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## By Nature Equal: The Anatomy of a Western Insight, by John E. Coons & Patrick M. Brennan

George E. Schultze

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moral and spiritual crisis in education. His deepest hope was “to develop a more liberating discourse on the intimate relationships among society, culture, and education” (p. x) by enriching educational theory with a moral and religious discourse. Ten years later, he gives voice to his own moral outrage at the continuing intolerable human suffering in the world and in education’s frequent complicity with such suffering.

One criticism of the text is that, as a collection of essays, it is repetitious. However, this should not dissuade anyone from reading this book. Given the renewed focus on the social teaching of the Church, *Moral Outrage in Education* would make an excellent selection for discussion among educators who might subconsciously assume that the lessons are for someone else.

## REFERENCE

Purpel, D. E. (1989). *The moral and spiritual crisis in education*. Granby, MA: Bergin & Garvey.

*Sr. Mary Katherine Hamilton, I.H.M., is a faculty member in the School of Education at the University of St. Thomas, St. Paul, MN.*

## BY NATURE EQUAL: THE ANATOMY OF A WESTERN INSIGHT

JOHN E. COONS AND PATRICK M. BRENNAN. PRINCETON, NJ: PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS, 1999.

*Reviewed by George E. Schultze, S.J.*

Our culture commonly speaks of human equality without proving that such equality exists. The Declaration of Independence was based on this notion and academic and civil leaders defend it, but no one adequately shows us why we should hold this belief as true. By and large most people believe in human equality, and subsequently, human rights. However, these rights will never be firm if they arise from assertions or religious traditions that others fail to accept. Coons and Brennan attempt to show the truth of human equality in a fair, conscientious, and scholarly manner. They accept the conventional use of terms like “freedom” and “equality,” recognizing the validity of linguistic philosophy, and sympathetically study the works of earlier western philosophers and theologians who have investigated the nature of the human being.

We know that as human beings we are unequal in many ways — height, appearance, intelligence, and so on. It means little to say that all human beings are equal because they possess height and intelligence when we know

that they possess height and intelligence to different degrees. For a useful understanding of equality, we need to find a common characteristic that all human beings possess and possess to the same degree. The authors call this double equality because it occurs in both possession and degree.

The host property that permits us to say all human beings are equal is “the capacity of every rational person to advance in moral self-perfection through diligent intention of correct behaviors toward other persons” (p. 13). This capacity is what makes us all equal and the authors coin the word “obtend” to underscore the movement toward objective good in an individual’s commitment (intention) to do the good. Human beings attempt to reach self-perfection by intending to achieve the objective of good for themselves and others; it is in doing the best they can that they become more fully who they are supposed to be as human beings.

We are, therefore, equal because every person possesses to the same degree the capacity to achieve the highest kind of moral worth. The twist to the Coons and Brennan position is that we might fail in our attempts at behaving morally—be moral bunglers—but our objective and good faith intention is equal to anyone else’s objective and good faith intention (“obtension”), which makes us all equals. Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas would both argue that moral worth is also dependent on the successful completion of the objective moral act (achieving our *telos*), a view that Coons and Brennan clearly question because some people will succeed to greater and lesser degrees.

The notion of human equality precedes the advent of democracy. The host property of human equality can be described by our experience of equality and the common linguistic use of “human equality” (i.e., cultural convention). Unlike some advocates of egalitarianism, the authors argue that equality is the natural state of humanity and not its goal, and in striving for our self-perfection, human beings come to understand that their fulfillment is dependent on the completion of their duties and obligations to themselves and others. At the conclusion of the book, the authors argue that humanity can only experience *liberté* and *égalité* if it has *fraternité* (i.e., social morality), completing the triad of the French Revolution. In our present culture’s Hobbesian focus on individuals and their freedom, we have forgotten the importance of *fraternité*—mutual obligation or perhaps mutual responsibility. Coons and Brennan further complain of the academe’s intellectual gnosticism that insists that doing what is right is always a matter of knowing the right; thus making it impossible for the less intelligent to achieve full moral worth. Furthermore, if people always know the right response to a moral problem, they lose their freedom to some form of determinism. As long as people have good intentions and act upon them, their moral worth is not diminished when they make an ignorant response to a moral dilemma.

The authors discuss philosophical positions of Thomas Hobbes, Thomas

Aquinas, and Immanuel Kant among others. They criticize Hobbes for describing a human will without limits and for therefore suggesting that human beings have no duty to anyone but themselves. According to the authors, Hobbes's mistake was in believing that freedom existed without law. Coons and Brennan correctly reason that some preinstitutional parameters for autonomy must already exist before you can begin to have anything close to democracy. Immanuel Kant rightly separated moral good from all other forms of human good because the only human good without qualification is a good will. For example, we believe intelligence is good but without a good will it can be used for nefarious purposes. Kant's thinking supports the authors' position because the separation of moral good from every other human good "is absolutely critical to human equality" (p. 121). Kant's proof of the pure reason of the noumenon ultimately fails, but the authors are willing to accept the capacity to intend the objective good as equal in every person as supported by convention. In other words, the wider public tends to believe that we have obligations to one another and we have the ability to try the best we can to live up to them. Obviously, our society has inherited much of its conventional view of human equality from the philosophy of Immanuel Kant.

Coons and Brennan look to the Jesuit philosopher Bernard Lonergan, S.J., to help them ground morals in nature without making nature the source of the moral ought, which would mistakenly lead to a moral determinism. What is objective for Lonergan does not correspond to external behavior but is the result of "fidelity to an internally given moral order" (p. 136). If we can never know for sure what is outside our thinking selves, we have to learn of our moral nature and find its objectivity by finding the support structure for moral self-perfection within ourselves. Lonergan's philosophy offers a reasonable explanation for this process.

Lonergan proposes that we know objective reality only by first knowing our internality (our subjective selves). As conscious beings, we experience data, at some level we understand the data, we judge the worth of the data we receive, and then we make a decision to respond in a specific way. When we decide to act, we have clearly become self-conscious. This simple description of the self is necessarily true because anyone who might attempt to refute it would have to rely on experience, understanding, and judgment to decide it was untrue. This subjective interaction with the wider reality of our experience is the spontaneous movement of the human spirit. Our desire to answer the ever-present questions about our meaning and what we are to do is only satisfied by adherence to the "transcendental precepts" that call from within: experience attentively, understand intelligently, judge reasonably, and decide responsibly. The ultimate norm for life is simply a part of who we are as individuals and not wholly immanent. Human beings by their nature need to adhere faithfully to the transcendental precepts. The importance of Lonergan

to Coons and Brennan's belief in human equality lies in each human being's adherence to these precepts that result in objectivity. It is from our interior fidelity to these precepts, our "authentic subjectivity," that objectivity becomes possible. Human beings desire what is real and so their desire transcends their subjective interiority. Moral objectivity occurs because individuals can make authentic judgments.

The question of whether people have the equal capacity to achieve objectivity in their moral judgments has been transmuted into the question of whether they have the same capacity to be authentic, and the answer seems to be yes. Moving the basis of ethics in from the external to the internal world dissolves the problem of "equal access." Once objectivity's norms are internal, everyone can know and satisfy them. The principle is not correspondence to the external but fidelity to the internally given transcendental precepts (p. 140).

To be authentic, which also means attaining objective moral self-perfection, we must try the best we can. No one can plead a lack of knowledge or insight when having to respond to an ethical dilemma. "This does not threaten but instead assures equality, because it never requires of the subject that he do more than heed the inner commands to be attentive, intelligent, reasonable, responsible" (p. 140). Obviously, to heed the inner commands is a challenge that will not countenance moral laxity.

After a very short discussion of virtue ethics, Coons and Brennan draw a framework for a Christian obstensionalism. The authors discuss both Protestant and Catholic theological traditions and the various ways theologians have disputed the relationships between freedom, choice, and grace and their influence or lack of influence on salvation. They find that St. Thomas Aquinas's natural law views do not permit an obstentional understanding of equality because St. Thomas did not believe that a person's will was good when it erred in reason, even when the individual had tried to do his best (i.e., ignorance is no excuse). The authors, however, find St. Alphonsus Liguori (the founder of the Redemptorists), Cardinal John Henry Newman, and the spirit of Vatican II to be promoters of views that are supportive of obstensionalism. To Liguori, a person who diligently attempts to do the good but fails acquires some merit for his attempt. Cardinal Newman's awareness of the limits of our knowledge when making moral decisions has led contemporary moral theologians to reason that if the institutional Church can make mistakes in reason at times, then individuals should not be faulted for making reasonable mistakes. Finally, Vatican II moved further along a path to the universal economy of salvation because the person who makes a commitment to God is trying the best he can.

Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel—but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their con-

science—those too [may attain] eternal salvation (*Lumen gentium*, sec. 16 as cited in Coons and Brennan).

The authors conclude that *Veritatis Splendor* and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* are less supportive of their view of equality based on obdension because Pope John Paul II, while affirming objective morality, never suggests that one is moral by trying one's best, although the person's "dignity" may remain intact. After reviewing both Protestant and Catholic writings, the authors have made a good case for descriptive human equality in the Christian tradition.

Coons and Brennan conclude their work by underscoring the fact that community can occur only where all human beings have an equal capacity for moral self-perfection. One can provide exceptions where some elites feel they have community to the exclusion of others, so the authors concede that their description does not satisfy conventional use of "community." But this should not prevent communitarians from trying to publicize their usage of community, which necessarily includes the capacity for moral self-perfection. To further this goal, the writers suggest that the Catholic world provides an "important illustration" of the relationship between equality and community. The Church sees itself as an exclusive community that has authoritative moral rules, and a recognition of the institutional governing structure is a prerequisite to membership. In addition, the Church members, because of an acceptance of "universal moral equality," must accept the outsider's freedom, the non-believer's freedom, to reflect on the Church's moral understandings and reject them. Catholics have an obligation to lay a bridge to outsiders in expanding their community, but they are to respect the non-believers' decisions. Ironically, even if the non-believer rejects the Catholic position, a universal community still exists because the Catholic respects any decision made in good conscience. Human equality is maintained in a pluralistic world.

*By Nature Equal* is a beautifully written book that provides much fodder for philosophers, theologians, lawyers, and any Catholics who take their faith seriously. A Catholic can accept the equality of human beings as a matter of revelation or through philosophical reflection, perhaps using some form of natural law. The beauty of this work, however, comes from the thoughtful arguments that will necessarily engage non-believers, either helping them become part of the Christian faith community as believers or simply encouraging them as fellow travelers on our common journey of moral self-perfection. The Catholic educator will find the groundwork for support in evangelical efforts and interfaith dialogue through education—not a heavy-handed evangelism, of course, but one of common good will and Christian neighbor-love.

This reviewer's one concern is that Coons and Brennan fail to give a full discussion of contemporary neo-Aristotlean virtue ethics that may come

close to describing an authentic route to moral self-perfection. Virtue ethics, and particularly neo-Aristotelean virtue ethics as espoused by Alasdair McIntyre and Stanley Hauerwas, authors that Coons and Brennan cite, clearly require moral decision-making to lead to action. Contrary to the authors' assertion, the state of virtue is not a passive one. Furthermore, the "self-perfection" of Coons and Brennan, which requires our participation with others, might be another stab at describing our *telos*. This, of course, becomes important to Catholic educators because the narrative that they live and teach their students says something about their end as a faith community. This element of narrative is not strongly promoted by Coons and Brennan because they cite good Catholic sources that underscore the economy of universal salvation. Clearly, we all try our best to reach our end, but ultimately we are dependent on God to gift us with it. God perfects us. To say the least about this fine philosophical work, we must thank the authors for giving us good reason to believe that we are all by our nature equal, assuring us of a universal community.

*George E. Schultze, S.J., is assistant professor of social ethics at the University of San Francisco.*

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