

Gender and Metaphysics: Judith Butler and Bernard Lonergan in Conversation

Theological Studies
2020, Vol. 81(1) 111–131
© Theological Studies, Inc. 2020
Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/0040563920904069
journals.sagepub.com/home/tsj



Benjamin Hohman 
Boston College, Chestnut Hill, MA, USA

Abstract

There has long been a mutual distrust between gender theory and Catholic metaphysics. However, this article argues that at least one significant figure in gender studies, Judith Butler, has been broadly misunderstood by many Catholic thinkers. Bringing Butler into dialogue with Bernard Lonergan, this article proposes to show (1) that Butler's critiques reveal certain influential strands of Catholic theology as metaphysically untenable, (2) that Lonergan's metaphysics evades Butler's critiques, and (3) that there is a complementarity between Butler and Lonergan's approaches and their aims. The final section of the article offers some foundational principles from Lonergan's metaphysics for framing ongoing dialogue.

Keywords

Judith Butler, gender studies, Bernard Lonergan, metaphysics, method

Pope Francis has repeatedly identified what he broadly terms “gender theory” as antithetical to Catholic teaching and as an “ideology” in a “global war trying to destroy marriage . . . [not] with weapons, but with ideas.”¹ He has suggested that it is “an expression of frustration and resignation, which seeks to cancel out sexual

1. Ines San Martin, “Pope calls gender theory a ‘global war’ against the family,” *Crux*, October 1 2016.

Corresponding author:

Benjamin Hohman, Boston College, Stokes 310N, Chestnut Hill, MA 02467, USA.
Email: hohmanb@bc.edu

difference because it no longer knows how to confront it.”² Gender theory, he argues, is part of a larger societal trend against marriage and the family that is nurtured by a “culture of the provisional . . . [in which] there is nothing definitive.”³ It connotes a “removal of difference [that] in fact creates a problem, not a solution,”⁴ to the question of human interrelations.

While Francis’s remarks reflect more of a moral and cultural critique than any specific engagement with gender theory and its larger philosophical contexts, his comments voice a broader concern shared by certain Catholic thinkers and leaders that all gender theory is part of a trend towards relativism and nominalism in contemporary culture. In this view, the needed Catholic response is one that emphasizes clear and immutable binaries of sex and gender, properly expressed in heterosexual relationships of complementarity, in order to resist the dissolution of meaning and morality. To defend the stable and knowable character of all reality—including the realities of sex, gender, and sexuality—proponents of this response often invoke an ordered and hierarchical view of the world linked to a metaphysical worldview. As a result, explicitly metaphysical forms of thinking—especially those influenced by Aristotle and Thomas—are often seen by many gender theorists as necessarily entailing a static view of nature, in which there obtains a strict corollary between biological expressions of sex and psycho-social and cultural expressions of gender.

While various non- and anti-metaphysical theologies and philosophies have emerged in recent years, an explicitly and methodologically metaphysical approach remains for many a central element of a Catholic worldview. However, if all gender theory is entirely discordant with all explicitly metaphysical approaches, then it is difficult to see how there can be any rapprochement between the metaphysically inclined and the many proponents of gender theory in the church, the academy, and the larger world. Without dismissing Francis’s concern for the new challenges facing marriages and families today, this article challenges the comprehensive dismissal of every gender theory as antithetical to every metaphysics or to the tradition of Catholic thought. Rather, to the extent that the ethical and philosophical critiques raised by gender theorists may be shown to reveal the excesses of various decadent accounts of metaphysics, I argue that engaging gender theory is crucial to a renewal an Aristotelian/Thomist metaphysics that avoids the dogmatism and reductionist tendencies that mark some interpretations of it. What I propose here is the view of metaphysics as a truly human—and therefore transcendent—discipline, which intends the cherishing of being and beings as made manifest in an unrestricted desire to know and to love more perfectly.

At the same time, I will argue that this chastened metaphysics offers important theoretical and rhetorical tools to the work of gender theory and its ongoing reception in the sphere of public wisdom. While critical theorists (among others) have revealed certain influential strands of Catholic “metaphysical” thought as being philosophically

2. Francis, “General Audience, Saint Peter’s Square, Wednesday,” Vatican website, April 15, 2015.

3. Francis, “General Audience, Saint Peter’s Square, Wednesday” (April 15, 2015).

4. Francis, “General Audience, Saint Peter’s Square, Wednesday” (April 15, 2015).

untenable, another strand—represented here by Bernard Lonergan’s “heuristic metaphysics”—provides important philosophical resources to engage the genuinely new and emergent questions pertaining to gender and identity from a position rooted deeply within Catholic traditions. In that sense, although this article is directed towards opening up dialogue between specifically Catholic theology and gender studies, it also reveals the particular relevance of Lonergan’s account of metaphysics in numerous places in the broader culture.

The first section of this article identifies two preliminary challenges to dialogue. Then, the second section engages several critiques of metaphysics forwarded by Judith Butler, which the third section then places in dialogue with Lonergan’s account of metaphysics. The bulk of these earlier sections focuses more on the methodological concerns that frame possible dialogue than on the data of gender studies, theologies of the body, or human sexuality and desire. However, the concluding section offers three important principles for subsequent conversations around these important topics.

Two Preliminary Challenges

It seems that (at least) two major challenges persist to establishing deeper dialogue between the metaphysical approach and the work of gender theorists. First, as suggested above, a number of Catholic leaders and thinkers indiscriminately reject gender studies as clashing with Christian religious wisdom. However, this tendency reflects a failure to substantively engage with the range of different movements within gender studies. It amounts to a forfeiture of the rights and responsibilities of the Church in the public sphere, since the strategy of outright dismissal will not prevent the ongoing discussion of these questions. As Luce Irigaray famously wrote nearly forty years ago, “Sexual Difference is one of the major philosophical issues, if not the issue, of our age.”⁵ The relevance of this statement is undiminished today, and to reject open dialogue is to accept a position of irrelevance. Rather, theologians are tasked with elucidating the properly theological questions raised by these conversations in a process marked by both listening and speaking.

A second challenge is the widespread view of many gender theorists—and not a few theologians—that metaphysics is a top-down, subsumptionist affair that is inherently oppressive.⁶ These concerns are not merely sidelined here, and I will not try to explain them away. Rather, recognizing the excesses of some past forms of Aristotelian/Thomist metaphysics, this article argues that there is a need for a different understanding of the metaphysical tradition that promotes a continual return to the data of experience in grounding better understandings and judgments that become the basis for

5. Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1993), 5.

6. For a helpful account of subsumptionist models of metaphysics and the problems inherent in them, see Frederick G. Lawrence, “Believing to Understand: The Hermeneutic Circle in Gadamer and Lonergan” (PhD diss., University of Basel, 1975), especially chapter 2, “The Humanist Tradition.”

subsequent ethical action.⁷ I would assert that such a metaphysics is critically important in the face of various extant expressions of intellectual un-conversion in both the broader public and the academy itself: reductive scientism, apathetic nihilism, and (more recently) a tendency by some to knowingly live by alternative facts. In each case, the turn away from the full, unitive complexity of human knowing curtails the possibility of generating the kind of broader public wisdom needed to sort through new and emerging questions in society; it represents a pattern of avoidance of larger theoretical accounts and, in that sense, it correlates with the denial of the possibility or value of understanding.

While I hardly expect any metaphysics on its own to reverse these trends, the critical metaphysics suggested here, which takes as its chief task the ordering and defense of all the fields of knowledge and their reality, can be a powerful tool for reconstructing a theological system that embraces the new and deepening insights of the present era. Thereby, it empowers communities of theologians to work together in the pursuit of ongoing philosophical and theological revision in accord with the cumulative process of scholarship across the full spectrum of human knowledge. This is a vital task. Furthermore, the task of methodically explicating an otherwise implicit account of metaphysics makes that account subject to interrogation.⁸ Thus, by elucidating and critiquing our account of knowing through the disciplines of epistemology and

7. While there are numerous candidates for a “new metaphysics,” this article focuses on and favors Lonergan’s rehabilitation of Aristotelian/Thomist metaphysics for several reasons. First, Judith Butler has influentially identified “metaphysics of substance,” referring to the Aristotelian metaphysical influence, as being particularly problematic. At the same time Saint Thomas’s thought, deeply influenced by his reception of Aristotle, has become one of the most important sources for Catholic theologians, as noted in Pope Leo XIII’s 1879 encyclical, *Aeterni Patris* [On the Restoration of Christian Philosophy]. Aquinas’s influence is felt perhaps nowhere more strongly than in the Magisterium and the Church’s seminaries, which often reflect the greatest resistance to the possibility of dialoguing with gender theorists. Lonergan’s approach, developed during his long apprenticeship to Aquinas’s thought, is, therefore, uniquely situated to provide a careful and faithful appropriation of Aquinas’s thought. At the same time, because Lonergan transposes Aquinas’s theoretical metaphysics into a framework developed on a phenomenologically verifiable cognitional theory and epistemology in light of modern natural and human sciences, his metaphysics is able to take Butler’s critiques seriously and help rule out the problematic and decadent forms of metaphysics that she identifies.

8. This claim rests on a distinction between two meanings of the word metaphysics. First, metaphysics can refer to an explicit, philosophical, and methodical metaphysics that seeks to give some account of reality and its contours. The second meaning, which is the one referred to above, is what we might call an implicit metaphysics. While persons may eschew explicit metaphysics for a number of reasons, an implicit metaphysics is always operative in human judgments, both theoretical and commonsensical, about their world. As I suggest later in this article, Lonergan discusses this under the headings of “latent” and “explicit” metaphysics, but the larger point is also acknowledged by thinkers more hostile to an explicit metaphysical approach. See, for instance, Jacques Derrida, “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” in *Writing and Difference* (Chicago:

metaphysics, it becomes possible to ground critically all fields of knowledge—including metaphysics itself.

However, as Judith Butler's critiques makes clear in the next section, we cannot accept any repressive metaphysics based on a model of knowing as domination, closed to the full range of the data of human experience, and unable to receive new data and new understandings. We can accept no materialist account, no naïve realism, and no idealism. Given the fundamental openness of human knowing, the only metaphysics that is in harmony with good faith is one that orients us towards the limitless search for understanding and knowledge and that is rooted in the very discomfort that always accompanies honest and open inquiry. My contention here is that this is precisely the kind of heuristic metaphysics developed by Lonergan.

Gender Trouble

In order to attend to the serious criticisms leveled broadly against metaphysical approaches—and thereby to frame a proper understanding of precisely what kind of metaphysics remains possible—this section engages three prominent critiques of metaphysics drawn largely from Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*.⁹ Although certainly dated in some ways,¹⁰ *Gender Trouble* remains a work of iconic significance in critical studies of gender, and it stands out for its clarity of philosophical critique—if not always clarity of expression. The criteria I extract from the larger argument in *Gender Trouble* specify the necessary preconditions to any attempt to bring epistemology and metaphysics into the conversation here. It should be noted, though, that while I take

University of Chicago, 1978), 278–93, especially 280–81: “All these destructive discourses and all their analogues are trapped in a kind of circle . . . [that describes] the relation between the history of metaphysics and the destruction of the history of metaphysics. . . . [T]here are several ways of being caught in this circle. They are all more or less naive, more or less empirical, more or less systematic, more or less close to the formulation—that is, to the formalization—of this circle. It is these differences which explain the multiplicity of destructive discourses and the disagreement between those who elaborate them. Nietzsche, Freud, and Heidegger, for example, worked within the inherited concepts of metaphysics. Since these concepts are not elements or atoms, and since they are taken from a syntax and a system, every particular borrowing brings along with it the whole of metaphysics. This is what allows these destroyers to destroy each other reciprocally.”

9. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 13.
10. In fact, later sections of this article will make use of Butler's own elaborations on her thought in *Gender Trouble* in Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993). For a more critical treatment of these changes and their significance with respect to questions of identity and agency in feminist critical theory see also Amy Allen, *The Power of Feminist Theory Domination, Resistance, Solidarity* (Boulder: Westview, 1999). Allen presents the development of Butler's thought from *Gender Trouble* to *Bodies That Matter* and her later writings on hate speech as solving the problems of agency that have been alleged in Foucault's account.

Butler as an important guide in rehabilitating a critical metaphysics, I do not engage or critique Butler's larger and evolving corpus. Following the initial treatment of Butler, then, the subsequent sections of this article seek to elucidate a framework for dialogue that is unitive and explanatory (without being a priori and repressive) by presenting a reading of the heuristic metaphysical structure developed by Bernard Lonergan.

Gender Trouble, first published in 1990, has become famous for its articulation of a strongly postmodern view of both gender and sexuality as social constructs rather than as naturally occurring binaries inhering in subjects.¹¹ Butler critiques this latter view as a form of biological reductivism that is backed by a metaphysical view of the world in which universal concepts are abstractly derived and then forced onto individual and communal perceptions of reality. While Butler articulates her own (ostensibly non-metaphysical) program and would be unlikely to endorse the program outlined in the later sections of this article, her work nevertheless clarifies several important critiques of the problems inhering in distorted accounts of metaphysics in history. In what follows, I will explore three of her critiques of metaphysics: (1) that it entails a false reductionism and biological naturalism, (2) that it is based on an artificial account of subjectivity that erases and excludes persons and groups by enforcing identity politics, and (3) that it isolates persons through a metaphysics of eternal presence, thus ignoring the ways in which they are communally, socially, and historically constituted beings. Following each critique, I will then clarify how each suggests a criterion to which any possible metaphysics must respond.

Butler's first major critique is found in her problematization of the supposed dependence of gender on biological sex and the reductivist mode of thinking by which this link is substantiated. She begins by demonstrating the constructed and contingent character of gender roles as they emerged (or were enforced) over time, thus challenging the idea that gender can be understood as a strict binary or that it flows as a natural consequence of a person's "biological sex." While Butler often uses the language of construction and performativity in *Gender Trouble*, this should neither be confused with sometimes common(nonsense) understanding of the phrase "social construction" as entailing something "artificial and dispensable."¹² Butler differentiates her account of "discursive construction"—elaborated more clearly in her later work, *Bodies That Matter*—from these former "radical constructivist" accounts, which posit either a "godlike agency" to culture/society as it produces subjects or else a "voluntarist subject who makes its gender through an instrumentalist action."¹³ Butler rejects both of these accounts along with the notion that sex and gender are merely the expression of a prior reality. Instead, Butler argues for the production of sex and gender through a process of "citation" and "iteration," in which persons reiterate preexisting social

11. A special thank you to both Elyse J. Raby and Claire E. Koen, who, through their generous notes and ongoing conversation, helped clarify for me the development of Butler's later thought in relation to *Gender Trouble*, although any lingering mistakes are entirely my own.

12. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, x.

13. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, xvi–xvii.

norms (which, in turn, have their own complex histories) in distinct ways in their own concrete contexts.

Butler identifies the misuse of the words “nature” and “natural” as techniques for prematurely closing historical and critical investigations into the history and motives of cultural constructs. Thus the asserted “naturalness” of the linked binaries of male–female and masculine–feminine obscures the historical chain of citations and reiterations that led to their articulation, thereby grounding the claim to authority from nature in an “infinite deferral of authority to an irrecoverable past.”¹⁴ The asserted groundlessness of these definitions magnifies their potential for abuse as their advocates unquestioningly enforce their conclusions on bodies. Butler notes in particular here the lived realities of a number of intersex persons who suffered on account of these strictly enforced binaries—not only regarding gender, but also of “biological” sex. On the basis of this view, many of these persons were subjected to dangerous “corrective” surgeries at birth with lasting physical and psychological consequences. The apparent groundlessness of gender binaries as “natural” leads Butler to further challenge the binary of biological sex as well:

What is sex anyway? Is it natural, anatomical, chromosomal, or hormonal, and how is a feminist critic to assess the scientific discourses which purport to establish such “facts” for us? . . . If the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called “sex” is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all.¹⁵

As Butler makes clear, any argument which reverts to a binary view of the sexes does so only by falling back on the same essentialist, oppressive, binary view of gender roles that were rightly rejected during the second wave of feminism.¹⁶ In both binaries, she concludes, there is a strongly ideological undercurrent that calls attention away from the complexity of the situation through a combination of biological reductionism and a false appeal to metaphysical naturalism.

This critique thus provides the basis for a first criterion for any possible metaphysical approach: namely, it must unequivocally reject the multiple iterations of the reductionist, naturalist fallacy. On the one hand, this means rejecting the view that the natural sciences have an objective view of reality as unconditioned by historical and cultural norms and that this view is somehow more real than the anthropological, sociological, or philosophical accounts of a given phenomenon. On the other, this also means rejecting the spurious claim to “naturalness” as a way of hiding the more complex and fragile emergence of cultural judgments and values over time. Perhaps somewhat ironically, both false-naturalism and scientism have been roundly condemned by

14. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 71.

15. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 6–7.

16. For an overview of the historical development of the feminist movement, see Estelle B. Freedman, *No Turning Back: The History of Feminism and the Future of Women* (New York: Ballantine, 2002).

Catholic thinkers in other contexts.¹⁷ In critiquing these two trends, Butler highlights that all acts of understanding and judgment, scientific or otherwise, are acts of interpretation and reinterpretation and are liable to error, bias, and (therefore necessarily) revision. Any metaphysics that appeals to a simplistic notion of nature as a cover story that displaces the complexity of these interpretive acts cannot be admitted.

Butler's second critique focuses more directly on the implications of what she identifies as a metaphysical approach on the realms of ethics and politics. Specifically, Butler challenges that the humanist notion of a subject, as something that exists prior to or apart from its social/cultural context, has been perpetually used as an exclusionary and repressive technique of domination in society: "The political construction of the subject proceeds with certain legitimizing and exclusionary aims, and these political operations are effectively concealed and naturalized by a political analysis that takes juridical structures as their foundation."¹⁸ For Butler, to assert the existence of classes of persons (e.g. "men" or "women") as freestanding political subjects with certain rights and duties in relation to their classification is always to exercise exclusionary power.¹⁹ As Butler argues,

There is a great deal of material that not only questions the viability of "the subject" as the ultimate candidate for representation or, indeed, liberation, but there is very little agreement after all on what it is that constitutes, or ought to constitute, the category of women. The domains of political and linguistic "representation" set out in advance the criterion by which subjects themselves are formed, with the result that representation is extended only to what can be acknowledged as a subject. In other words, the qualifications for being a subject must first be met before representation can be extended.²⁰

The practice of group politics depends on the demarcation of these particular subjects with this particular kind of subjectivity. This perpetuates the old binary structures, for example by drawing boundaries as to who can claim to be "a woman" and who can

17. For only one prominent example, see John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio* [On the Relationship between Faith and Reason], Vatican website, September 14, 1998, sec. 88, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091998_fides-et-ratio.html.

18. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 2.

19. Butler makes deliberate use of the double meaning of subjects and subjection (*assujettissement*) identified by Michel Foucault some years earlier in his own rejection of the humanist methods of argumentation and political organization. Quoting Foucault, "Let us ask . . . how things work at the level of on-going subjugation, at the level of those continuous and uninterrupted processes which subject our bodies, govern our gestures, dictate our behaviors, etc. . . . We should try to discover how it is that subjects are gradually, progressively, really and materially constituted through a multiplicity of organisms, forces, energies, materials, desires, thoughts, etc. We should try to grasp subjection and its material instance as a constitution of subjects. . . . We must attempt to study the myriad of bodies which are constituted as peripheral subjects as a result of the effects of power." See Michel Foucault, "Two Lectures," *Critique and Power: Recasting the Foucault/Habermas Debate*, ed. Michael Kelly (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1994), 31.

20. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 1–2.

claim to speak from “a woman’s point of view.” Therein, the group submits to the exclusionary logic against which it purports to be fighting. Butler declares that any ontology of substances undergirding real and substantive subjects is not only artificial, “but essentially superfluous” for achieving real change.²¹

The move from this critique to a second criterion for metaphysics is a bit more difficult. A central element of metaphysical inquiry entails clarifying the conditions for asserting true judgments, and this includes judgments of real distinctions between things, persons, groups, and so on. If philosophy must entirely eschew this vital task, then it would indeed mean there can be no more metaphysics. However, as I will argue more substantially in the next section, there is no inherent link between metaphysics and the construal of subjects or subjectivity in such a monadic and privatized manner. Still, though, without accepting Butler’s prohibition, we may recognize the overriding ethical concern at its root: namely, what Frederick Lawrence helpfully identifies as a “postmodern concern for the other.”²² The second criterion, therefore, is that any possible metaphysics must specifically account for this concern, and, if it would retain the language of subject/subjectivity, it must provide an account of the subject that specifically disallows for the repressive tendencies of identity politics and factionalism.

Finally, in what I identify as her third major critique, Butler charges that the ontological approach is grounded in an Aristotelian metaphysics of substance that isolates the subject as a self-inhering being: “Within philosophical discourse itself, the notion of ‘the person’ has received analytic elaboration on the assumption that whatever social context the person is ‘in’ remains somehow externally related to the definitional structure of personhood, be that consciousness, the capacity for language, or moral deliberation.”²³ In Butler’s view, Aristotelian metaphysics of substance treats the subject as self-inhering being, reduces relationality to secondary and accidental status, and thus impoverishes the understanding of persons. From the perspective of Lonergan’s metaphysics, though, Butler’s reading seems to represent partial misunderstanding of Aristotle along conceptualist and essentialist lines. While Aristotle’s thought has been oftentimes abused, his *Metaphysics* famously begins from the deep wonder that orients all people towards knowing. In this sense, although the word “accident” connotes something lesser to the contemporary ear, it does not mean something less real or less interesting to the wondering subject or less constitutive of the

21. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 24.

22. Lawrence uses this phrase to describe the ethical imperative found in the works of Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, and Lyotard. See Frederick G. Lawrence, “The Fragility of Consciousness: Lonergan and the Postmodern Concern for the Other,” in *The Fragility of Consciousness: Faith, Reason, and the Human Good*, ed. Randall S. Rosenberg and Kevin M. Vander Schel (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2017), 229–77. Butler’s own later account of moral theory specifically takes up the question of how “the self,” which she differentiates from the monadic “subject,” is not only confronted with this ethical duty towards the other, but is in fact constituted in and by its place in a larger relational structure in which it encounters “the other.” See Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University, 2005).

23. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 16.

world of human meaning. Still, Butler correctly notes that Aristotle's metaphysics is concerned with determining the universal and necessary in such a way as to effectively devalue contingent truths, which includes the relations that Butler demonstrates to be so vital to understanding human persons. The notion of relation as an accidental category makes identity in isolation preeminent, thereby devaluing the very spaces in which an individual's gender becomes meaningful for both the person and for the community.

The third and final criterion we may draw from Butler, then, is the need to account for the way in which human expressions of gender and identity more broadly emerge and develop in inalienably social, cultural, and historical contexts. Any alternative, deductive, a priori approach to knowing would demonstrate a profound illiteracy of the hermeneutic revolution in biblical studies, theology, and philosophy in the twentieth century, and so risk incoherence and irrelevance with the larger fabric of Catholic thought in the academy and the church.

Evaluating Lonergan's Metaphysics

As I argue below, Lonergan's metaphysics both answers these three criteria and brings significant clarity to the ongoing conversation around gender. Unlike many of the problematic metaphysical accounts which fall to Butler's critiques, Lonergan eschews metaphysics as first philosophy. Lonergan transposed the received metaphysics and systematic theology of Thomas Aquinas into a metaphysics grounded on interiority as known through phenomenological exploration of a person's conscious psychological operation. The real is defined in relation to the innate human desire to seek truth and the verifiable fact of our making at least some true judgments. Thereby, Lonergan expounded an account of metaphysics for persons living and knowing in a world constituted by historical and contingent developments. This allows Lonergan's metaphysics to engage meaningfully with hermeneutic insights and, to some extent, with the work of deconstruction. Thus, not only is Lonergan's metaphysics able to respond to the criteria gleaned from Butler, but, as an example of a "heuristic" metaphysics, it calls each person constantly beyond themselves in an effort to meet, understand, and know the other as an integral part of reality itself. Far from a call to abstraction, Lonergan's metaphysics serves as a call to lovingly encounter the world and its inhabitants in their concrete reality and interrelation.

In *Insight*, Lonergan provides a phenomenologically verifiable account of cognitive theory to answer the question, "What am I doing when I am knowing?" He proposes a common or general account that unites all realms of human knowing, from common sense to quantum mechanics, from theology to gender studies. No matter the field of inquiry, knowing always entails three elements. First, there is an attentiveness to the data of experience or of consciousness. Second, from an innate and spontaneous curiosity, there emerges an insight into the intelligibility of the data, which is then conceptualized in some way. Third, through reflective judgment on the adequacy of the insight in relation to the data of experience and the warrant written in the specific

form of the spontaneous questioning, there results a judgment of the truth or falsity of that account.²⁴

Building on this account of human knowing, Lonergan articulates an epistemology that answers the question, “Why is doing that knowing?” Lonergan’s epistemology of “critical realism” asserts that the human person is directed by an unrestricted desire to know the world in its complete intelligibility. This desire issues forth in the spontaneous emergence of questions in the subject that carry her from experience towards understanding (what is it?) and from understanding towards judgment (is it really as I understood it?). When a person knows something, they know it as a “virtually unconditioned” judgment of truth. The phrase “virtually unconditioned” means that the truths to which that human knowers have access are historically conditioned and contingent; the truth of a claim rests on the subject’s having asked and answered all of the relevant questions which condition the possible truth of any given answer. As a result, knowing depends on the dependability and authenticity of the subjects knowing, on their openness to further questions, and on their honesty about the sufficiency of answers. Far from a groundless ground, human knowledge of reality is genuine precisely because it is comprised of true judgments of facts that have been tried and tested over time. Authentic knowers recognize that all concepts have dates, and some have expiration dates.

Finally, Lonergan proposes a definition of metaphysics as the answer to the question, “What do I know when I do this?” by asserting that what we know is, in fact, reality. The real, as intelligible, can be observed through attention to experience or to the data of consciousness, it can be intelligently understood, and it can be judged to be true to the extent that all the relevant questions that condition the truth claim have been reasonably and responsibly answered. This account of metaphysics is termed “heuristic” in that it posits the potential intelligibility of all of reality and clarifies the operations by which we actualize that potential. It is termed “latent” in that it identifies the isomorphism between the intelligent human mind and reality as intelligible that is always present even if unthematic. Thus, the warrant for any judgment of reality lies not in an “infinite deferral of authority” to a hidden substructure, to some prior concept of nature, or simply to tradition; rather, metaphysics takes on the humble task of asserting the full intelligibility of the world as it stands in potential to intelligent human knowers.

At each level, Lonergan’s metaphysics is based on the free and dynamic emergence of questions. Beginning from this spontaneous human orientation towards the world in wonder, metaphysics names the unknown objective of our unrestricted desire to know all things and values, without claiming to know all the answers a priori. It is open to

24. Lonergan refers to this presentation of the tripartite structure of all acts of knowing as normative across multiple distinct disciplines as the “generalized empirical method” (GEM); for a more robust explication, see Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, 5th ed., rev. aug., Lonergan, Bernard J. F. Works. 1992 3 (Toron; Buffalo: Published for Lonergan Research Institute of Regis College, Toronto, by University of Toronto Press, 1992). For a more condensed account of these levels, see Chapter One of Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 2nd ed., rev. aug., Lonergan, Bernard J. F. Works (Lonergan Research Institute; v. 14 (Published for Lonergan Research Institute of Regis College, Toronto, by University of Toronto Press, 2017).

the largest possible world and to new and ever-emerging intelligible objects and properties and therein provides the space within which theology may dialogue with gender studies, or with any other mode of inquiry. At this point we must ask, though, How does Lonergan's metaphysics specifically respond to our three criteria? How does it (1) reject the reductivist and naturalist fallacies, (2) account for the postmodern concern for the other and avoid a repressive account of subjectivity and the subject, and (3) evade the charge of being a "metaphysics of eternal presence" and provide a sufficiently relational and developmental account of emergence to make sense of both lived human experience and the best of modern philosophical and theological thought?

In response to the first criterion, we may affirm that Lonergan's account clearly repudiates the tendency towards reductivism. Lonergan's metaphysics elucidates the conditions for the fulfillment of a given question by specifying the demonstrable pre-conditions for a truth claim, but then it refers the verification of those possibilities to whatever field of inquiry is methodically equipped to carry out those investigations. Metaphysics only aids various disciplines in operating authentically in their own fields without overstepping their competency:

Because the metaphysician can assign the general characteristics of proportionate being as explained, it does not follow that he can give detailed answers. On the contrary, he must refer questions of detail to particular departments; and he failed to grasp the limitations of his own subject if, in his hope to meet issues fully, he offers to explain just what various forms are. Inversely, scientists in their several fields can give detailed answers to appropriate questions; but their competence in their own field is conjoined with a failure to grasp its limitations if they attempt to answer the further questions that regard other particular fields or the universe as a whole.²⁵

Metaphysics specifies neither the material method of inquiry nor the objects to which it may be applied. It does not tell scientists how, when, and where to apply the scientific method; rather, it clarifies the scope of an answer according to the methodology applied in response to the initial question. Thus, while the biologist may have something important to add to the discussion at hand, the metaphysician asserts that the biologist is not omni-competent to answer all the relevant questions simply by virtue of being a biologist. In short, biology cannot dictate theology, but neither can theology dictate biology.

Lonergan's metaphysics also combats the isolationist tendency of methodically diverse fields by expounding the relationships between them. Authentic subjectivity means taking seriously the knowledge of other disciplines and being open to the new questions that arise between fields as the result of ongoing investigation. Lonergan describes the interconnections between fields as they are ordered by a movement from lower intelligibilities to higher in which the higher levels sublimate the lower. This is not intended as a destructive epistemic-hierarchicalism. Lonergan's meaning of "sublate" here is quite different from the destructive connotation of the Hegelian *Aufhebung* in that Lonergan argues for the conservation of the truths at the lower levels, even in moving to the higher.²⁶ Although the higher viewpoints express an intelligibility

25. Lonergan, *Insight*, 522.

26. While Lonergan explicitly rejects the Hegelian version on pages 446–47 of *Insight*, his appropriation of the more avowedly Rahnerian meaning of sublation in his own thought attains more prevalent usage only in later works. For instance, in relation to the levels of cognition,

beyond that of the lower, they cannot be deemed to be true if they are destructive of the intelligibility present at the lower levels. In fact, any metaphysics that does not clarify the enriching and enlarging implications of sublation of the lower levels will promote domination and repression. This account of the ordering of higher and lower intelligibilities and the meaning of sublation is further clarified by another critical concept for Lonergan: emergent probability.²⁷

Emergent probability is Lonergan's account of how genuinely new phenomena appear in a constantly unfolding world and, therefore, how their intelligibility relates to both prior and subsequent realities. For instance, prior to the emergence of biological life, there was a chemical substrate from which life eventually emerged according to the probabilities that govern chemical reactions in the world. However, while the lower-order chemical phenomena set the conditions for the possibility of the emergence of biological life, the newly emergent biological order has a different and higher intelligibility than the lower: Once living cells emerge and begin to recur, the likelihood of their recurrence depends on patterns and probabilities identified in biological modeling. As suggested above, this account of emergence and intelligible sublation describes not only how things evolve and emerge in time, but it also describes the relationships of presupposition and complementarity that order the various accounts of any intelligible object or phenomena according to diverse fields. In this sense, the lower-order intelligibility does not cease to be true, but its own probabilities begin to be affected by a new, higher, and emergently intelligible order. These simpler, lower-order cycles then become the basis for further cycles—from chemistry to biology and then on to sensitive and rational psychologies. The lower levels are more essential; the higher are more excellent. To explain the higher according merely to the lower is to ignore the complexity of what has emerged as genuinely new, greater, and irreducible with respect to the lower (partially) constitutive components.²⁸

In the actual practice of interdisciplinary dialogue, the linkages among various levels are maintained by a common core of method—of inquiry and critical reflection—shared by each of their investigations. What is common across disciplines is that, with respect to their own particular objects of inquiry, each method functions as “a normative pattern of recurrent and related operations yielding cumulative and progressive results.”²⁹ Thus, what characterizes a healthy methodology is that it is open and ongoing, and thus the role of method as coordinated with a heuristic metaphysics is revealed to be a surprisingly hermeneutical one. Previous insights continually enable additional

see Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 316–17. Although this term does not appear as such in *Insight*, Lonergan clearly intends the same meaning both in describing the relationships between higher- and lower-level explanatory genera at *Insight*, 280–83 and in his explanation of human development at *Insight*, 494–503, in which Lonergan talks about both the relation of higher explanatory genera to lower and the relations of higher to lower levels of consciousness in much the same way.

27. For Lonergan's own explication of the intricacies of emergent probability, see Lonergan, *Insight*, 138–50.

28. Lonergan, *Insight*, 494–95.

29. Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 4.

questioning that might lead to greater attentiveness to data, and genuinely new understandings and true probable judgments in an ascending hermeneutic spiral. We do not merely ask and re-ask the same questions, but we learn to ask better questions over time and, thereby, come to better answers in the form of verified hypotheses. These verified hypotheses generated according to diverse fields of inquiry contribute to the movement towards fuller understanding of any given phenomenon within and across disciplines.³⁰ This then also prevents any reductionism that would exclude inquiry at higher levels into ethics, politics, aesthetics, philosophy, and—in questions regarding what is unconditioned by space and time—into theology.

In summary, all of these realms of being and inquiry are integral to the complete intelligibility of the universe, and they bear intelligible relations to one another. Such a methodically grounded metaphysics rules out partial accounts at any level—whether nonhuman (e.g. the larger ecological context) or human (e.g. classism, racism, or sexual/gender bias)—and supports Butler's insistence that questions concerning genitality, sexuality, gender, and identity cannot ignore human discoveries in the fields of genetics, phenotypic expressions, reproductive science, endocrinology, and so on.³¹ Lonergan's metaphysics and his account of emergence thereby offer compelling, explanatory reasoning to the injunction against both reductivism and false naturalism, and thus fulfill the exigencies of our first criterion.

Turning, now, to the second criterion, we must also ask if Lonergan's heuristic metaphysics strongly avoids a repressive account of the subject and subjectivity. As I will show below, Lonergan not only evades these pitfalls, but, moreover, provides an expanded basis for making the kinds of normative claims that are needed to promote cumulative and ongoing changes in persons, institutions, and policies in line with ethical concern. Interestingly, it seems that, while subjects and subjectivity are at the heart of Lonergan's program, what he means by this bears substantial similarities with Butler's own elaboration of agency as articulated in response to critiques leveled at *Gender Trouble*.

Critics have raised two basic issues regarding Butler's treatments of subjects. First, some charge that Butler overemphasizes performance, thereby ignoring bodily realities and their impact on identity. Second, they argue that, in dismantling subjects and subjectivity, Butler also dismantled real agency. How, her critics ask, can anyone be capable of resistance or liberation if all advocacy is complicit in the ongoing subjugation that advocacy appears to entail? As Nancy Hartsock poignantly offered, "Why is

30. Within the larger metaphysical structure, Lonergan refers to each of these accounts as constituting conjugate potencies, forms, and acts; *Insight*, 456–62. Lonergan's notion of conjugate forms are quite similar to accidents in Aristotelian philosophy. The difference, as Lonergan argues, is that accidents have been taken as being "accidental" according to a commonsense meaning that to many connotes their being irrelevant to understanding the thing in question. Lonergan challenges also, though, that this is a proper reading of Aristotle or Thomas, as will be discussed at greater length below.

31. Of course, there are many issues here that cannot be dealt with fully in the course of a single article. Notably, here, sublation does involve a real integration of lower viewpoints into higher viewpoints. Due care must be taken to avoid simply inaugurating a new biologism or any other reductive foundation.

it that just at the moment when so many of us who have been silenced begin to demand the right to name ourselves, to act as subjects rather than objects of history, that just then the concept of subjecthood becomes problematic?"³² According to this reading, all persons are so emaciated by the subjection Butler describes as to be wholly impotent.

However, Butler responded powerfully to these critiques in her 1993 work, *Bodies That Matter*. First—in a way that resonates strongly with Lonergan's own position—Butler challenged that those who saw her argument in *Gender Trouble* as denying the importance of the body must themselves have held a view of the body as something "already out there," prior to gender performance and the interpretations and judgments which constitute it as real. If this were true, then humans would have unmediated access to information about their own bodies prior to and apart from the way they interpret that information in dialogue with the larger culture, which Butler rejects outright.

In response to the second critique, directed at her depiction of agency, Butler draws again on the Derridean notions of citation and iteration:

Performativity cannot be understood outside of a process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms. And this repetition is not performed *by* a subject; this repetition is what enables a subject and constitutes the temporal condition for the subject. This iterability implies that "performance" is not a singular "act" or event, but a ritualized production, a ritual reiterated under and through constraint, under and through the force of prohibition and taboo, with the threat of ostracism and even death controlling and compelling the shape of the production, but not, I will insist, determining it fully in advance.³³

Butler's critics seem to insist that the performance be enacted by some subject who is radically free from all other conditions and relations—which describes an account of freedom that both Butler and Lonergan would reject. Rather, performance makes sense only within the context of the overlapping relations that run through and between people. The social and cultural expectations that operate on the subject do not determine their acts; rather they provide the context within which those acts take on their particular significance. Butler argues that this is a full account of agency, and rejects the need to also provide a reified account of subjecthood or identity at the expense of the "other" and through the citation of groundless, regulatory norms: "This instability in all discursive fixing is the promise of a teleologically unconstrained futurity for the political signifier [ex. 'women']."³⁴ In the realm of political action, Butler argues that this entails pushing the boundaries of the previous discourse toward "a more expansive rearticulation" of "political signifiers" and, thereby, to "learn a double movement: to invoke the category and, hence, provisionally institute an identity and at the same time open the category as a site of permanent political contest."³⁵ Rather than language

32. Nancy Hartsock, "Foucault on Power: A Theory for Women," in *Feminism/Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 157–75 at 162.

33. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 95.

34. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 146.

35. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 166–68.

calcifying an intended good as a stable achievement, it may be deployed to confront the inextinguishable reality of evil in human affairs.

Thus, while Butler does not offer the kind of agency that is easily taken up by identity politics, it is a mistake to say that she has no account of agency. As she further argues,

Enabled by the very signifier that depends for its continuation on the future of that citational chain, agency is the hiatus in iterability, the compulsion to install an identity through repetition, which requires the very contingency, the undetermined interval, that identity insistently seeks to foreclose. The more insistent the foreclosure, the more exacerbated the temporal nonidentity of that which is heralded by the signifier of identity.³⁶

By creating a “hiatus in iterability,” Butler’s account of agency is precisely the ability of interrelated individuals to disrupt the production and reproduction of otherwise totalizing norms set through closed cultural signifiers that many experience as instances of dominative power. While Butler does not seem to account for the revelatory capacity of language to convey truth, her work is precisely intended to create the very openings in a hegemonic order that might—when transposed into metaphysics and theology—allow for a heuristic metaphysics and a dynamic account of culture to supplant a closed and repressivist metaphysics and a classical/classicist account of culture.

Thus, although Butler rules out “subjects” in the sense of fixed, reified identities that become normalizing weapons of control, she has surprising points in common with Lonergan. I would also argue that Lonergan’s sense of “subject,” which roots the nature of the subject in its perennial openness to new questions stemming from a fundamental disposition of wonder, avoids the problematic accounts Butler identifies, for it is only the effects of sin that close persons off from this dynamism. Beyond this complementarity, though, Lonergan also articulates something Butler does not: namely, the criteria that characterize loving and intelligent authenticity and the structure of conversion that are required to coax concrete subjects away from their fearful embrace of the false security of a statically defined world.

Intellectual conversion involves attending critically to one’s own acts of knowing in order to affirm both the reality and the limits of all true historical judgments. Intellectually converted persons are enabled to affirm the intelligible world in all its complexity and to have a heightened awareness of their own tendencies toward over-signification. For such persons, development means attending to new and emerging questions that arise spontaneously from an unrestricted desire to know and love and addressing the impediments that they and their community place on that desire.³⁷

36. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 167.

37. Lonergan, *Insight*, 496–500. The notion of the “unrestricted desire to know” is an integral component of the way Lonergan understands cognitional structure. Let it suffice, here, to explain it as the questions which structure consciousness and which act as a heuristic towards understanding the entirety of the intelligible world. For a fuller account of this, see especially *Insight*, 350–52 and 636–39.

Insight into oversight involves paying attention to our blind spots or our selective inattentions with respect to sensory data or the data of consciousness. These biases, left unchecked, dictate a kind of tunnel vision that confuses reality with our own disoriented agenda—especially when that agenda has not reached the level of explicit consciousness. People examine and overcome their own biases by first discovering and acknowledging—through the working out of meaning intersubjectively in communities of knowers—their (often subconscious) suppression or repression of images and feelings that dramatically obstruct the harmonious cooperation of our psyches with the conscious components of development.³⁸ Critically, Lonergan also identifies the importance of authentic religious conversion, which he describes as “other-worldly falling in love. It is total and permanent self-surrender without conditions, qualifications, reservations. But it is such a surrender, not as an act, but as a dynamic state that is prior to and principle of subsequent acts. It is revealed in retrospect as an undertow of existential consciousness.”³⁹ In this, Lonergan clarifies how religious conversion plays a pivotal role in promoting intellectual, moral, and psychic conversion in a world marked by sin.

Lonergan’s account of human consciousness and of personal conversion does not isolate the individual from other knowers—or from the love of God. Conversion always involves personal openness, cooperation, and change in response to the concrete meanings and values of a particular context. Without an adequately understood subject, there cannot be a metaphysics that sets forth the ontological conditions for intelligibility and truth. Without such an integral heuristic structure as this metaphysics provides, it is hard to see how the conclusions of gender studies will be capable of not being waylaid by the forms of false naturalism or biological reductivism discussed earlier, which are themselves rooted in truncated cognitional theories. In this sense, the notion of the subject worked out in Lonergan’s cognitional theory, epistemology, and heuristic metaphysics suggests the criterion of truth, goodness, and authenticity that makes open and loving inquiry more than just an arbitrary or voluntary activity.

Lonergan’s explication of the authenticity of the subject, verified intersubjectively over time, meets and exceeds the second criterion at a fundamental level. Authentic liberation entails individual subjects achieving self-transcendence through acts of knowing and loving. Hence, the only way to challenge the tendency of dominant power structures to “create” and then dominate subjects is instead to cultivate subjects who are subjects of their own history through the self-appropriation of the dynamisms of conscious and intentional knowing and loving. These subjects do so by asking and answering ever-further questions, and they thereby anticipate the movement to higher viewpoints that sublimate and integrate lower ones in accord with the sapiential framework for explanatory accounts provided by methodically controlled metaphysics.

38. Lonergan, *Insight*, 500–502. The conversion of images and values pertains to another needed conversion, psychic conversion, which is best explained in chapter 2 of Robert M. Doran, *Theology and the Dialectics of History* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1990).

39. Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 240.

Finally, then, we return to the third and last criterion for any possible metaphysical approach: namely, that it must provide a relational and developmental account of reality that resonates with lived human experience and with the best of modern philosophical and theological thought. It seems to me that some elements of the preceding—and perhaps especially the excursus on emergent probability—demonstrate in a preliminary way how Lonergan might respond to this. Even stronger evidence—with respect to ontological priority in the order of being—can be found in Lonergan’s more explicitly theological work: namely, that Lonergan views all persons and things as inherently relational because they are held in perfect unity in God’s creative act. As noted earlier, Butler’s critique places Aristotle at the beginning of the whole problematic trajectory of metaphysics. Whether or not Butler has read him correctly, though, Aristotle’s worldview was not determinative for Thomas Aquinas or for Lonergan:

[For Aquinas,] world order is prior to finite natures [or substances] that [God] sees in his essence, first of all, the series of all possible world orders, each of which is complete down to its least historical detail, that only consequently, inasmuch as he knows world orders, does God know their component parts such as his free gifts, finite natures, their properties, exigences, and so on. Coherently with this position I would say that the finite nature is the derivative possibility, that it is what it is because of the world order, and that the world order is what it is, not at all because of finite natures, but because of divine wisdom and goodness. Thus the world order is an intelligible unity mirroring forth the glory of God.⁴⁰

While Aristotle’s metaphysics may have ascribed a diminished intelligibility to accidental properties because of their contingent (and therefore non-necessary) character, Lonergan and Aquinas’s understanding of the existence of all possible world orders within the divine mind renders all contingent or accidental properties equally intelligible and therefore equally real. Neither dismisses the reality and significance of relations and contingently predicated qualities in constituting the individual, for it is God’s loving and providential will that unfolds in creation and not merely the arbitrary laws of a clockwork universe. Rooted in the single and simple creative act of God, there is no prior or pure sense of nature that grounds the whole, and there is no detail that is more or less dignified than another.

In line with the priority of the world order as a dynamic unity, Lonergan emphasized the need to attend not only to relations as they exist locally and proximately, but also a further faithfulness to the relationality that constitutes us as beings in love. Stressing the centrality of intersubjectivity in understanding subjects and their world, Lonergan writes:

Prior to the “we” that results from the mutual love of an “I” and a “thou,” there is the earlier “we” that precedes the distinction of subjects and survives its oblivion. This prior “we” is vital and functional . . . One adverts to it not before it occurs but while it is occurring. It is as if “we” were members of one another prior to our distinctions of each from the others.⁴¹

40. Bernard J. F. Lonergan, “The Natural Desire to See God,” in *Collection*, CWBL 4, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1994), 85.

41. Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 57.

Consequently, there is no subject independent of their own subjectivity. This is true with respect to the mutual mediation of constitutive meanings through society and, critically, with respect to the way that people come to know and be themselves only through others through collective mutual self-mediation. As Maurice Blondel made so clear, all actions, as inescapably within a context of mutual mediation, are always and everywhere coactions.⁴² Or, as Lonergan puts it, nearly all human operations are instances of cooperation.⁴³

Rooted in this view of the world, Lonergan's thought responds powerfully to the third of Butler's critiques. In addition to framing his metaphysics around a deep engagement with contemporary scientific knowing and a worldview grounded on evolution and change, Lonergan was constantly aware of the larger creationary context in theology that specifies the proper range of metaphysics as the whole of created being. He laid the groundwork for the continued retrieval of Aquinas and others without ignoring the genuine emergence of new questions and methods today. This transposition of metaphysics into the modern scientific but specifically not scientific worldview—in dialogue with notions of divine providence, cosmic creation, and the hermeneutic revolution in philosophy and theology—avoids the now typical fragmentation and materialistic reduction of reality, and yields a powerful and powerfully open metaphysics.

Some Further Conclusions

In this article, I have sought largely to demonstrate that Lonergan's and Butler's work are not wholly antithetical and that there are, in fact, a number of places where they are complementary. I have suggested a framework within which those who accept Butler's early philosophical criteria but not necessarily her larger ontological agnosticism may begin to develop a more constructive account of sex, gender, sexuality, and the links between these. I have also argued that Butler, perhaps the most iconic representative of contemporary gender theory, may be a vital resource for Catholic thinkers as they rise to the challenge of speaking the gospel into genuinely new situations today. One need not accept all of Butler's conclusions to recognize the necessity of engaging with gender theorists—whose diversity of positions defies summary judgment—in order to maintain the integrity and relevance of Catholic thought. In these final pages, then, I wish only to make more explicit some of the foundational principles that, in light of the preceding, would helpfully frame attempts at ongoing dialogue.

First, gender is a complex human phenomenon, and it must not be reduced only to the lower-order explanatory accounts of human identity. In the arguments above, I argued for the metaphysical reality of emergence in an evolutionary worldview. This chain of emergence does not stop with the beginnings of the human species; it is at work also in human schemes of cooperation, “not with the blind laws of natural

42. Maurice Blondel, *Action: Essay on a Critique of Life and a Science of Practice* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1984), 207–17.

43. Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 48.

selection, but through the conscious, self-correcting activity of human inquiry and insight.”⁴⁴ Thus, although the lower orders emerge intelligibly, the higher, human levels emerge both intelligibly and intelligently: the generic patterns operative in human lives and choices move from the psychology proper to animals to the human intellectual level in such a way that the lower manifolds no longer are solely determinative. Understanding gender for both of trans- and cis-persons necessitates grappling with complex expressions of self-understanding in relation to the social, cultural, psychological, and spiritual realms. This means that we have to take into account the effect of the real problematization of gender that has taken place. While there are persons and governments who try to suppress the existence of queer persons and their questions, those efforts are both unintelligent and unloving. In whatever way a person identifies today, they increasingly do so in explicit knowledge of the larger public debates around these questions, and their decisions and self-understandings are inevitably shaped by the very existence of the conversation that they live.

My second concluding point has been implicit throughout this article: Reality has an irreducibly statistical component. This implies neither a strict Lamarckian determinism nor a world of pure chaos, thus promoting solipsism or nihilism. Rather, reality itself unfurls according to statistical norms and deviations. This evolution is what makes possible the emergence of new schemes of recurrence, but it is also what makes it possible for human knowers to learn about the world and, at least potentially, to progress in new and deeper understanding of themselves. With respect to embodied, phenotypic sexual expression, it still makes perfect sense to affirm the reality of male and female as these terms correspond to two probability clusters of the whole of human sexual expression. Sex is an explanatory account for the whole range of expression of certain sets of characteristics in persons according to statistical norms. However, no single point in the data set is more “normal” in an ethically normative sense.⁴⁵ Persons may exist closer to or farther from an apex of the distribution curve, but there is no Platonic ideal which dictates so-called normal expression. Simply put, what is humanly normal is to have some sexual expression—male, female, intersex—not to have *some particular* sexual expression. We can affirm the reality of male or female sexed-persons on the basis of a manifold of primary and secondary sex characteristics and their varied statistical expressions; we cannot assign a claim of ethical or natural superiority to just two false binary possibilities. The same holds true for gender expression, to the extent that it relates to but isn’t determined by lower intelligibilities.

Third and finally, Lonergan’s account of metaphysics clarifies that, while there is a need to promote broader understanding of gender, sex, and sexuality, neither chemistry, nor biology, nor even metaphysics is in the business of specifying ethical norms,


44. As explained in Patrick H. Byrne, “Ecology, Economy and Redemption as Dynamic: The Contributions of Jane Jacobs and Bernard Lonergan,” *Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture, and Ecology* 7 (2003): 5–26, <https://doi.org/10.1163/156853503321916192>.

45. For an excellent treatment of this, see Jonathan Heaps and Neil Ormerod, “Statistically Ordered: Gender, Sexual Identity, and the Metaphysics of ‘Normal,’” *Theological Studies* 80, no. 2 (June 2019): 346–69. doi:10.1177/0040563919836194.

and it is always a category mistake to treat them otherwise. Metaphysics gives us the tools to interrogate our acts of understanding and judging, but it cannot provide all that is needed to move self-implicated subjects in history to act responsibly. Thus, while Lonergan's metaphysics exhorts persons with three initial transcendental precepts—be attentive, be intelligent, be reasonable—it also opens to the reality that the probability of any subject realizing them in single instances across a lifetime is intimately tied up with two further precepts: be responsible and be loving. This situates the activity of knowing within the larger ethical and religious world of meaning. As a properly human discipline, metaphysics opens upwards towards a realm of values that is itself normed by love of self, others, and God, thus yielding a rightly ordered metaphysics.

Lonergan's account of metaphysics, understood as critical and heuristic, provides a framework for a more dialogic meeting of the theology and gender studies that treats sex, gender, and sexuality neither as irrelevant nor as all-encompassing of our experience of ourselves as selves. The various potencies and forms that contribute to an individual's identity are not unrelated conceptual islands grouped together *ex post facto*; they subsist in the concrete individual as what is to be understood in his or her full human complexity. To treat sexuality and gender as mere accidents (in the ontologically reductive sense) destroys the unitive wholeness both of the higher emergences of human psychic and of spiritual life and of the person as a unity-identity whole. Conversely, to reject the notion of a subject as oppressive solves nothing. What is needed is a framework for maintaining all of these elements together in a dynamic whole of intelligibility. Although no single philosophical or theological project can encompass a whole culture—let alone the diverse cultures coexisting today—a heuristic metaphysics calls us constantly to give an account of ourselves and to attend to the accounts of others in an effort to not only coexist but to know, value, and love persons in their concrete complexity. Only such a metaphysics has the possibility of adequately providing a needed philosophical solution to the genuinely philosophical aspects of the problem in a way that is at once dynamic and unitive. Failing this, it seems unlikely that we can overcome the deep distortions of bias that militate against a lasting peace and which fuel the fires of endless culture wars.

ORCID iD

Benjamin Hohman  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4519-3013>

Author Biography

Benjamin J. Hohman is a doctoral candidate at Boston College. His areas of interest include metaphysics and epistemology, evolutionary and ecological theology, and Lonergan studies. He has had articles and reviews appear in *Heythrop Journal* and *Horizons*.