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Taking Pictures with Negative Contrast: Edward Schillebeeckx, Critical Remembrance and Policy Analysis As Practical Reason

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Abstract

Experiences of negative contrast result from the normative judgments of the natural law. Such cognition of the normative judgments of the natural law can be aided by the practice of “photography with caption”, which involves capturing on film images of negativities and supplying a commentary or caption to help viewers focus on the negativities. Such photographs can serve as a form of narrative stimuli leading to critical historical remembrance that is based on the negative experience of contrast.

Keywords: Edward Schillebeeckx, practical reasons, critical remembrance, photography.

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Introduction

In an earlier paper, I made the case that the precepts of natural law ground the possibility of what Edward Schillebeeckx calls “negative contrast experiences”.¹ Building on John Finnis’ reading of Aquinas’ natural law theory, I argued there that, since negative contrast experiences are expressions of *normative* judgments protesting various forms of atrocities, then these judgments must be ultimately based not in mere preferences or taste but in the first principles of *practical reasons* which prescribe what *ought* to be or what *ought* not be, i.e., the “natural law”. One could add that, in line with Finnis’ take on Aquinas’ natural law theory, such contrast experiences and their ethical deliverances *drive* theoretical (including metaphysical and anthropological) research, instead of being *derived from* a prior metaphysical account of the world or human nature.

In this paper I develop that line of thought, but specially focus on ways one can access the experience of such negative experiences of contrast, and therefore, by implication, the grasp of natural law’s normative prescriptions. Once more, I draw on the thought of Schillebeeckx, and suggest that such cognition of the normative judgments of natural law can be aided through a form of “photography with caption.” The latter involves capturing on film images of negativities and supplying a commentary or caption to help viewers focus on the negativities, in order that they may reflect on these and experience appropriate normative responses to these images and the realities these images point to. The basic idea is that: confronting subjects in affliction *visually* can help lead to the negative contrast experiences that awaken practical reason’s grasp of values and ethical imperatives, which in turn challenge conventional values and orientations.

Doing such “photography with caption” appears to me to be relevant to leaders, decision makers, policy analysts and advocates in government, business or non-

¹ Jude Chua Soo Meng, “How Negative Contrast Experiences are Possible: A New Classical Natural Law Ethic of Human Liberation” in *Thomas Instituut Jaarboek*, Vol. 22 (2003), 57-82

governmental charities, who are especially well positioned to ensure that the natural law's ethical norms have a place in policy debates on the national and world stage.

Organizations and Performance

In the current climate there are many interpretations of what is valuable and what is right and wrong. Because of this, policy makers and organizational leaders often struggle with problems that are “wicked”. Drawing on a less rigid characterization than the one originally offered by Rittel and Webber, I mean by ‘wicked problems’ those problems that are not easy to define in a straightforward manner, in large part because there can be many contending values, frames or worldviews that prevent a unitary interpretation of what exactly is the issue and what therefore might be the problem, and what therefore might be an appropriate solution.² Disagreements over wicked problems result in intractable policy disputes.

To better resolve intractable policy disputes, organizational leaders need to acquire intelligence that can help negotiate such value-laden disagreements over wicked problems, which scientific and technological forms of intelligence cannot fully arbitrate. Yet, the pressure to perform and to be accountable remains high on the agenda and organizations need to achieve, and *to be seen* to have successfully achieved. Therefore, even if disputes on goals and ends remain unresolved, some forms of visible indicators of success and failures are crafted and become the standards for determining what is to be sought and done. Leaders and their organizations cling tightly to these performance measures and indicators and focus their efforts to fabricate shows of successes based on these criteria.

What follows is undesirable for two reasons. Firstly, concentrating one's attention on achieving these performance indicators distracts from the search for relevant intelligences that are required to better negotiate wicked problems. Secondly, gaps and other needs which are not identified by the performative discourse and served by the performative culture eventually become visible and telling in time, and side effects that

² See Horst Rittel and Martin Webber, “Dilemmas in A General Theory of Planning” in *Policy Sciences*, Vol. 4 (1973), 155-169

follow from the instrumentalism of everything in order to achieve these performance indicators may accumulate.³ After all, these performance indicators are frequently derived from normative judgments which are premised on what March describes as “abstract models of reality that reduce the complexity of any particular context to what are believed to be its essential components and relations.”⁴ Such simplifications generate errors in complex scenarios.

Organizations and systems which find these consequences intolerable will therefore be forced to refine their performance indicators to manage some of these effects. Even then, investing to manage these problems dig into the profit margin or performative achievements on the shorter term, therefore there is much resistance from managers who are on the watch and want to appear to have performed well during their tenure.⁵ As such the evolution of the organization’s policies is slow and shifts in mindset are unlikely, and organizations are more eager to continue to do what achieves the performance indicators, whatever the side effects.⁶ It is business as usual. In this way performative organizations tend to be willing to tolerate major accumulation of consequences that are on other criteria (but only on *other* criteria!) atrocious just in order to “perform” well. For example, politicians are inclined to ignore calls to address changes in the climate if they believe that climatic consequences are likely to hurt only indicators that measure performance *after* their own tenure, whereas addressing the climate would have immediate consequences that hurt *their present performance* measured under the economic indicators. Again, educational leaders may be willing to tolerate and accumulate various forms of institutional social injustices and blindspots in the educational processes for students as well as staff leading to consequences that emerge only after generations in order that they appear to have performed well under current indicators which acknowledge academic achievements unreflectively measured as numbers.

³ James G March, “Rationality, Foolishness and Adaptive Intelligence”, *Strategic Management Journal*, Vol. 27 (2006), 201-214 at 208

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ James G March, “Exploration and Exploitation in Organizational Learning” in *Organization Science*, Vol. 2.1 (1991), Special Issue: Organizational Learning: Papers in Honor of (and by) James G March. (1991), 71-87 at 73

⁶ March, “Rationality, Foolishness and Adaptive intelligence” o. c., 206

A Need for Intelligence

It is however possible to remedy this trend. For instance, one might find ways of introducing, through various forms of pedagogical and exploratory devices, the serious recognition of new goals, values or worldviews which have been displaced by a culture ordered solely towards the achievement of these performance indicators.⁷ In this way the obsession with performance indicators can be “exorcised”.⁸ Doing this could include the employment of “technologies of foolishness,”⁹ which are psychological techniques for broadening one’s epistemic horizons. For example, one encourages decision making that promotes identity experimentation in order to expose the agent to new ways of being and of thinking, with the hope that these new ways of being and thinking, and their associated goals and values, would be seen as serious alternatives to those under the performative culture.¹⁰

However, a complete solution will demand more. Relaxing one’s grip on the performative culture and the security it affords merely leaves one acknowledging the current complexity and the multi-various possible sets of values, world-views and frames competing for dominance. And, confronting disputes over wicked problems with post-modern soft relativism which attributes an equal standing to all supposedly incommensurable and competing discourses is I suspect not always helpful. The resolution of policy controversies through the form of ‘frame reflection’ that Schön and Rein recommend, where one adopts the essentially post-modern premise that there is no objective criteria to arbitrate between competing powers and hopes to trade one frame for another through diplomatic invitations under pragmatic pressures does not go far enough and is on several levels flawed.¹¹ Even if one adopts no foundational premises outside of

⁷ Jude Chua Soo Meng “Saving the Teacher’s Soul: Exorcising the Terrors of Performativity” in *London Review of Education*, Vol. 7.2 (2009), 159-167

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ James G March, “Model Bias in Social Action” in *Review of Educational Research*, Vol. 42.4 (1972), 413-429 at 423; James G March, “Bounded Rationality, Ambiguity, and the Engineering of Choice” in *The Bell Journal of Economics*, Vol. 9.2 (1978), 587-608 at 601

¹⁰ See Jude Chua Soo Meng, “In Praise of Folly: On Seriously Playful Curriculum Design” in *Education Today*, Vol. 58.4 (2008), 18-23; also Jude Chua Soo Meng “Saving the Teacher’s Soul: Exorcising the Terrors of Performativity” o.c.

¹¹ Donald Schön and Martin Rein, *Frame Reflection: Toward the Resolution of Intractable Policy Controversies*, Basic Books, New York, 1994

those frames, it may still be possible to eliminate frames which are internally incoherent, particularly through self-contradictions that occur between the performance and the utterance, or the implications of the act of defending one's frame seriously and various commitments within that frame.¹² I have elsewhere argued that *public* policy prescriptions defended *seriously and with intent*—whatever the substantive content—is at odds with frames that adopt naturalistic atheism as a metaphysical commitment or fundamental worldview.¹³ More importantly, the belief that persons should be willing to trade frames in 'frame reflection' lacks warrant; it is ironic that Schön and Rein's work proposing frame reflection was written in a spirit of lamentation after they had failed to convince MIT designers they were consulting to do precisely that very frame reflection they recommend.¹⁴ In any case, theoretically speaking, if one adopts this post-modern neutrality in relation to the competing frames, then there is really no basic reason to privilege one frame over the other, and the prescription to trade one frame for another comes across as redundant and arbitrary, and hence is not persuasive.

If the organization wishes to edge towards progress in the resolution of wicked problems beyond the acknowledgment of the plurality of frames, leaders must press on until some positive articulation (where available) of what is true and false or right and wrong is achieved, based on which other discourses may be measured. What needs to be further discovered in exploration are forms of intelligence that carry with them those normative insights to help leaders arbitrate between the competing value-laden frames and paradigmatic worldviews which define the various interpretations of the problem and associated policy recommendations. I should confess that I say this with an Aristotelian-Thomistic confidence in the existence of such forms of intelligence, which I believe derives from the natural law, or the first principles of practical reason. It is a confidence that the following sections of this paper will try to defend. Put in a different way, the exploration that I suggest here is promoted with a view to enabling a conception of "policy analysis as practical reason" where non-neutrality and positive principles of ethics and metaphysics constituting an objective frame help move policy analysis

¹² Compare *ibid.*, 44-45

¹³ Jude Chua Soo Meng, "God and the Taming of Wicked Problems: Some Philosophically Required Frames in Policy Design" in *Angelicum*, Vol. 85 (2008), 815-831

¹⁴ See Schön and Rein, *o. c.*, 124-128

forward.¹⁵ These kinds of exploration can be encouraged in higher education institutes preparing graduates for the work force or professionals for leadership roles, and should especially find a place in professional development courses for leaders submerged in totalizing performative cultures, in spite of themselves.

Rationality: Bounded and Expandable

Essentially exploration involves the expansion of rationality's boundaries. The idea that rationality is bounded is a major theme in behavioral psychology and economics, and the term "bounded rationality" was coined by Herbert A. Simon.¹⁶ Rationality's bounded-ness is most visible in reason's inability to compute for optimal solutions maximizing value functions in complex scenarios. The limits of rationality can be difficult to correct. His response was to propose alternative decision making heuristics to maximization or optimization, arguing that decision makers should instead satisfice, meaning that one settles for a solution that is tentatively good enough but not necessarily optimal. However, other forms of rationality's limits are less permanent, and have more to do with the consequences of some epistemic habits and preferences rather than the intrinsic operational limits of the mind, and hence, it may be possible in these cases to push the limiting perimeters further back. Therefore against a narrow obsession with original design goals, Simon recommended an openness to accidental consequences that could be welcomed as new goals.¹⁷ Also, James G. March, for example, considers if our preferences can blind us epistemologically to various forms of intelligences, and suggests that the modification of these preferences can expand our rationality, or at least open us to searches that can lead to the discovery of new forms of intelligence.¹⁸

¹⁵ Fazal Rizvi, "Towards A View of Policy Analysis as Practical Reason" *Journal of Education Policy*, Vol. 1.2 (1986), 149-162

¹⁶ Herbert A. Simon, *Administrative Behavior* (4th Edn.), The Free Press, New York, 1997; also Herbert A. Simon, *Models of Bounded Rationality: Empirically Grounded Economic Reason*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press, Vol. 3., 1997

¹⁷ Herbert A. Simon, *The Sciences of the Artificial* (3rd Edn) The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press, 1996; also Jude Chua Soo Meng, "Donald Schön, Herbert Simon and *The Sciences of the Artificial*" in *Design Studies*, Vol. 30.1 (2009), 60-68.

¹⁸ See March, "Model Bias in Social Action", o. c.

If we apply an Aristotelian distinction between theoretical rationality and practical rationality, we could describe the kind of rationality I am hoping to expand here as practical rationality. The distinction between theoretical reason and practical reason can be described as a distinction between two kinds of reasoning processes aimed at achieving different acts each with their offerings of first principles governing these processes.¹⁹ Theoretical reasoning is reasoning that is employed when deliberating about what *is* the case, and although it introduces norms it does so within the perimeters of the factual, for example, when one deliberates the means to a given end. Practical reasoning is operational when one deliberates about what *ought* to be, especially when such deliberation occurs beyond the confines of thinking about means to ends; practical reasoning explores what final ends are worth seeking or what things or states of affairs one should be avoiding, irrespective of any other ends. Under this interpretation of practical reasoning which is John Finnis' and which draws from Aristotle through to Thomas Aquinas, practical reasoning offers a set of foundational first principles each of them fully normative, i.e., each of them fully furnished with the "ought" in them. As such practical reasoning does not need to "derive" its foundational prescriptive norms from the deliverances of theoretical reasons; it does not need to cross the logical gap between fact and value, if we think this inference from the 'is' to the 'ought' is fallacious.

This however does not imply that the discoveries of theoretical reason or of the factual are of no use to practical reasoning. Practical reasoning demands and employs knowledge from theoretical reasoning: for example, practical policy thinking draws on descriptive, quantitative truths of states of affairs. Further to this—and this point is especially pertinent to this paper—the epistemic encounter with descriptive truths, especially truths about certain states of affairs or facts, has the capacity to sharpen and surface the grasp of normative ideas or ethical prescriptions, including those which could themselves be foundational first practical principles from which other norms may be derived.²⁰ This is especially true of the encounter with states of affairs where there is a grievous measure of meaningless suffering, leading to a keen and critical awareness of

¹⁹ John Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1980; John Finnis, *Fundamentals of Ethics*, Washington D. C., Georgetown University Press, 1983

²⁰ Jude Chua, "How Negative Contrast Experiences are Possible" o. c.

specific imperatives or norms condemning such states of affairs²¹—a line of thought that I will further develop in the following sections. Meaning to say, if we grant that the naturalistic fallacy is truly a fallacy, then knowing such facts does not *logically* permit one to infer the norms of ethics. Nevertheless, the knowledge of such facts has the *psychological* (meaning, epistemic and empirical, and indeed partly semiotic) effect of making these ethical norms, derived from practical (rather than theoretical) first principles evident and hence more visible to one’s deliberative consciousness. While this is a psychological rather than a logical achievement, it is not a trivial one. The psychological disclosure or not of these ethical principles often determines whether or not, for all pragmatic purposes, there are or there are not such things as ethical norms based on which one can arbitrate between contesting shows of normative standards. Particularly for the positive-empiricist paradigm—still dominant in policy circles where technological conceptions of policy analysis hold sway—because ethical norms cannot always be inferred from measurable facts, they are hence discounted, said to be non-existent fictions and are not taken seriously.

The Experience of Negative Contrast

Concrete facts can be experienced and recalled with value neutrality, to be known and detailed descriptively. Thus a surgeon-professor can examine an image of an x-ray and explain how it shows a person’s lungs with a spread of cancerous tumors. But that same fact can also draw more than that, on occasion. The same surgeon professor was using the x-ray image of his late father’s chest, and when alone and back in his office, just as he files up the image after class, he takes another look at it and occasionally tears well in his eyes and he wishes it had not been the case. The latter reaction includes sentiment, of course: perhaps sorrow, perhaps anger. Yet it is not impossible that it also includes a judgment that has a prescriptive quality over and above the motives inspired by feelings. It might include, “why should my father have to die so young, and so painfully? Nobody ought to suffer like that. Why didn’t he quit smoking earlier? He should have. Nobody should be lured into a smoking addiction, nobody should have his or her life cut short this

²¹ Ibid.

way. It's not worth it. It's just not right for cigarette companies to promote their product and pretend it does no harm!" The second reaction is shot through with evaluative claims. Not all of these need be sound, but some of these may be, and some inspire the quest for surer, sounder arguments consistent with these judgments. Still the point remains that sometimes, one's confrontation with a state of affairs can lead to a prescriptive consciousness over and above the purely theoretical or contemplative one, and over and above merely sentiments or preferences. Such experiences include what Schillebeeckx calls "negative experiences of contrast".²²

The phrase and idea of a "negative contrast experience" draws from the Frankfurt School critical social theorists, especially Theodor Adorno's notion of 'negative dialectic'. The basic insight is that ethical imperatives are less easily visible in good times than they are in bad. Rather, in the experience of or encounter with negativity, most notably great suffering, persons can have the critical insight that the current state of affairs is simply ethically unacceptable: "This cannot be!" Facing up to suffering leads to ethical protestation.²³ In these experiences of negativity, which do not primarily refer to the suffering of pain so much as the suffering of various forms of meaninglessness or deprivation of meaningful goods,²⁴ ethical imperatives surface. These ethical imperatives condemn the negativity on the one hand, and on the other urge the agent to promote a better state of affairs. So it is critical and at the same time convicts the agent with "a utopian consciousness", or a drive to improve things for the better.²⁵

In his celebrated *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*, Schillebeeckx details the dynamics of such experiences of contrast. He highlights in particular their epistemic connection to suffering as *negative* experiences of the latter and therefore the implicit dialectical orientation towards and longing for a better, more humane, and more meaningful world, based on which longing such *negative* or *critical* experiences are

²² Edward Schillebeeckx OP, *God the Future of Man*, Sheed and Ward, New York, 1969; Edward Schillebeeckx OP, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*, Herder and Herder, New York, 1980; Edward Schillebeeckx OP, *Church the Human Story of God*, Crossroad Publishers, New York, 1990

²³ Robin Ryan CP, "Holding On To the Hand of God: Edward Schillebeeckx on the Mystery of Suffering" in *New Blackfriars*, Vol. 89 (2007), 114-125

²⁴ Jude Chua, "How Negative Contrast Experiences are Possible" o. c., p. 60

²⁵ Schillebeeckx, *Jesus*, o. c. p. 661. Here is an interesting transition from an interest in the descriptive and theoretical to an interest in the prescriptive and practical; a transition from the pure theorist to the orientation that belongs to the (morally concerned) professional, practitioner or designer.

possible.²⁶ At the same time, such experiences of negative contrast yield norms that are apart from and that are critical of the technological forms of thinking, or what he calls ‘controlling / manipulative scientific knowledge’, which have the tendency to instrumentalise the suffering human person without any respect for his intrinsic, and perhaps superior value in comparison with our other goals and our preferential duty towards him, thus commodifying him or making a product out of him, and disrespecting his ‘priority’. Schillebeeckx writes:

“[H]uman suffering also has a particular critical and productive epistemological force. This cannot just be reduced to the purposive, emancipatory type of ‘controlling knowledge’ (that form of knowledge peculiar to science and technology)... The special epistemological value of critical experiences of contrast has a critical function towards... the scientific and technological forms of knowledge... It is critical of the controlling knowledge of science and technology, which as such presupposes that man is merely a ‘controlling subject’ and by-passes the question of the priority which the sufferers can claim among us... [E]xperiences of suffering come upon a man in the form of a negative experience, quite different from the positive enjoyment of contemplative, playful and aesthetic experiences. On the other hand, under the aspect of the experience of *contrast* or critical negativity, the experience of suffering forms a bridge towards possible action which might remove both suffering and its causes... [B]ecause of its negativity, it has an ethical resistance to this ‘let be’; it has a critical epistemological force which appeals to a practice which opens up the future, an action which, moreover, is not subject to the acceptance of a monopoly of technocracy (that is also a cause of suffering).”²⁷

²⁶ Ibid., 816-819

²⁷ Ibid., 817-819

In his monumental *Church: The Human Story of God*, in which he develops the notion that people are the words with which God tells his story, Schillebeeckx describes negative contrast experiences as “pre-religious” in order to point out their natural and evidential quality, rejecting at the same time the positivist paradigm which cannot receive such normative judgments: “This experience is also more certain, more evident than any verifiable or falsifiable “knowledge” that philosophy and the sciences can offer us. Indignation (which is certainly not a scientific term) seems to be a basic experience of our life in this world.”²⁸

Even as evidential and certain, such ethical imperatives may not be so determinate to be of the kind which settles whether abortion or homosexual unions are right or wrong, or whether a certain military response is just. That said, they may still be distinct enough to convince persons of the need to not “let be” certain privations of basic goods, manifesting as suffering and affliction, and to demand that this should never ever be left unaddressed. At the very least, they invite us to re-examine policy deliberations that are willing to welcome and leave unaddressed as side effects such negativities or sufferings in order to achieve other desired ends, or worse, those which intentionally aim to bring these states of affairs about for some other end. Thus for example, the ethical imperative might consist of a protestation against the large scale destruction of the natural and cultural environment, and loss of life, and hence challenge policy thinking solely interested in the achievement of economic gains at the expense of massive harms to the rainforest and indigenous communities. For instance, in this way the ethical protestation is able to arbitrate between competing policy arguments from environmentalists and industrialists and fall on side of the those who are at least interested to manage such consequences, if not to prevent them, otherwise we might end up with a state of affairs that “simply cannot be permitted!”

It is of course entirely possible to imagine agents arriving at such ethical imperatives apart from experiences of contrast, although it is also true that experiences of contrast helpfully surface these ethical imperatives. After all, ethics can come from ‘above’—to speak metaphorically of derivations from general ethical principles, as applied moral philosophy is often done. Just as well, one can acknowledge ethical

²⁸ Schillebeeckx, *Church*, o. c., p. 5

reflection from ‘below’, meaning by that, that it is often through concrete, contextualized negative contrast experiences of grave suffering that agents grasp vividly ethical imperatives condemning such an unhappy state of affairs and urging for emancipative change for the better. Such acknowledgment highlights the epistemological advantage of being on the ground, especially when there is no consensus regarding general moral principles from above, as is often the case in the struggle over wicked problems. Indeed it is not unusual to find that the evidential ethical insights from below leads to the exploration for a parallel ethics from above, since the contrast experience can drive the search for corroborating deductions from general principles (where they are available), as Schillebeeckx has also acknowledged.²⁹

History as *Anamnesis*

Is there nevertheless a way for those who have no direct access to these contexts to share in that epistemologically privileged condition? Meaning, is there a way that one might just be as acutely sensitive to ethical imperatives as those on the ground experiencing these sufferings *without* at the same time suffering as they suffer? Schillebeeckx thinks there is. For him, the answer is a form of historical reflective thinking he calls “critical remembrance”. Critical remembrance (or critical history) is meant not the mere contemplative or speculative recall of past events but rather recollection that has ethically epistemic consequences informing or leading to action (*praxis*). Schillebeeckx is especially interested in “critical remembrance” (*anamnesis*) of suffering.³⁰ In the critical remembrance of suffering, the thing or event which is the basis for such remembrance is not experienced in the real nor in the present, nor *need it necessarily be something one has experienced personally*. In spite of the distance, through such critical remembrance of suffering, the production of negative experiences of contrast can be effectively just as epistemologically transformative: one grasps normatively binding ethical imperatives to liberate such and similar sufferers from their affliction and to resist such gross negativity.

²⁹ Schillebeeckx, *God the Future of Man*, o. c., 153-154

³⁰ Elizabeth K. Tillar, “Critical Remembrance and Eschatological Hope in Edward Schillebeeckx’s Theology of Suffering for Others” in *Heythrop Journal*, Vol. XLIV (2003), 15-42 at 16

Applying this insight in his theology of the liturgy, Schillebeeckx argues that liturgical celebrations of the Roman Catholic mass needs to make *visible* occasions of critical remembrance of the sufferings of Jesus Christ, and of characters in the Christian tradition. As Tillar explains:

“This example of his method at work embodies the recognition that liturgy contains an intrinsic element of protest against unjust socio-political structures and any endeavor that causes suffering. Indeed, as the critical dimension in liturgical remembrance, socio-political protest is a stimulus to ethical action. Moreover, he reminds us that the association of liberating actions of particular people with the elements of liturgy—including narrative, doxology, hymns, and the Eucharist—has a biblical basis...There is no incompatibility between the sacramental dimension of the church and social activism, i.e., between contemplation leading to the articulation of socio-political theory and theologically informed praxis...If liturgical remembrance does not include an ethos of justice and compassion, it forfeits its basis in reality.”³¹

Although Schillebeeckx’s application of his theory of critical remembrance in liturgy is centrally theological or religious, the basic strategic insights and pedagogical methods can be transposed and developed into a similar application of a more secular nature. At the heart of Schillebeeckx’s theory of liturgical remembrance is the simple thesis that narratives and performances which call to mind events or stories of negativity (and liberation from these negativities) can have the psychological effect of generating negative experiences of contrast just as the actual experiences of these negativities can. Liturgy crafted in a certain way to highlight these sufferings and emancipative events is just one possible pedagogical form; there is nothing to prevent the crafting of other non-religious instruments or tools that can also highlight the experience of suffering and emancipations to generate the critical remembrance leading to experiences of negative

³¹ Elizabeth K. Tillar, “The Influence of Social Critical Theory on Edward Schillebeeckx’s Theology of Suffering for Others” in *Heythrop Journal*, Vol. XLII (2001), 148-172 at 167-168

contrasts. Indeed “the concept of ‘critical remembrance of the past’ includes the recollection of *any* tradition with a view to the retrieval of the under-represented, or neglected aspects of history, especially of past human suffering, wither in the church or in society as a whole.”³² Therefore it is not impossible to imagine the design of some secular educational programme with these pedagogical effects in mind, and then artificially introducing these into systems or organizations to stimulate the desired explorations discussed earlier in order to balance undesirably performative tendencies.³³ Thus Procario-Foley and Bean consider how service-learning programmes expose mature students to negative experiences of contrast as their lives interweave with the poor they serve.³⁴ Elsewhere Sison suggests movies and their viewing may bring across such experiences of contrast.³⁵ In this final part of the essay, I will explore the use of the camera and photography as one possible secular application of Schillebeeckx’s theory of critical remembrance.

An Example: Camera with Caption

Certainly photography is not the only possible educational application of Schillebeeckx’s theory of critical remembrance, but it is an attractive one because inexpensive digital cameras are widely available, and usually are built into mobile phones that people already carry. Also, images differ from statistics, numbers or mere words; to borrow and build on a semiotic concept from Aquinas and John Poinsoot, we could say that images operating as signs have strong “powers of exciting”, and are especially effective for bringing our attention to the signed realities.³⁶ Finally, developing a discussion on the application of critical remembrance with a focus on a specific tool is also helpful for thinking through in determinate ways how the concretization of the more

³² Tillar, “Critical Remembrance”, o. c., p. 22

³³ See James G. March, “Rationality, Foolishness and Adaptive Intelligence” o. c.

³⁴ Elena G. Procario-Foley and David F. Bean, “Institutions of Higher Education: Cornerstones in Building Ethical Organizations” in *Teaching Business Ethics*, Vol. 6.1 (2002), 101-116

³⁵ Antonio Sison “*Perfumed Nightmare* and Negative Experiences of Contrasts: Third Cinema as Filmic Interpretation of Schillebeeckx” in *Journal of Religion and Film*, Vol. 6.1 (2002), available at: <http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/perfumenght.htm>

³⁶ See John Poinsoot, *Tractatus de Signis: The Semiotic of John Poinsoot*, John Deely (trans.), Berkeley, University of California Press, 1985, at 197-198

general theory of critical remembrance would play out. These ideas are meant less as exhaustive recommendations than they are stimuli for further proposals, development and refinement.

The general idea is straightforward: the photographer can take pictures of people (and of oneself), structures, systems, etc. in various forms of privation, in order to highlight their plight. Some of these images may be of events in the past, but some can be of contemporary events. The point in critical remembrance is not the recollection of the past, but that the *calling to mind of events that are distant*, either because they are in the past, and hence temporally distant, or perhaps because they are not happening to us even if they are occurring just as we speak and hence these are spatially and experientially distant. Distant events are easily forgotten: they do not powerfully effect ethical responses. So long as these negative realities are not presently experienced, then the photographic images of these distant negativities help us *recall* them, by calling them to our mind, and to our presence. These images of suffering then perform the similar task of liturgical narratives: they call to mind, and excite our memory of these serious privations and negativities, and set the stage for negative experiences of contrast, leading to the protestation against these and similar realities, or inspire the search for principles corroborating these protestations.

The pedagogical programme can take the form of photographic sessions or perhaps include a photographic exhibition of the pictures taken. Both the photographic artist and the viewer of the photographic prints are set up for critical remembrance. In such a pedagogical programme, photographers and viewers of the photographic prints who are policy makers, leaders and decision makers are especially welcome.

The use of photographic images to influence policy thinking is not altogether new.³⁷ Caroline Wang's report of a "photovoice" project in Yunnan Province China, which had Chinese women take pictures of their ordinary plight in poor living conditions, has this to say:

³⁷ M Brighton Lykes, Martin Terre Blanche & Brandon Hamber "Narrating Survival and Change in Guatemala and South Africa: The Politics of Representation and a Liberatory Community Psychology" in *American Journal of Community Psychology*, Vol. 31.1/2 (2003), 79-91; Caroline C Wang, "Photovoice: A Participatory Action Research Strategy Applied to Women's Health" in *Journal of Women's Health*, Vol 8.2 (1999), 185-192; Caroline C Wang, Yi Wu Kun, Tao Zhen Wen & Kathryn Caravano, "Photovoice as a participatory health promotion strategy" in *Health Promotion International*, Vol. 13.1 (1998), 75-86

“Pictures can influence policy, but how? The potential for using photovoice as a tool to influence policy resides in the exchanges among community people, health workers, and policymakers over images of interest... Throughout the Yunnan Program, we observed it was the health policymakers—often far removed from the experience of the people they govern—who could and did learn from the women’s photographs and stories. Rural women already knew what burdens filled their days.”³⁸

An important requirement might be the inclusion of a commentary or a caption for each picture to help the viewer focus on the negativity, especially when the pictorial composition is well conceived. This is particularly helpful when the photographer is technically and aesthetically competent and, because of the excellence of the photographic method and print, the picture, having become desirable and attractive, ends up in danger of losing its critical and transformative value. Walter Benjamin brings this out well when speaking of how photography can fail to achieve political and revolutionary value. He says:

“[Photography] becomes more and more subtle, more and more modern, and the result is that it can no longer be possible to photograph a run-down apartment house or a pile of manure without transfiguring it. Not to speak of the fact that it would be impossible to say anything about a dam or a factory cable except this: the world is beautiful. *The World Is Beautiful*—that is the title of a famous book of photographs by Renger-Patsch...it has even succeeded in making misery itself an object of pleasure, by treating it stylishly and with technical perfection. What we should demand from photography is the capacity of giving a print a caption which would tear it away from fashionable clichés and give it a revolutionary use-value. But

³⁸ Wang, “Photovoice” o. c., p. 187

we will pose this demand with the greatest insistence if we—writers—take up photography.”³⁹

Doing “photography with captions” of the kind I recommend here does not seem, at first glance, to fit very nicely with ordinary conceptions of serious professional or scholarly work, as would traditional social science research, for example. Yet in its essence it is not too different from sociological or anthropological studies which record the social dynamics of communities or organizations, particularly those works of critical theorists who record the negativities in performative systems or organizations. The main difference is merely that critical photographic research, if I might call the kind of photographic study I am speaking of here, is methodologically more visual.⁴⁰

³⁹ Walter Benjamin, “The Author as Producer” in *The New Left Review*, John Heckman (trans.), I/62, (1970), at 5; available at <http://newleftreview.org/?page=article&view=135>

⁴⁰ Caveat: the author’s borrowed development of Edward Schillebeeckx’s idea of negative experiences of contrast in ethics does not necessarily entail endorsement any of Schillebeeckx’s other (theological) positions or conclusions.