't—by reference to a whole series of facts: its record of academic attainment, the proportion of pupils achieving the higher grades in national examinations, how its results in national tests at the end of the key stage compare with the national average, its record in respect of pupils' behaviour, the number of exclusions in the past three years, how many of these were permanent and how many fixed term, etc. So it is by means of reviewing a broad range of factual information—often in the form of statistical data—that answers to value questions are found. The facts of cognitional judgments provide the evidence for supporting or subverting value judgments. And this goes to show that value judgments are genuinely cognitive as well as evaluative.

Again, the binary structure of logic, which is operative at the second level of consciousness, the intellectual level,—the *yes/no* character of logic which Wittgenstein explores at some length in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*—is carried forward into succeeding higher levels: into the affirmation or negation required at the level of cognitional judgment (*It is so*, or *It is not so*) as well as into the affirmation or negation required at the level of evaluation (*It is good*, or *It is not good*). Because the lower levels are built into the higher levels, not only do value judgements have genuine cognitive content but they are also required to be logically coherent: there are truth conditions attached to value judgments and, as such, they can be meaningfully affirmed or denied. The notion of sublation is rather a beautiful notion, drawing out as it does the nature and structure of the process by which value judgments are achieved.

Lonergan claims that the four steps by which value judgments are achieved are normative—not in the sense that to go through these four steps will ensure a true value judgment but in the sense that no true

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value judgment can be reached unless these four steps are gone through. For there can be no true understanding unless the data of experience are attended to since it is the data that have to be understood (described, interpreted, explained); nor can there be true knowledge without prior understanding since knowledge is the affirmation that one's understanding is true; likewise, there can be no true value judgment without knowledge since the facts of the matter will provide the standards by means of which a true value judgment can be made. The point of any value judgment is to determine whether a certain designated end is being achieved or will be achieved by the entity in question. So to say that something is a good chair is to say that it serves its purpose as a chair; to say that something is a good watch or clock is to say that something serves well the end of telling the time. It is because Hume—and in this he set the fashion for generations to come, provoking a reaction from the later Wittgenstein—developed a blind spot for propositions other than those stating facts or logical deductions that he could find no place for *ought* in normal discourse. *Ought* statements do not 'fit in' to statements of fact but they do 'fit in' to statements about ends; that is their natural home and habitat.

Because the four-stage process by which true value judgments are achieved is invariant and normative, Lonergan calls it *transcendental* and the method by which we achieve such judgments he calls *transcendental method*. It is a structure or process of thinking and reasoning that we follow spontaneously and irresistibly when working out practical problems or dealing with everyday situations. (Because this is the case, Lonergan's solution to the problem posed by Hume has much in common with Wittgenstein's. But Wittgenstein recommended that we pay close attention to how words are actually used in a variety of contexts. Lonergan's solution is the more technical, *explaining why* Hume's assumptions regarding the relation between *is* and *ought* are wrong.) Another way of understanding *transcendental* in Lonergan's use of the term, which differs from Kant's, is to say that a denial of this structure of knowing and valuing is tantamount to a performative contradiction. For to support such a denial, the denier would have to appeal to fresh data or propose a new interpretation of the data; would be required also to demonstrate that his interpretation was true and in this way justify his value judgment that we *ought not* to uphold the notion of transcendental method. In other words, the denier would have to appeal to the very process he is denying in order to uphold his denial, so that what he was doing would be in contradiction with what he was saying.

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Moral judgments

Having explored the nature and structure of value judgments, I shall now attempt to say something about the distinctive nature of moral judgments. My argument will be that moral judgments are a species of value judgment, that they have the same structure as value judgments but differ from mere value judgments in respect of their content. As it happens, there is an interesting passage in Wittgenstein which brings out well the difference between moral and other types of value judgment:

> If for instance I say that this is a good chair this means that the chair serves a certain predetermined purpose and the word good here has only meaning in so far as this purpose has been previously fixed upon. In fact the word good in the relative sense simply means coming up to a certain predetermined standard.—and if I say that this is the right road I mean it is the right road relative to a certain goal. Used in this way these expressions don't present any difficulty... But this is not how Ethics uses them. Supposing that I could play tennis and one of you saw me playing and said, "Well you play pretty badly" and suppose I answered "I know I'm playing badly but I don't want to play any better", all the other man could say would be "Ah then that's all right". But suppose I had told one of you a preposterous lie and he came up to me and said, "You're behaving like a beast" and then I were to say "I know I behave badly, but then I don't want to behave any better," could he then say "Ah, then that's all right"? Certainly not; he would say "Well you ought to want to behave better". Here you have an absolute judgment of value, whereas the first instance was one of relative judgment'.

Wittgenstein at the time he gave this lecture (around 1930) still held the view he had expressed in the *Tractatus*, that ethical judgments take us 'beyond significant language'. Nevertheless, the passage does tell us something about the distinctiveness of moral judgements. Whereas in judgments such as 'This is a good chair' or 'This is a good clock', the goodness in question is relative to an end we have *chosen* to adopt—and may well be quite objective relative to that end—in the case of human happiness or wellbeing, I shall argue, there can be no question of choice. There is simply no choice about it. Human happiness or wellbeing or flourishing or prosperity or thriving—I use all these terms collectively in order to convey Aristotle's notion of *eudaimonia*—is an absolute end, acting as a fixed standard, one we cannot play around with. It stands above all human conventions. Why this is the case now needs to be explained.

If we accept that the structure of value judgments is transcendental

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in the way previously explained, then we have to accept the consequence that this structure is inviolable. To violate the structure is to violate the basic set of norms to which appeal can be made to justify any value judgment whatsoever. The structure of value judgments relates to evaluating as a process, the process we go through in order to reach a true value judgment. But this transcendental structure is not limited to cognitional and evaluative process. For by relating the steps we go through with the four levels of consciousness, Lonergan has linked his position with the structure of human personality. Consciousness is that which constitutes human personality: we are persons by virtue of the consciousness we enjoy. While it may be the case that in the order of knowing we come to grasp the structure of cognitional and evaluative process before grasping the structure of the human personality, in the order of being it is the fact that a person's nature is transcendental that forms the basis for transcendental method. *Esse* precedes *agere*: *it is because we are as we are that we can act as we do*. That is the crucial step in my argument: from transcendental method to the structure of human personality, from process to person.

From this it follows that human personality constitutes a fixed and absolute standard in the realm of moral behaviour. For to violate the norms of the human person is equivalent to violating the norms of transcendental method and that, we have seen, is always an illegitimate move, indeed one that is involved in self-contradiction. A similar contradiction is incurred by any attempt to dispute the fact that the integrity and prosperity of the human person constitute an absolute standard of right conduct. For any moral argument against human wellbeing would have to propose some advantage to humankind as grounds for changing or abolishing this standard. No reason could be proposed for changing the standard that did not appeal to the standard in justification for the proposed change. It is because they are concrete realizations of transcendental method that persons are special, ends in themselves, free agents, what Lonergan terms 'ontic values'. Moral judgments are moral precisely because they are tied to the end of human wellbeing, human flourishing, human prosperity. For this reason, moral judgments stand at the apex of the various conscious operations we perform as human beings, for their subject matter and their standard is humanity itself. In moral discourse, it is our humanity that is at stake.

Some very interesting consequences follow from this definition of the human person by reference to the structure of transcendental method. The subject who makes a moral judgment is also constituted as a person by the norms inherent in the conscious operations she or he performs when making the judgment. It follows that in being true to

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these norms, the person making the judgment or taking the action is being true to herself or himself. In other words, when I make a true moral judgment, I am fitting myself to myself, I am making me whole, I am upholding and promoting my human integrity. By contrast, when I knowingly make a morally wrong judgment, the norms of transcendental method are violated and by that very act I am being untrue to myself and I fail to retain my human integrity. There is a complete coincidence of impact made by moral judgments on myself and on the others whose wellbeing is the content or the subject matter of the moral judgment. In being true to the humanity of others, I uphold my own; in betraying their humanity, I betray my own.

Another consequence of the absolute standard of human flourishing is that moral judgments require a quite peculiar self-transcendence on the part of the subject or agent, for they cannot be in the subject's or anyone else's self-interest. Unlike other value judgments, where I often decide that something is good because it serves my interests or the interests of my company or my friends, moral judgments stand above all partial self-interests. The reason is the absolute standard of human wellbeing. Therein lies the reason for Lonergan's constant repetition in his later writings that the subject's self-transcendence is the criterion of objectivity in moral judgments[5].

Bernard Lonergan did not apply his notion of transcendental method to moral philosophy in any systematic way. But I believe his position can be developed along the lines I have indicated to provide the basis for a natural law approach to moral argument. In a recent well argued critique of John Finnis's argument in his book *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, Mark Discher finds that, in the final analysis, Finnis cannot get natural rights for everyone. He pinpoints Finnis's shortcomings as stemming from the fact that he lacks "an absolute conception of the value of persons which entails that they absolutely be granted the positive, benefit rights"[6]. I believe that such an absolute conception of the value of persons can be worked out on the basis of Lonergan's transcendental method and, what is more, that a basis for a philosophy of rights and obligations can be found in this notion of person. But to develop that thesis is beyond the scope of this article, which must confine itself to demonstrating just how effectively Lonergan answers Hume.

Intuitionism, emotivism and prescriptivism were all approaches taken to moral philosophy in this century in mainstream British philosophy, with implications for the status and nature of moral propositions. It would be true to say that each was developed in view of the perceived difficulties surrounding the interface between judgments

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of fact and judgments of value, first voiced by Hume. It has been my argument in this article that Lonergan's notion of the four levels of consciousness together with his notion of sublation go a long way towards dispelling these long-standing difficulties. In so doing (I believe it could be argued) they provide a basis for a natural law approach to morality in which moral judgments could be accepted as both objective and as saying something real about the world.

1 David Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, Selby-Bigge edition, p 467–70.
2 I wrote about these previously in *New Blackfriars*. See 'Lonergan and Hume – Epistemology' in *New Blackfriars* March and May 1982.
3 For a clear account by Lonergan of the notion of the four levels of consciousness, see his article 'The Subject' in *A Second Collection*, Darton, Longman and Todd 1972, p 69 f.
4 L. Wittgenstein, 'Lecture on Ethics', edited by Rush Rhees, in *Philosophy Today*, edited by Jerry Hall, Macmillan 1968.
5 See for example, *Method in Theology* by Bernard Lonergan SJ, Darton, Longman and Todd 1972. p 121–2.
6 'Does Finnis get natural rights for everyone?' by Mark R. Discher, *New Blackfriars* January 1999, p 29.

Fides et Ratio: A Response to John Webster

Thomas Weinandy

Professor John Webster is not only a colleague and friend he is also someone with whom I have a good deal of theological affinity. Moreover, and more importantly, while he is an Anglican and I a Roman Catholic, we, on fundamental Christian doctrine, share a common faith. Because of this I read with special interest his article '"Fides et Ratio", articles 64–79' (*New Blackfriars*, Vol. 81 No. 948 (2000) 66–76). I knew that he might be critical of the encyclical at certain points, as would be expected from any serious thinking theologian examining a particular piece of work. What I did not expect was his almost complete lack of sympathy towards the encyclical's aim, his almost thorough disagreement with its approach, arguments, and judgements, as well as at times, his dismissive attitude toward the encyclical, which on occasion, so it appeared to me, to border on the mocking. In response to Professor

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