



Robert J. Fitterer's book, *Love and Objectivity in Virtue Ethics*, published in 2008 by University of Toronto Press, brings together several topics that I have discussed to various extents in past columns:

- Aristotelian virtue ethics ("Virtue as a Skill," May 2012; "Virtuous Engineering," September 2013; "Virtue Ethics, Judgment, and Engineering," July 2014).
- Bernard Lonergan's cognitive theory ("How We Know and What It Means," September 2009; "Engineers Are Persons, Too," January 2010).
- The role of emotions in moral living ("Risk and Virtue Ethics," January 2014).

Fitterer begins with an exposition of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, affirming that "ethical truth differs from scientific truth and cannot be captured in abstractions such as universally applicable moral maxims." He invokes cognitive psychology to argue that "the imprecision comes from the prior indeterminacy of the concrete good relative to each individual human who must discern it, combined with the probabilistic nature of human insight when deployed in concrete problem solving." This does not entail a complete lack of objectivity; rather, good choices are grounded in an individual's grasp of what is genuinely conducive to human well-being (*eudaimonia*).

How do people come to know this? In the same way that we come to know everything else – by following what Lonergan identified as the "generalized empirical method," which he summarized as a series of "transcendental precepts" (#4 is my addition):

- 1) Experience – Be *attentive* in examining the data presented.
- 2) Understanding – Be *intelligent* in envisaging possible explanations.
- 3) Judgment – Be *reasonable* in evaluating which is most likely.
- 4) Deliberation – Be *considerate* in exploring potential courses of action.
- 5) Decision – Be *responsible* in electing to proceed accordingly.

Each of these processes is "spontaneously operative" in everyone to some degree, but because the will is involved, we are capable of employing them more intentionally – not only to pursue theoretical knowledge (*episteme*), as in scientific investigation, but also to develop practical judgment (*phronesis*) for "the concrete and particular circumstances of human living." This results in not only insights of *fact*, but also insights of *value*; and when implemented conscientiously, it becomes a cycle that is effectively self-correcting: decision leads to action, which leads to new experience against which we reassess our previous conclusions.

Unlike insights of fact, insights of value often rely at least partially on emotions. Here Fitterer, following Lonergan, is careful to clarify that he is not referring to bodily states such as tiredness or hunger, or to general moods like depression or irritability. Instead, he has in mind "the emotions such as fear, love, anger, joy, or disgust that accompany some object of thought or perception ... feelings that approve or disapprove, that attract or repulse, that evoke a desire to cling or to flee." These are *apprehensions* of value that do not merely manifest personal preferences, but constitute "recognition of some object or action that is seen as an intrinsic good" – especially once confirmed by subsequent, reflective *judgments* of value.

Of course, emotions are by no means infallible when carrying out this function. Besides producing various kinds of biases that can interfere with our ability to exercise the transcendental precepts properly, they establish our "horizon of concern," the boundary between what we care about in general and what does not matter to us at all. Furthermore, in going about our daily business, we tend to move among distinct "patterns of experience" (Lonergan) or "salience networks" (Fitterer); that is, we inevitably focus on specific aspects of our current situation, causing other factors to fade into the background. It is *phronesis* that must determine which of these mindsets is most appropriate in each succeeding set of circumstances that we face.

Fitterer concludes by seeking a suitable "background emotion, one that is beneficial to ethical insight induction ... a healthy emotion that would predispose us towards an expanding horizon of concern ... an emotion that allows us to shift across various limited patterns of experience." The only viable candidate that emerges is what Lonergan described as "open-ended altruism, the self-sacrificing love commonly called *charity*," which "embodies a concern for the genuine good, both for oneself and for others." As Martha Nussbaum observed, this kind of love includes "recognition of the unique individuality of persons; reciprocity in human relations; and mediation of mercy and justice through compassion."

This is not to say that we must love everyone in the same way that we love, for example, our families. "Background emotion does not have a proximity to my personal *eudaimonia* the way feelings about significant people do. It is a fundamental set of concerns, usually operative without our explicit awareness." Fitterer argues that such love actually fosters a "performative" or "procedural" type of objectivity by "maximizing the probability of sound moral insight occurrences." Paraphrasing the Apostle Paul, it binds all of the virtues together in perfect unity (Colossians 3:14).

This is fully consistent with what I have previously proposed as "The Moral Virtues of Engineering" (May 2013). Objectivity, care, and honesty are complementary components of love-as-compassion. Virtuous Engineers diligently adhere to the transcendental precepts, constantly and consciously expanding their horizon of concern to encompass everyone who might be affected by their projects or products, and then adjust their decision-making in each case accordingly.■



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Fitterer on Practical Judgment

"*Phronesis* is not a deductive science (*episteme*), whereby we derive correct choices from moral axioms. And it is not a *techne*, whereby direct application of general procedures of art will more or less guarantee correct outcome. *Phronesis* requires attentiveness to the actual circumstances impinging upon us, a calibration of decisions as the case may demand."