

Predistribution summary of address at ACPA Convention, April 1977

"Natural Right and Historical Mindedness" by Bernard Lonergan

Natural right has been thought a paradox, but if one combines the Aristotelian notion of nature with contemporary intentionality analysis, nature and right join hands.

For Aristotle nature was an immanent principle of movement and of rest (Phys. II, 1 192^b22). But such an immanent principle is the spirit of inquiry that wonders what and why and how; of reflection that demands sufficient reason for an assent; of deliberation that requires our projects to be truly worth while. It not only sets goals before us but moves us to them; it seals success with peace, but penalizes obtuseness with embarrassment, error with confusion, sin with remorse.

This natural propensity to inquire, reflect, deliberate, which at once is concrete, dynamic, and normative, would seem to be the very substance of natural right in its sociocultural dimensions. It promotes the individual from infancy to human maturity. It transforms an aggregate of individuals into a community with a common field of experience, common ways of understanding, common judgments, common values and purposes. It even underpins the dialectic of history. For when its norms are met in a sustained fashion, there results the cumulative cycle of progress, as insights yield better projects, better projects become fresh courses of action, fresh courses of action change the earlier situation, and the changed situation becomes the springboard for still further insights. On the other hand, when its norms are repeatedly violated, then obtuseness, unreasonableness, irresponsibility have their cumulative effect in a situation ever more unmanageable, a society ever more hopelessly divided, a culture in which love and loyalty and faith have too often been betrayed for them to retain their pristine power to overcome evil with good.