

**The Subjective Dimension of Human Work:
The Conversion of the Acting Person According to
Karol Wojtyla/John Paul II and Bernard Lonergan**
Deborah Savage
New York: Peter Lang, 2008 (290 pages)

The world of commerce and the world of theology rarely meet in the same person, so, when they do, it behooves us to take notice, for that person will, it is hoped, be able to make obvious and clear the connection between Catholic social teaching and the concrete reality of corporate America. Deborah Savage, author of *The Subjective Dimension of Human Work*, is such a person. In the 1970s, Savage was a pioneer of the new collaborative approaches to management-labor relations. Her motivation was not only her sense of the humanity of the workers with whom she was working, but also a desire to show that attending to the dignity of all persons in business relationships benefits all parties, contrary to the cynicism that prevented many businessmen from attempting such approaches. Savage was convinced by her own experience and her study of John Paul II's 1981 encyclical on work, *Laborem exercens* (LE) that "the future of the American ideal of equality and freedom for all is linked directly to the possibility of each person pursuing his or her own path to self-realization, something that takes place in large part through one's work" (65).

Savage's desire to understand the philosophical and theological bases for her experience as a successful manager, coupled with her admiration for the social writings of Pope John Paul II, led her to pursue a doctor of philosophy degree in theology. In the course of her theological studies, Savage was introduced to one of the most heated disputes in twentieth-century theology: the debate over the correct interpretation of the doctrine of nature, the supernatural, and grace. Two of the major participants in the controversy were the transcendental Thomists and the existential Thomists. Among the disputed points between the two schools is the adequacy of either approach to ground Catholic social teachings as represented in the Second Vatican Council's Constitution on the Church and the Modern World, *Gaudium et spes*.

Because of her devotion to the thought of John Paul II, whose pontificate interpreted *Gaudium et spes* and whose thought is strongly dependent on the existential Thomists, Savage presumed that she would find that approach to be the one that most adequately grounded personalist business practices. This presumption began to erode as she explored the thought of Canadian Jesuit Bernard Lonergan, the main North American representative of the transcendental Thomists. Savage's thesis is that Lonergan's theological anthropology, including his solution to the nature-grace controversy, his cognitive theory, and his theory of conversion, better grounds the personalism of LE than John Paul II's own analysis of the moral act in his pre-papal book, *The Acting Person*. Savage is convinced that Lonergan's articulation of the process of self-transcendence that comes about through human action

rationally chosen is the only one that can show how work—all work—is, or should be, an activity that contributes to personal salvation and social progress.

Savage begins by situating the affirmation of the priority of the subjective value of work in LE in the context of a later twentieth- and early twenty-first-century trend in secular business theory to look for and focus on a spiritual meaning of work, using primarily the work of Robert Fogel, author of *The Fourth Great Awakening and the Future of Egalitarianism*. Next, she describes and critiques in detail the prepapal writings of John Paul II (Karol Wojtyła) and Lonergan on three points—(1) the reality of the human person, as distinguished from the abstract description of the essence of man; (2) the cognitive process involved in coming to know the good; and (3) the process of self-transcendence of the human person through intentional action—showing how each writer’s theory relates to the subjective value of work. She finally compares and contrasts the two authors and concludes that Lonergan is superior and more useful because his system, in rejecting outdated and erroneous aspects of the existential Thomist anthropology, preserves a more robust realism untainted by theoretical abstraction and more adequately grounds a holistic vision of the acting person in their conversion through work.

Savage’s detailed description of Lonergan’s cognitive theory is very well done, at points moving one to desire to know and understand more of Lonergan’s ideas. Readers will appreciate Savage’s affirmation of the central role that human freedom plays in the economic sphere, where work properly understood can provide self-transcendence (46). She is no socialist. She gives practical insight into the personalization of work in her critique of Enlightenment mechanicism (74). A corporation is not a machine but a union of persons. Her emphasis on the importance of the role work can play in personal interior integration, including feelings, corresponds to John Paul II’s own statements (e.g., LE, 75n24).

Yet, there are significant weaknesses in this book, many of which stem from the sheer ambition of the project. Savage takes the field on so many battle fronts—the nature-grace controversy and its impact on social doctrine, faculty psychology, Scotist cognitive theory, and the role of feeling in human decision-making—that it is hard to express criticism or agreement about one without neglecting others equally as important. The wideness of the scope also prevents her from tackling any one issue with the depth and systematic precision a dissertation needs.

The need for care in argumentation is rendered more imperative by Lonergan’s rejection of significant components of the Thomist tradition. Unfortunately, Savage does not argue systematically for Lonergan’s conclusions. Rather, the arguments about the most controversial parts of her thesis are somewhat scattered over three chapters, including in footnotes. Those who do not have background in medieval cognitive theory simply must take her word for it that the Scotist articulation of knowledge as vision is a myth and an error, that faculty psychology is destructive of integral subjectivity, and that Stephen Duffy is right about nature and grace.

A further and perhaps more significant problem with the book is the selectivity with which she reads Wojtyła, John Paul II. To understand fully what John Paul II considers to be the subjective value of work, one must refer not only to *The Acting Person* but also

to *Love and Responsibility* and to the theology of the body, which was being developed at the same time LE was written. John Paul's personalist theological vision, rooted in Genesis 2, is not only about self-transcendence but also about *communion between persons*. Because man is made in the image and likeness of the Triune God, a communion of Persons, the purpose of work is not only the transformation of matter or the integral self-transcendence of the subject but also the establishment and strengthening of communion between persons. "Thus work bears a particular mark of man and of humanity, the mark of a person operating in a community of persons" (LE, preamble). "It is the characteristic of work that it first and foremost unites people" (LE, n. 20). Lonergan's theory, despite his own intentions, seems *de facto* subjectivist and individualist, rather than intersubjective.

A specific component of John Paul II's personalism is the significance of male and female, marriage and family. Savage mentions this significance but does not integrate it into her interpretation of LE, despite the fact that John Paul II says: "And this ordering remains necessarily and indissolubly linked with the fact that man was created male and female in the image of God" (LE, n. 4). Although the human *essence* is common, the human *person* is decidedly and crucially *male* or *female*. A true personalism has to be attentive to sexual differentiation.

This book is useful primarily for the scholar steeped in the intricacies of modern controversies about medieval philosophical anthropology. In fact, this dissertation is not about work as normally understood, nor is it even about work as the locus of human conversion. It is about the relative merits of various versions of cognitive theory, compared, contrasted, and evaluated. A social scientist or management theorist would come away from this book wondering why exactly the Scotist cognitive theory is so problematic. Finally, there is never a systematic application of Lonergan's cognitive theory to management theory or to the practical world Savage spent so much time on at the beginning—only a hint of an application that must await her further work. Let us hope that her subsequent contributions provide concrete application of Lonergan's thought to the understanding of work as a means to communion between concrete persons.

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