

# Bernard Lonergan on Work

[Prof. Richard M. Liddy](#)

Seton Hall University  
South Orange, NJ 07079

[This paper is not complete, but perhaps the reader can find in it some of the categories from Bernard Lonergan's writings relevant to analyzing and understanding the worlds of human work.]

Several years ago I came across a book entitled **Moral Mazes: The World of Corporate Managers** by an industrial sociologist named Robert Jackall. In researching his book Jackall had joined the staff of several corporations for a period of time. In each case he observed the workings of the company and interviewed numerous people at various levels in the company's hierarchy. One business person I know described it as the most accurate description of corporate culture he had ever encountered.

And what were Jackall's findings? As I read his book, I remember being overwhelmed by the depressing picture he painted. The dog-eat-dog environment. The lack of concern for workers' safety. The bottom-line mentality militating against the on-going welfare of the company and the broader society. The palace intrigues to the neglect of concern for genuine talent. Even the consultants hired to help managers and workers in their own lives and in their contribution to the company were suspect, for they were hired by management and therefore could not be expected to be objective.

As I read this book I could only think of the Gospel imperative to "repent." In the world studied by Jackall there was an obvious need for basic changes, changes on the part of management, governing boards, middle management, on-line workers. What I did not find strongly outlined in Jackall's book was the positive side of the Gospel message: "the kingdom of God is at hand." If the underlying message of his book was the need for corporate culture to repent, what I found lacking were good reasons "why?" Why change corporate culture? What are our goals as we build our worlds of business, commerce and finance? Where are we heading? What is the point of "work" in general and the redemption of meaningless or skewered work?

The Christian tradition has at various times and in various cultures attempted to answer these questions. Max Weber wrote of the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism, finding in early Calvinism a powerful force for the building of the modern world. Various Roman Catholic spiritualities, such as that of St. Frances de Sales in the **Introduction to the Devout Life**, have sought to give meaning to the concrete daily lives of ordinary workers. More recently, in this century, Teilhard de Chardin painted a theological and

poetic picture of work as "building the earth" and thus hastening our common thrust toward the Omega Point of genuine community and love.

Now I would suggest that a major challenge for Christians today is to bring together these various viewpoints: that is, to integrate into an overall framework these worlds of exigent scientific and human studies, exemplified by Jackall's book, and the worlds of Christian theology and spirituality. All this in order to shed light on the often stagnant, sometimes creative, lives of workers today. To rise to this challenge one must know some methodology. One needs to know the methodologies of the contemporary scholarly disciplines that study work and one needs to know a refined theology capable of drawing the best from the Christian past in order to dialogue with such contemporary human studies. In other words, one must know the Christian tradition on work and one needs to know how to translate that tradition into words amenable to the scholarly readers of such works as Robert Jackall's.

It is for this reason that Bernard Lonergan spent himself creating a set of mediating models that could serve as a bridge between those who study in a scientific and scholarly way the world of work and those who are rooted in Christian theology. By the help of these mediating perspectives people on either side of this bridge could at least begin the walk towards one another. In this way all of these actors would contribute to clarifying and hopefully ameliorating the working lives of people.

Bernard Lonergan was a Canadian Jesuit whose life spanned a good part of the twentieth century, 1904 to 1984. I had the good fortune to have him as my teacher in Rome in the early 1960s. One could say that the major aim of all of Lonergan's work was to create a basic set of methodological perspectives that could serve as a bridge connecting the sciences and scholarly disciplines with Christian theology. His major philosophical work was **Insight: A Study of Human Understanding** (1957) in which he analyzed the structure of human consciousness operative in the concrete activities of scientists and people of common sense, and the metaphysical view of the universe flowing from that structure of consciousness. In 1972 he published **Method in Theology** in which he analyzed the structure of historical knowledge and how Christian theology can emerge from such knowledge. It is most interesting to note that at the end of his life he worked on a manuscript on economic knowledge, **An Essay in Circulation Analysis**, a text due to be published this year among his "Collected Works" by the University of Toronto Press. Slowly his own work is having an influence as "Lonergan Centers" exist in numerous countries in the world.

Ultimately, from a Christian point of view, Lonergan's aim was to show how belief in Christ, God incarnate, and the theology flowing from that belief, could have transforming implications both for the sciences and the scholarly disciplines and for the praxis that flows from and influences those sciences and scholarly disciplines. If the Gospel is to have an influence on the world of human work, one needs a theological methodology capable of taking the best human studies on work and integrating into them Christian theological perspectives and principles.

Loneragan's first step in creating this methodological bridge between the concrete practice of the disciplines and Christian theology was to point out the "normativeness" of the human spirit. There is within us a drive to understand, to get things right, to seek in our actions the good and the valuable, to love. This built-in quest of the human spirit finds expression in human development and in the creation of human communities. This built-in drive of the human spirit finds expression in human creations, among them the creations of human work that enhance our lives and raise our standard of living. Such developments and creations of human intelligence we speak of as progress.

On the other hand this normativeness of the human spirit - for meaning, for truth, for goodness - finds itself in conflict with the short-cuts we tend to take, with our own tendencies to individual and group selfishness, and with our tendency to throw in the towel and to cease questioning and searching. Such compromises also find expression in "the work of our hands:" in our families, our cities and states, our nations and our world. Such failures we speak of as decline. Jackall's book made such a profound impression on me precisely because it outlined our massive communal failures. As Amartya Sen, the recent Nobel laureate in economics, said "the greatest relevance of ideas of justice lies in the identification of patent injustice..."

Human progress, marred by human decline, points to the need for redemption, the third of the three "vectors" that Lonergan claims are needed to analyze any concrete human situation. His own writings, motivated by his own deep religious faith, highlight this need for human redemption, not as a leap beyond reason, but as a leap to reason: to obeying our internal drive for meaning, for truth and for genuine love.

Loneragan's fundamental principle, then, is to point very specifically to the structure of our own consciousness as we pay attention to our own experience, seek to understand, reflect on the truth of our understanding and on the values guiding our decisions and actions. Lonergan would have each one of us - the scientist, the scholar, the theologian - reflect on this normative structure within themselves, come to understand this structure and personally appropriate it in such a way that it has an influence on our lives and our decisions. For it is this normative structure that sends us beyond ourselves to forming communities of meaning, truth and love with others. It is this normative structure that grounds our dissatisfaction with meaninglessness in our personal and communal lives, the lack of truth, the falsehood, the lack of love. It is the graced healing of this normative structure that leads us to seek to bring good out of evil and to initiate new creative ventures in the midst of the debris of our failures. It is the graced healing of this normative structure of our being that leads to good and wholesome work.

In what follows we will outline four methodological perspectives that Lonergan brings to thinking about the world of work: first work as a practical pattern of experience; secondly, work as creating worlds; thirdly, work and the dynamics of history; and fourthly, a graced vision of work.

## **1. Work as a Practical Pattern of Experience**

Now one of the things about work is that it is not the whole of life. There is such a thing as sitting on the beach soaking up the sun's rays without a care in the world. There is play. There is the experience of beauty. There is the fascinating and challenging area we call human relationships. There is the love of learning, not for any immediately practical purpose but solely for the love of it. Finally, there is prayer, ultimately not a doing but a receiving from the One who wants to love us. What we normally mean by work is different from all of these other activities and the worker who would forget these other dimensions of life we call a workaholic. At the same time, development in any of these other areas of life is likely to have a spill-over and enriching effect on the quality of our work. Any adequate understanding of work has to link it to all these other key patterns of being human.

Now in *Insight* Lonergan sets human work within the context of these other dimensions of human living. He begins with exercises in what he calls the intellectual pattern of experience: that is, the pattern of human experiencing in which we seek to understand things in their universal relationships to other things. His point is to understand first the intellectual pattern of experience as evidenced in the sciences and, from that broad basis, to understand what happens in our ordinary common sense modes of operating. For without such a wide explanatory perspective, you can be involved in ordinary living, but you are very hard-pressed to say what such ordinary living is. You can be working, but you would be hard-pressed to say exactly what you are doing when you are working. In other words, you need a broader viewpoint in order to say what a narrower viewpoint is all about.

Against this background Lonergan treats of the various patterns of human experience. There is, for example, the biological pattern exemplified by the animal's stimulus-response activities of fight or flight. There is also the aesthetic pattern in which we become fascinated by and taken up by the beauty of purely experiential patterns, the melody in the musical sounds, the colors in the trees or the sunset. Next there is the intellectual pattern of experience, mentioned above, characterized by the pure desire to know, the wonder that Aristotle called the source of all science and philosophy. Next there is the dramatic pattern of experience in which we play our role, skillfully or not, in the drama of life. This pattern is highly influenced by the presence of other people in our lives, mothers and fathers, men and women. That presence conditions our particular "style" as we live out our lives. Elsewhere, Lonergan speaks of the mystical pattern of experience, the experience of falling in love with and being in love with God.

Finally, there is the practical pattern of experience, the pattern concerned with building the world. It is this pattern, oriented toward concrete decision-making and the formation of objective human worlds, that is the subject of chapter seven of Lonergan's *Insight*.

## **2. Work as Creating Worlds**

Through the practical pattern of consciousness we create worlds: the worlds of technology and economics, the worlds of politics and education, the worlds of families and religions. The orientation of the practical pattern of experience is not towards knowledge for its own sake, but towards using knowledge in making and doing.

In an article written in the early 1960s Lonergan describes this practical and creative character of human common sense.

The pioneers in this country found shore and heartland, mountains and plains, but they have covered it with cities, laced it with roads, exploited it with their industries, till the world man has made stands between us and a prior world of nature. Yet the whole of that added, manmade, artificial world is the cumulative, now planned, now chaotic product of human acts of meaning.

Or, to give my own example. As I walk down 35th Street in Washington, D.C., the Georgetown area, virtually everything I notice is the creation of human minds. There is, of course, the material substrate: the stones that went into making the streets, the wood of the houses, the very dirt and plants of the gardens. But all of these have been shaped and informed by human minds, hearts and wills to make up a street integral to the Georgetown area: houses that are homes to many people, cars that bring people in and out of this quaint old area, schools where students learn, businesses where people work, etc.

And as I walk along, I consider the streets themselves. They were built by a unified group of construction workers carrying out a very specific plan: each worker doing his part but all together contributing to a common plan and a common outcome. And these streets resulted not just from the labor of the individual workers who built them, but from a plan conceived in particular minds, communicated to other minds and, by persuasion, adopted as a common goal of politicians, business persons, manual laborers. A number of influential people agreed upon this plan: city planners, treasurers, bankers, politicians, engineers - all cooperating, all carrying out in one way or another the commonly agreed upon plan. Such plans and the streets that flow from them are incarnations of insights, the concretions of ideas that make up what Lonergan calls a certain overall "good of order:" that is, the concrete intelligible functioning that provides a recurrent set of particular goods for a great number of people at the cost of some particular discipline on the part of individuals.

In **Insight** Lonergan spells out this development from human needs to technology, and to the division of labor that is the economic system; and from the economy to the political system, a specialization of intelligence that consists in persuading the different parts of the system to cooperate with each other for the good of the whole. Most people get ideas, but the ideas reside in different minds, and the different minds do not quite agree.

Of itself, communication only reveals the disparity. What is wanted is persuasion, and the most effective persuader becomes a leader, a chief, a politician, a statesman.

The fact of differing visions of the good of order brings to light a deeper dimension in the human creation of these various worlds, and that is the notion of value. "Little children differ over particular goods; grown-ups differ over the good of order." What is the best economic and political system for working people: capitalism or communism? A Republican vision of government or a Democratic one? A great deal of government intervention or as little as possible? What is the best type of management system in a company? the best type of leadership? Authoritarian or participatory? These questions only highlight the scale of values that people carry within them. In creating our worlds of work we do so according to these scales of values.

The important point in all this is that our worlds of work are created by human acts of meaning: insights, judgments and decisions that affect the creation of things in our world, but that also affect ourselves. Such acts of meaning involve an understanding of how things hang together, what the truth of things is, what is good and valuable. In the creation of our worlds of work we are either incarnating or we are not the normative drive of our being for order, for truth, for goodness and value. Lonergan sums this up nicely in one of his writings from the early 1960s:

Human acts occur in socio-cultural contexts; there is not only the action but also the human setup, the family and mores, the state and religion, the economy and technology, the law and education. None of these are mere products of nature: they have a determination from meaning; to change the meaning is to change the concrete setup. Hence there is a radical difference between the data of natural science and the data of human science. The physicist, chemist, biologist verifies his hypotheses in what is given just as it is given. The human scientist can verify only in data that besides being given also have a meaning. Physicists, chemists, engineers might enter a court of law, but after making all their measurements and calculations they could not declare that it was a court of law.

### **3. Work and the Dynamics of History**

In chapter seven of *Insight* Lonergan treats of the biases that infect the ordinary unfolding of human intelligence called human common sense. Such biases affect our human work. Previously he had written of "the dramatic bias," that is, the hidden psychological blind spots that hinder the full development the human person. Here he writes of the more conscious biases that affect the broader context of the communal development of human intelligence, that is, the individual bias, the group bias and the general bias.

Individual bias, normally called selfishness or egoism, uses intelligence to circumvent the just and reasonable demands of one's community. It is an incomplete development of intelligence. It arises above a merely inherited mentality. It has the boldness to strike out and think for itself. But it fails to pivot from the initial and preliminary motivation, provided by desires and fears, to the self-abnegation involved in allowing complete free play to intelligent inquiry.

The cool schemer, the shrewd calculator, the hard-headed self-seeker, is usually a very intelligent person. But by a conscious self-orientation he sizes up the social order, ferrets out its weak points and loop-holes, and discovers ways of getting access to its rewards while evading its responsibilities. Jackall's book gives ample illustrations. Nevertheless,

Prior to the criteria of truth invented by philosophers, there is the dynamic criterion of the further question immanent in intelligence itself. The egoist's uneasy conscience is his awareness of his sin against the light. Operative in him, there is the Eros of the mind, the desire and drive to understand; he knows its value, for he gives it free rein where his own interests are concerned; yet he also repudiates its mastery, for he will not grant serious consideration to its further relevant questions.

Then there is the group bias expressed in the phrase, "My country right or wrong, but my country." In the world of work it could be expressed as "My business right or wrong, but my business," or "My managerial team right or wrong, but my team." Where individual bias has to overcome normal intersubjective feeling, group bias finds itself supported by such feeling.

Just as the individual egoist puts further questions up to a point, but desists before reaching conclusions incompatible with his egoism, so also the group is prone to have a blind spot for the insights that reveal its well-being to be excessive or its usefulness at an end.

Group bias is responsible for the conflicts between groups, the division between the have's and the have not's, the privileged and the oppressed. There results the distortion of the social process away from any coherent and unified expression of human intelligence. "The sins of group bias may be secret and almost unconscious. But what originally was a neglected possibility, in time becomes a grotesquely distorted reality."

Finally, Lonergan treats of what he calls the general bias in the unfolding of human intelligence in ordinary living. The existence of this bias comes to light when "the have-not's" replace "the have's" in the halls of power. Then, it becomes evident that all groups are subject to a basic human bias against intelligence as such, a bias responsible for a "longer cycle" of human decline. Whether this bias finds expression in myths, in advertising symbols or in consciously articulated philosophies, its essence consists in not giving intelligence free scope. It consists in not trusting human intelligence. Only intelligence wedded to power is respected. Such a bias has social effects. The deteriorating social situation is taken as it is, and as it is, it is not intelligible; it involves "the social surd." The situation exists, it is real, but it is unintelligible. In such a situation persons affected by the general bias desire to be "realists," or "pragmatists," and doing so means continuing the absurd situation.

In a series of lectures on education from the 1950s Lonergan presents an analogous analysis, this time not just in terms of bias, but in terms of sin. He says:

Sin is a category not only of theological and religious thought. One of the fundamental inspirations of Karl Marx is perhaps his hatred and critique of the sins of the bourgeoisie in the nineteenth century. There is a terrific hatred in Marx, and it is a hatred of sin. Again, in Nietzsche there is a hatred and critique of the sins of the masses, of what is all too human, of their resentment against human excellence of any kind, of their desire to bring everyone down to their own level....These examples indicate that sin is a preoccupation not merely of religious and theological thought. Sin is an evident fact in human life.

Lonergan analyzes sin according to a three-fold division, more or less corresponding to the three-fold division of the human good as particular goods, the good of order and value. The three levels of sin are 1) sin as crime; 2) sin as a component in social progress; and 3) sin as aberration.

Sin as crime is rooted in the law. It generates the notion of the good as staying out of jail. It also generates the notion that to attain further good you need to have more laws, more policeman, more courts. Saint Paul had something to say about this when he spoke of the law as giving rise to the knowledge of sin.

On a deeper and more profound level, however, sin is a component in social process. Such sin is rooted in the group bias mentioned above that divides society into the haves and the have-nots, the people with power and the powerless. This profoundly distorts the harmonious development of human society and is at the basis of wars and civil conflicts. The have-nots gradually spot and exploit the weak spots in the structures of the haves.

Lonergan often invoked Arnold Toynbee's Study of History as a treasury of historical examples. Toynbee talks of social change as invariably taking place through "creative personalities" often arising from the poorer or marginalized segments of society. Often these persons withdraw from their own society for a while - for prayer, meditation, reflection - only to return later with a vision of societal change. With others they form a creative minority with a new vision of society. Other people follow them because they believe "something is there." They don't always "get it," but by a process of imitation, mimesis, they follow along. The creative movement succeeds and even finds support in neighboring societies.

Eventually, the creative process slows down. Having achieved power, eventually the creative minority becomes the merely dominant minority. Creativity begins to shrivel up.

The process of mimesis changes into drudgery and routine with no understanding of what is going on. They keep on doing it because they have to live. Creativity has fewer and fewer opportunities for significant achievement. The lone individual is more and more driven onto the margin of the big process, of what is really going on. The masses demand security, distraction, entertainment, pleasure, and they have a decreasing sense of shame.

Lonergeran recounts a story similar to the ones told in Robert Jackall's book.

In this regard, I relate a story told me by a man in Montreal. His mother came from Germany and his uncles went to Detroit. His uncles put their sons through college by spending their lives working in factories. When they retired from the factories they could not just be idle, so they set up small machine shops where they worked on their own time. Their sons with college education were quite content to work in the factories just as their fathers had done, and they spent their spare time watching baseball games on television. Now that is not simply an individual matter. The older men belonged to a different time when opportunities existed for the individual that do not exist today. The supermarkets have pushed out the corner grocery store, and so on all along the line. You have to be in big business to be in business at all, and in big business you have nothing to say.

Lonergeran goes on describing "sin as a component in social process" by recalling how "having an enemy" pulls people together. Wars give people a stake in the nation, giving them the feeling that they belong together. Increasingly "the outer and inner barbarians," other poor and dispossessed peoples who have no stake in the country, grow to ever larger proportions.

And finally, there is the universal state as an outward peace to cover over inner emptiness. Sin as a component in the social process lets the material development go ahead, and at the same time takes out of it its soul.

Is this what happens in our corporations - "material development without a soul?" According to Jackall, that is at least sometimes the case.

Finally, on the deepest level, there is what Lonergan calls sin as aberration. It can be summed up in St. John's words, "All that love the light come to the Son, but those whose works are evil refuse to come to the light, because they do not wish their works to become manifest." (John 3, 19-21) Just as human consciousness is determined by the orientation of the human subject - is one creative, or does one just drift along? - so also history has its orientation..

There is such a thing as the spirit of an age, and that spirit of an age can be an aberration, it can be folly. "Whom the gods destroy they first make blind." As aberrant consciousness heads to neurosis and psychosis, similarly aberrant history heads to cataclysm. Every closing off, blocking, denial of the empirically, intelligently, rationally, freely, responsibly conscious subject is also a closing off, blocking, of the dominance of the higher aspirations of the human spirit and the human heart.

Such blocking off can find expression in false philosophies and degrading myths and the destruction that comes from believing in such philosophies and myths.

There arise vast illusions. A greater part of my life, and of many of your lives, was passed in a milieu in which the idea of automatic progress dominated social thinking. Everything was inevitably getting better. That idea has been eliminated by two world wars, the Depression, and the Cold War, so that no one talks about automatic progress any more. But it was a vast illusion that possessed men's minds and influenced all sorts of decisions. The classless society promised by Marx is another such illusion, the illusion of a utopia. Nietzsche's Superman is another illusion, an illusion of the individual.

Against sin as aberration there is redemption, in particular the redemption Christians speak of as "in Christ Jesus."

The redemption in Christ Jesus does not change the fundamental fact that sin continues to head for suffering and death. However, the suffering and death that follow from sin attain a new significance in Christ Jesus. They are no longer the sad, disastrous end to the differential of sin, but also the means towards transfiguration and resurrection.

The root of such transformation is, of course, for the Christian, the love of God - falling in love with and being in love with God - and the supernatural virtues of faith, hope and charity flowing from that love of God.

Faith is the fundamental answer to the problem of sin not only in the next life but also in this life. Against sin as aberration, that is, the sin that verifies the old Greek proverb "Whom the gods would destroy they first make blind," faith reestablishes truth as a meaningful category....The reestablishment of truth as a meaningful category is also a liberation of intelligence and reason.

Again, against sin as a component in the social process, sin as changing social process from a matter of freedom and creativity to routine and drudgery with all its determinisms and pressures and in the limit violence, there arises hope, which liberates the pilgrim in us, and which enables us to resist the pressures and determinisms that are, as it were, the necessity of sinning further. Pius XII spoke of the fact that the modern world creates situations in which people have to be heroic to avoid mortal sin. To have that heroism there is needed the virtue of hope; and without that heroism there is no victory over the cumulative effects of sin as a component in social process.

Here Lonergan refers to what in his theological writings he speaks of as "the law of the cross," the transformation of evil through the acceptance of suffering.

Finally, against sin as self-perpetuating, as a chain reaction, there is love of one's enemies and the acceptance of suffering....there is a chain

reaction of sin in the logic of the objective situation, and against that aspect Christianity teaches the acceptance of suffering. The acceptance of suffering puts an end, at least at one point, to the chain reaction of sin that spreads throughout a society. When everyone is dodging suffering, when no one accepts it, the burden is passed ever further on.

#### **4. A Graced Vision of Work**

The general bias is the failure of human common sense to learn that it needs to learn, that it needs a viewpoint higher. From a Christian point of view that higher viewpoint involves, of course, the wisdom that comes from the Holy Spirit; that is the basic component. But, as in the work of Thomas Aquinas, such supernatural wisdom makes use of a human wisdom, a philosophy, that is able to integrate all the human disciplines into an overall view of the world. In Lonergan's view that human wisdom, that higher viewpoint, is a normative view of the self and the world. Because it is normative, it involves a critical theory of history, that is, a theory that is able to distinguish between progress and decline.

The needed higher viewpoint is the discovery, the logical expansion and the recognition of the principle that intelligence contains its own immanent norms and that those norms are equipped with sanctions that man does not have to invent or impose.

Lonergan calls the needed higher viewpoint on human society and human culture "cosmopolis," a heuristic term designating the communal goal of liberation from human bias.

What is necessary is a cosmopolis that is neither class nor state, that stands above all their claims, that cuts them down to size, that is founded on the native detachment and disinterestedness of every intelligence, that commands man's first allegiance, that is too universal to be bribed, too impalpable to be forced, too effective to be ignored.

Such a cosmopolis will be effective through a critical culture that will be able to speak to the human heart as well as to human intelligence.

It invites the vast potentialities and pent-up energies of our time to contribute to their solution by developing an art and a literature, a theater and a broadcasting, a journalism and a history, a school and a university, a personal depth and a public opinion, that through appreciation and criticism give men of common sense the opportunity and help they need and desire to correct the general bias of their common sense.

In **Method in Theology** Lonergan writes of faith helping reason to be reason. "It is not propaganda and it is not argument but religious faith that will liberate human reasonableness from its ideological prisons." Elsewhere Lonergan paid tribute to Pierre Teilhard de Chardin for speaking to this human need for a vision of history that could touch both the minds and hearts of people at the end of the twentieth century.

...what moves men is the good, and good in the concrete...If at one time law was in the forefront of human development...still, at the present time it would seem that the immediate carrier of human aspiration is the more concrete apprehension of the human good effected through such theories of history as the liberal doctrine of progress, the marxist doctrine of dialectical materialism and, most recently, Teilhard de Chardin's identification of cosmogenesis, anthropogenesis, and christogenesis.

The Christian doctrine of the Word of God finds insertion into the emergence of the natural world and the human world of communities seeking the meaning of their sufferings and their existence. The Word of God, in whom all things were created and in whom all things are renewed, gives ultimate meaning to the world of human work.