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Statistical and Sacral

VICENTE MARASIGAN, S.J.

In a book like *The Phenomenon of Man* by Teilhard de Chardin,¹ or like *Insight* by Bernard Lonergan,² there is a noticeable fascination for statistical models in these men's efforts to cope with the mystery of evolution of man and of man's thought. For instance, it seems basic in Teilhard's cosmic belief that in the play of large numbers the whole increasingly transcends the sum of its parts. Lonergan seems to be saying the same thing in his description of emergent probability. When the particles of the cosmos, or the insightful events of a moving viewpoint, begin to interact, their interaction generates the conditions for the emergence of a greater whole. Just as the cosmos is an emergent process with an intrinsic direction towards fuller being, so too an integrated insight is an emergent process with an intrinsic direction towards fuller vision.

On his own admission, Teilhard would not have posited the above axiom without having first believed as a Christian that a transcendent cause is immanent in cosmic emergence. But he was fascinated to discover that such a belief is also hinted at — in a dark manner — by statistical models:

The arrangement of great complexes (that is to say of states of greater and greater improbability, even though closely linked together) does not operate in the universe (least of all in man) except by two related methods: (i) the groping utilisation of favourable cases (whose appearance is provoked by the play of large numbers) and (ii) in the second phase, reflective invention . . . (Cosmic energy) finds itself intrinsically influenced in its effects by two uncertainties related to the double play — the chance at the bottom

¹ Teilhard de Chardin, *Phenomenon of Man*, Harper Torchbook, 1961.

² B. Lonergan, S.J., *Insight*, New York, 1956.

and freedom at the top. Let me add, however, that in the case of very large numbers (such, for instance, as the human population) the process tends to 'infallibilise' itself, inasmuch as the likelihood of success grows on the lower side (chance) while that of rejection and error grows on the other side (freedom) with the multiplication of the elements engaged. (Footnote: For a Christian believer it is interesting to note that the final success of hominisation (and thus of cosmic evolution) is positively guaranteed by the 'redeeming virtue' of the God incarnate in his creation. But this takes us beyond the plane of phenomenology.)³

In a less lyrical but equally perceptive analysis, Lonergan reveals a similar fascination for the statistical emergence of events:

The validity of the sequential postulate (the extension of emergent probability to things) rests simply on the validity of inquiring intelligence. Just as we endeavour to understand smaller aggregates of data, so also we seek the intelligibility immanent in the universe of data. Just as the rejection of all inquiry is a total obscurantism, so the rejection of this or that inquiry is a partial obscurantism. For all data are equally data; all are materials for understanding; and as it is impossible to exclude all understanding, so it is incoherent to attempt insight in some cases and to refuse to attempt it in others that do not significantly differ. Now if there is to be known an intelligibility immanent in the universe of data, then it will regard things no less than events and schemes of recurrence; for things are to be grasped in data; their numbers and differentiation, their distribution and concentrations, their emergence and survival, give rise to questions that require an answer. One does not escape that requirement by appealing to divine wisdom and divine providence, for that appeal reinforces the rejection of obscurantism and provides another argument for affirming an intelligible order immanent in the visible universe.⁴

Lonergan goes on to show how the relations between events are associated with and predictable by mathematical laws involving transits from products to sums of the probabilities of those events. His account involves complicated but rigorous logic. One who succeeds in following his highly disciplined reasoning is rewarded with an utterly fascinating intelligibility of a theocentric world-process.

Gabriel Marcel does not share the fascination of Teilhard and Lonergan. In an essay on "The Sacral in the Era of Technology", Marcel finds that statistics and sacrality are utterly irreconcilable: The number factor operates in absolute opposition to the sacral. The very act of counting itself, I would think, is the beginning of desecration. And

³ *Phenomenon*, p. 307.

⁴ *Insight*, p. 261.

if this is so, it is all the more true of statistical evaluation, though, admittedly, those entrusted with the preservation of genuine religious values often condescend to this kind of reckoning — just so much more proof of how far along the process of desacralization actually is.⁵

This is not an isolated statement taken out of context. In an earlier essay, Marcel equates mathematics to intellectual corruption: “The mind becomes corrupt as soon as it accustoms itself to juggling with numbers that correspond to nothing in the imagination”.⁶

Are statistics and sacrality reconcilable or not? It may not be possible here to answer this question. But it may be helpful to try to understand the tension, or at least to live with it.

In his attractive existentialist style of philosophical reflection, Marcel invites his readers to share with him such experiential moments as: the awareness of I-Thou relationship with God; a father’s role of mediator between his child and God; the feeling of compassion for a smiling, defenseless child; the mob hysteria at Fatima; contraceptive intercourse, and the statistical evaluation of deaths and populations. These are vital moments in which the sense of the sacral is either present or absent, and therefore shed philosophical light on the notion of sacrality. While doubting his conclusions with the modest plea that he is himself a “rent individual in process of transition”, he describes sacrality in four significant terms: theocentricity, transcendence, obscurity and simplicity. Of these, theocentricity is fundamental: man’s sense of sacrality implies an awareness that God transcends him and is therefore beyond the reach of his reason and yet relates to him as a person, unique and inwardly autonomous.

It may be assumed that Marcel’s notion of sacrality is substantially shared by both Teilhard and Lonergan. Dialectic polarization occurs when this notion is applied to technology, or more properly, to the existing technological culture insofar as this makes extensive (but not exclusive) use of the statistical approach. The area of polarization may here be narrowed down to those two elements labelled by Marcel as *obscurity* and

⁵G. Marcel, *Searchings*, Newman, New York, 1967, pp. 49–50.

⁶G. Marcel, *Man Against Society*, Chicago, 1962, p. 263.

simplicity, allegedly missing in the technological models of the cosmos or of insight.

Under the heading of *obscurity*, Marcel emphasizes the dark manner that limits man's knowledge of God. For him, the true believer "folds his hands and by this very gesture declares that there is nothing to be done and nothing to be changed; he simply resigns himself. His gesture is one of dedication and worship".⁷ The explicit object of this obscure knowledge is God, but there is an implicit extension to God's creatures, particularly human beings. For Marcel then, a human being is a sacred mystery, and to remove the element of obscurity in this mystery is to desecrate the human being.

This is in contrast to the experience of Teilhard who was convinced that adoration subconsciously motivated the scientist's passion for research, particularly into the phenomenon of man. More explicitly, Lonergan assails "obscurantism"⁸ (not synonymous with "obscurity"), and calls for a concerted campaign against the "flight from understanding".⁹ His own conduct in this campaign is truly impressive.

Marcel may be afraid of the illusion of human self-sufficiency among modern technocrats. This is a real danger in Western technological cultures. But the danger of superstition, magical idolatry, overemphasis on sacral efficacy *ex opere operato*, is equally real in the minds of Teilhard and Lonergan. This is more observable in under-developed rural communities of the Third World.

As for the element of *simplicity*, Marcel emphasizes the uniqueness and interiority of a person, without which his sacral relation to a transcendent God would be meaningless. From this he feels compelled to rule out multiplicity and multitudes from the domain of the sacral. "Grace can only reach the individual, and if it reaches the masses through the individual then it will only happen if the masses arouse themselves from the stupor

⁷ *Searchings*, p. 50.

⁸ *Insight*, p. 261.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. xi.

that made them masses in the first place".¹⁰ Here Marcel is skating on thin theological ice. He is thinking of a depersonalized mob ("Fatima, for example") and not of an interpersonal community of worshippers ("where two or three are gathered together in My name"). This unqualified generalization need not be taken seriously. More serious is his further generalization that to count multitudes is itself "the beginning of desecration". Is this true?

The statistical method does require the mind to abstract from an individual's personhood and to treat him provisionally as a statistical unit. In some instances, such abstraction may be tantamount to denying personhood, or at least to ignoring the dimension of interiority, and Marcel is quite right to lodge a protest. But is this necessarily true in all instances?

Not in the case of Teilhard. In the statistical play of large numbers, Teilhard saw a cosmic psyche groping among the preambles of faith for the lineaments of a Face, in an effort to super-personalize the multitudes into Omega.¹¹ Nor in the case of Lonergan. In his theory of emergent probability, he "has clearly offered an expansive and flexible instrument for an understanding of the world God chose to form into the body of his Christ, into his people".¹²

Perhaps a distinction may be offered at this point. Multitudes are of kinds: there are multitudes of atoms and stars; there are multitudes of flora and fauna; there are multitudes of human beings. The three kinds of multitudes are as radically different from each other as are the grades of being. Hence statistics of multitudes cannot be univocal, and it is wrong to use it as if it were.

Furthermore, statistical models have only a linguistic function whereby persons strive to communicate to one another their experience of being, both one and many. Reality always transcends language, and at three different levels of transcendence.

¹⁰ *Searchings*, p. 52.

¹¹ *Phenomenon*, Book 4, chapter 2, pp. 254-272.

¹² L. O'Donovan, S.J., "Lonergan, Emergent Probability and Evolution" in *Continuum*, VII, 1, 1969, p. 142.

Language, even when describing the most concrete existential situations of human relationships, is often compelled to make use of many abstractions, and Marcel himself would not consider this as desecrating. Statistical models, like language, can be used, as in Teilhard and Lonergan, with an awareness of the dimension of interiority present in interpersonal relations.

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The above reflections arise in response to an imperative of contemporary history: technology in planetary planning. The technocrats controlling these processes are relying heavily on statistical models of society. Because economic factors are more easily adapted to statistical methods, present day technology tends to be econocentric. As Marcel points out, this is a defect, for it tends to submerge personhood in numbers, thereby desecrating the person. Teilhard himself was saddened to discover that his own increasing ability to conceptualize the totality of human beings was accompanied by a decreasing ability to relate to the individual person as person, and that he was increasingly being compelled to seek something else *behind* the personal.¹³ The technological mentality does have limitations.

But the new awakening to the ecological dangers that beset our planet is urging us to decide on a global response within *this* decade. For such a decision, statistical models, for all their limitations, are the only ones readily available to decision-makers.

This realization may well be one reason for the anguish of mankind (or the more conscious portion of mankind) now at a critical threshold of evolution.

¹³ Teilhard de Chardin, *Hymn of the Universe*, Harpers & Row, New York, 1965, p. 67.