

Insight into Lonergan

by Nicholas Lash

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I have been invited not only to comment on the essays published in this collection,¹ but also to try to 'place' Bernard Lonergan and his work. The first task is not easy, the second is virtually impossible. In saying this, I am not denying that it is reasonable to ask questions such as: 'What is Lonergan up to?', 'Where does he stand in contemporary debates?'. The list of contents alone would invite such questions. What is the common factor, beyond the mere fact of common authorship, in sixteen essays, originally published between 1943 and 1965, on such disparate topics as: 'Finality, Love, Marriage', 'A Note on Geometrical Possibility', 'The Assumption and Theology', and 'Cognitional Structure'? Another reason for wanting to have Lonergan 'placed' is that, while the sheer difficulty of most of his work renders him inaccessible to many people, he has profoundly influenced such very different spirits as David Burrell, Bishop Butler, Charles Davis, Sebastian Moore, John Courtney Murray and Michael Novak. Yet, while I believe that Lonergan is one of the most profoundly original and creative Catholic thinkers of our time, it is his very originality that makes it almost impossible to place him. It may seem paradoxical to describe as 'original' a man much of whose writing bears the terminological hallmark of neo-scholastic theology and metaphysics. But then, the originality of Beethoven did not consist in the notes of the scale which he employed, but in the conception and structure with which they were ordered.

Frederick Crowe's editorial introduction to the collection is an excellent biographical and interpretative summary of Lonergan's work. It needs to be read alongside the rather fuller essay, with the same purpose, which Fr Crowe contributed to the special number of *Continuum* (which he also edited) which served as a Festschrift for Lonergan's sixtieth birthday.² In the latter essay, Crowe said that he intended to 'divide the course of Lonergan's expansion and development into five stages which may be marked outwardly as (1) his doctoral dissertation, (2) the *Verbum* articles, (3) *Insight*, (4) his concern with method, and (5) the present phase in which interest centres on historical consciousness and meaning as constitutive of reality for the race of man' (p. 17). Before commenting on the essays

¹*Collection*, papers by Bernard Lonergan, S. J. Edited by F. E. Crowe, S. J. Darton, Longman & Todd. 1967. xxxv + 280 pp. 50s.

²'The Exigent Mind: Bernard Lonergan's Intellectualism', in *Spirit as Inquiry: Studies in Honour of Bernard Lonergan* (*Continuum*, Vol. 2, No. 3, Autumn 1964).

in the present collection, it may be helpful to say something about each of these five stages.

The first two stages belong together. During this period, Lonergan was concerned with a rigorous examination of the mind of Aquinas on two key topics: 'Gratia Operans' and 'The concept of *Verbum*'. Whatever should be the judgement of history on these two treatises from the point of view of their exegetical validity, it is not here that their real importance lies, either for Lonergan or for us. As Crowe says: '... the real discovery was of the way Aquinas worked and questioned and thought and understood and thought again and judged and wrote' (*ibid.*, p. 18). In other words, Lonergan's principal concern, even in these early years, was less with the position which Aquinas reached on this or that topic than with the techniques he employed to reach that position. Similarly, at each stage of his career, what Lonergan is doing is of less interest than how he is doing it: 'It is a choice of performance rather than content (that)... is the key, I think, to understanding what Lonergan has done' (*ibid.*, p. 17).

The very depth to which Lonergan succeeded in entering into the mind of Aquinas has, however, proved a mixed blessing, so far as the accessibility of his own thought is concerned. Because he learned to use the linguistic and conceptual tools employed by Aquinas as his own—even when working on projects which did not, and could not have explicitly occurred to Aquinas—he continued to use 'scholastic' language well into the period when most Catholic thinkers were abandoning it as unhelpful. This does not mean that he was on easy terms with neo-scholastics of the period. On the contrary, because he shared a common terminology with men whose fundamental epistemological and theological options were often diametrically opposed to his own, he was a constant object of suspicion. Occasionally, suspicion erupted into violence, and the one essay in the present collection written with something less than the calmness of the sage ('Christ as Subject: A Reply') is a pulverizing response to a Roman theologian who, in an article in *Divinitas*, had imputed to him a position '... that I fail to distinguish from heresy' (p. 164).¹ In 1957, to be accused of heresy in the columns of *Divinitas* was to invite excessive attention, of a not wholly sympathetic nature, from the Holy Office.

Apart from Aquinas, the biggest single influence on Lonergan in his early period was probably Newman. I say 'probably' because, although Lonergan has himself acknowledged the extent of this influence, it is surprising that, whereas references to Aquinas abound in his writings, references to Newman are extremely rare. It is, I suspect, from Newman that he learnt his technique of cumulative argumentation, which has irritated so many people who have tried to grapple with *Insight*: 'In the thirty-first place...' (*Insight: A*

¹From now on, where no reference beyond page-number is given for a quotation, it is taken from *Collection*.

Study of Human Understanding, London 1957, p. 726). It may also be from Newman that he has inherited a somewhat ponderous humour. Thus, while I cannot imagine Lonergan referring, as Newman once did in a sermon, to a man sitting 'neath the umbrageous banana', I can imagine Newman, were he writing today, rounding off a paragraph devoted to the contrast between our contemporary trust in computerized information and the trust of an earlier age in the memory of the prudent man: '... while the old-style prudent man, whom the cultural lag sends drifting into the twentieth century, commonly is known as a stuffed shirt' (p. 261).

A more serious point of comparison between the two men would be between Newman's 'illative sense' and Lonergan's 'insight'. Which brings me to that monumental, and monumentally difficult book, that dominates the third period in Lonergan's development. The obstacles that confront the prospective reader of *Insight* are manifold. There is the range of topics discussed: mathematics and the physical sciences; the bias inherent in individual intellectual growth and in the dialectical development of a society or culture; the principles of metaphysics; history and human freedom; man's knowledge of God. There is the heavily condensed and often turgid style. There is the fact that, as Lonergan insists, it is impossible to understand the book by dipping into it and extracting isolated paragraphs or pages on different topics; it must be read right through, because it consists in one unfolding argument. There is, finally, the basic difficulty that, throughout this massive book, Lonergan's primary concern is not with the topics under discussion, but with the way in which men discuss them; not with the intellectual, scientific or cultural problems which men try to solve, but with the way in which they try to solve them.

Throughout the book, as throughout all his writings, Lonergan is urging his reader to investigate, to discover, and so to improve, the way in which he, the reader, sets about the task of asking questions, formulating hypotheses and verifying them as true. Lonergan is a teacher; that man is his disciple who, under his guidance, is constantly attempting to improve the quality of his own intellectual performance. This process of investigation and discovery he calls 'the personal appropriation of one's own rational self-consciousness' (*Insight*, p. 748). It is a process which men are unwilling to undertake, because it calls for immense self-discipline and unremitting hard work. Moreover, Lonergan's analysis of the conscious subject ('My position cannot be understood if it is true that whatever is known is an object', p. 179), which is a crucial element in the *Insight* period, is frequently confused, by lazy minds, with that introspection of which Anglo-American philosophy is suspicious, and which Lonergan himself repeatedly and vigorously rejects.

The search for the personal appropriation of one's own rational self-consciousness is, for Lonergan, a matter of making explicit for

oneself the structure of human cognitional activity. There is nothing queer about *understanding*; it is, as Lonergan often says, ‘. . . what is rare in the stupid and frequent in the intelligent’ (p. 107). Yet, while many people understand many things, few people know the nature, range, limitations and scope of their own or anybody else’s understanding. There is nothing queer about rational affirmation or *judgement*; it is deciding, on the basis of the evidence, whether X is or is not the case. Yet, while many people reasonably affirm many things, few people know the nature, range, limitations and scope of the judgements which they make. Thus it is, for example, that, in interpreting someone else’s thought, it is only too common for a man, even one reputed to be intelligent, ‘merely to quote and then argue; to forget that there does exist an initial and enormous problem of developing one’s own understanding; to overlook the fact that if he is content with the understanding he has and the concepts it utters, then all he can do is express his own incomprehension in the words but without the meaning uttered by the understanding of’¹ the author in question. Thus it is—and this seems to me especially important in view of the massive attempts currently being made in theology to reinterpret the Christian tradition into our contemporary situation—that, in order to know what another man knew, it is necessary to be in possession of, and rigorously and flexibly to employ, *adequate hermeneutical tools*. ‘Logically, the interpretation of a writer is a matter of formulating an hypothesis, working out its presuppositions and its implications, and verifying in the text the presuppositions, the hypothesis itself, and the implications. Deductions of what a writer must have meant are just so much fancy; in reality they are deductions from the hypothesis assumed by the interpreter, and whether that hypothesis is correct can be determined only with probability, a probability that increases only with the extent and the variety of the verification’ (p. 62).²

In other words, the discovery of the triple structure of one’s own cognitional activity—experiencing, understanding, affirming—makes one sensitive to the need for interpretative precision, and explains why it is that Lonergan’s fourth period is dominated by his concern with method (‘method is simply reason’s explicit consciousness of its own procedures’, p. 138).³ It is increasingly being appreciated that an adequate hermeneutic is an indispensable element in grasping the dynamics of cultural and doctrinal history; in enabling us to be free from the past not by ignoring it or blindly rejecting it, by by *critically appropriating it*. And since for Lonergan, as the passage

¹The Concept of *Verbum* in the Writings of St Thomas Aquinas’, *Theological Studies*, Vol. 10 (1949), p. 390.

²It hardly needs pointing out that, while the literary critic and the exegete are usually aware of the need for some such process, it is employed all too rarely by those who feel competent to declare that ‘Pope A taught X or condemned Y’.

³Several essays in *Collection* are concerned with this triple structure; cf. especially ‘Isomorphism of Thomist and Scientific Thought’, ‘Insight: Preface to a Discussion’, and ‘Cognitional Structure’.

just quoted indicates, an adequate control of principles of verification is central to a valid hermeneutic, this may be the place to mention the strangest of all the charges that have been levelled against him—that of idealism.

The crucial role that verification, or judgement, plays in cognitional activity is not only evident throughout the pages of *Insight*, but it could be inferred from the very fact that he has always been so interested in mathematical and scientific procedures. The present collection includes an interesting essay entitled: 'Isomorphism of Thomist and Scientific Thought'. He begins by noticing that '... the relation of hypothesis to verification is similar to the relation of definition to judgement' (p. 143). For the scientist, verification is a criterion of intelligently grasped probable occurrence. In other words, the scientist is not simply concerned with experiencing data; nor is he simply concerned with the meaning he discovers through understanding his experience; he is concerned to verify whether that which he has understood is in fact the case; he is concerned with affirmations of fact, with truth in the concrete. The idealist and the positivist, on the other hand, are and can only be concerned with meaning. 'The key factor here is Lonergan's distinction between *understanding* and *judgement* and his insistence that truth and falsity are found only in *judgement*. This allows Lonergan to insist upon a principle of verification as strongly as any positivist and yet avoid the difficulties which have crippled positivistic exposition of this principle. For a logical positivist verification is a criterion of *meaning*; for Lonergan it is a criterion of truth' (Edward M. MacKinnon, S. J., *Spirit as Inquiry*, p. 59).

However, while the charge of idealism is simply incoherent to anybody who has taken the trouble to study his writings, the ground of that charge is not so difficult to detect: 'The most shocking aspect of the book, *Insight*, is the primacy it accords knowledge' (p. 152). Even to outline Lonergan's defence of the primacy of knowledge, it would be necessary to reprint at least the whole of the essay ('*Insight: Preface to a Discussion*') from which that quotation is taken. All that I can do is to throw out a clue. Most people are aware that seeing, inquiring, understanding, thinking, weighing the evidence, judging, are distinct, though related components of human knowing. But few people seem to be aware of the fact that it is illegitimate 'to scrutinize ocular vision and then assume that other cognitional activities must be the same sort of thing' (p. 224). And so, from a series of illegitimate and unquestioned assumptions, the critical problem emerges: 'if idealism is possible, there exists the problem of the bridge' (p. 210). For Lonergan, idealism is possible as a theory, but impossible as a performance. In the last resort, one is brought to agree with him, not by means of some recondite theoretical analysis, but by a simple advertence to the facts.

According to Crowe, Lonergan's lectures (mostly unpublished)

since the publication of *Insight* have moved 'through the implementation of methods founded on that book, to the question of the meaning that constitutes human institutions and, because meaning develops in history, of the new historical consciousness of man' (p. xiii). This concentration on constitutive meaning has not so far resulted in the publication of a major work, although it is no secret that he has been preparing such a work for ten years, and it is earnestly to be hoped that he will be given time to complete it. The last two essays in this book are, therefore, all the more important. The first word in the title '*Existenz and Aggiornamento*' will only surprise those who, making a fallacious inference from terminology to the nature of intellectual procedure, have supposed that Lonergan was a 'scholastic' rather than an 'existentialist' (he himself, I am sure, would reject the disjunction and resist the labels). He has always been, as his work on the notion of the subject should have demonstrated to the discerning, in a broad sense an existentialist, but perhaps the implications of his own variety of existentialism are becoming more apparent now that he is moving, terminologically, into waters more accessible to the non-scholastic.¹

In saying this, I do not mean that he is becoming easier to understand. He will always be difficult to understand, not only because of the profundity of his own thought, but because he invites, in the reader, an intellectual effort comparable to his own (as did Socrates). It follows that the reader who is unwilling or unable to make the effort misses the profundity (in this Lonergan is like Aquinas and unlike those writers who, by sheer stylistic obscurity, manage to convey the impression that something important is being said!). What one does notice in these more recent essays, however, is a concentration on the *community* as constitutive of meaning; a dimension which was implicit in the chapters on 'bias' in *Insight*, but which has now been developed more rigorously:

'For what is community? It is not just a number of men within a common frontier. It is an achievement of common meaning, and there are different degrees of achievement. Common meaning is potential when there is a common field of experience, and to withdraw from that common field is to get out of touch. Common meaning is formal when there is common understanding, and one withdraws from that understanding by misunderstanding, by incomprehension, by mutual incomprehension. Common meaning is actual inasmuch as there are common judgements, areas in which all affirm and deny in the same manner; and one withdraws from that common judgement when one disagrees, when one considers true what others think false and false what they think

¹An interesting topic for research would be the basis of such common ground (and it is quite extensive) as exists between Lonergan and Karl Rahner. A point of contact of particular importance is the work of Joseph Maréchal, from whom has come, as Lonergan says: 'not a school but a movement, not a set of ready-made opinions repeated in unison, but a basic line of thought that already has developed in various manners and still continues to do so' (p. 203).

true. Common meaning is realized by will, especially by permanent dedication, in the love that makes families, in the loyalty that makes states, in the faith that makes religions. Community coheres or divides, begins or ends, just where the common field of experience, common understanding, common judgement, common commitments begin and end' (p. 245).

This passage, and the whole of the essay from which it is taken, seem to me to be especially important, in view of the fact that not only do they relate Lonergan's triple structure (experience, understanding, judgement) to the familiar Thomist triad (potency, form, act), but do so in order to outline an analysis of the relationship between language and community which is remarkably close, for example, to that of Fr Fergus Kerr in his recent article in *New Blackfriars*.¹

The extent to which the direction in which Lonergan's thought is currently moving depends upon, and subsumes, all that has gone before, becomes apparent in the last, and to my mind the finest essay in the book ('Dimensions of Meaning'). 'My topic is meaning, and at first sight at least it seems to be a very secondary affair. What counts is reality. What is of primary moment is, not the mere meaning, but the reality that is meant. This contention is quite correct, quite true, as far as it goes. But it is involved, I think, in an oversight. For it overlooks the fact that human reality, the very stuff of human living, is not merely meant but is in large measure constituted through acts of meaning' (p. 252).

His examination of the implications of that last statement leads into an analysis of the nature of the contemporary cultural crisis. 'The pioneers in this country found shore and heartland, mountains and plains, but they have covered it with cities, laced it with roads, exploited it with their industries, till the world man has made stands between us and a prior world of nature. Yet the whole of that added, man-made artificial world is the cumulative, now planned, now chaotic, product of human acts of meaning. . . . The family, the state, the law, the economy are not fixed and immutable entities. They adapt to changing circumstances; they can be reconceived in the light of new ideas; they can be subjected to revolutionary change. Moreover, and this is my present point, all such change is in its essence a change of meaning' (p. 254). ' . . . if social and cultural changes are, at root, changes in the meanings that are grasped and accepted, changes in the control of meaning mark off the great epochs in human history' (pp. 255-6). ' . . . the Greek mediation of meaning resulted in classical culture. . . . Classical culture has given way to a modern culture, and, I would submit, the crisis of our age is in no small measure the fact that modern culture has not yet reached its maturity' (p. 259). ' . . . the vast modern effort to understand meaning in all its manifestations has not been matched by a

¹'Language and Community', *New Blackfriars*, Nov. 1967.

comparable effort in judging meaning. The effort to understand is the common task of unnumbered scientists and scholars. But judging and deciding are left to the individual, and he finds his plight desperate. . . . The crisis, then, that I have been attempting to depict is a crisis not of faith but of culture' (p. 266).

Although this essay is only a sketch, the clarity with which it is drawn explains his impatience with, for example, Leslie Dewart's programme for dehellenization. This impatience springs precisely from a conviction that Dewart's hunch is correct but that it has, in his book, remained—a hunch. 'Just as he discusses truth without adverting to hermeneutics, so Dewart discusses the development of dogma without adverting to the history of dogma. . . . He is dealing with a very real and very grave problem. He would have written an extremely important book, if he had distinguished the achievements and limitations of Hellenism.'¹

During this review, I have attempted to do what I initially declared to be virtually impossible: to 'place' Lonergan as well as to comment on this collection of his shorter papers. On the reasonable assumption that I have failed, may I quite seriously urge the reader who proposes to use this book as an introduction to Lonergan's thought to work backwards. If he does so, by the time that he reaches the first essay, that on 'The Form of Inference', he will be ready, if he is still sound in wind and limb, to launch into one of Lonergan's longer and more demanding works. He will, at least, have been warned.

Bernard Lonergan is a contemplative. Such men are rare, but they are indispensable if the human community is to succeed in attaining a corporate understanding and judgement of its identity and purpose strong enough to reverse the process of general bias described so eloquently in *Insight*. A society composed entirely of such men would fail to achieve most of the fundamental concrete tasks confronting the human spirit. A society which can find no place for such a man will descend, uncomprehendingly, into chaos.

'Classical culture cannot be jettisoned without being replaced; and what replaces it cannot but run counter to classical expectations. There is bound to be formed a solid right that is determined to live in a world that no longer exists. There is bound to be formed a scattered left, captivated now by this, now that new development, exploring now this and now that new possibility. But what will count is a perhaps not numerous centre, big enough to be at home in both the old and the new, painstaking enough to work out one by one the transitions that have to be made, strong enough to refuse half-measures and insist on complete solutions even though it has to wait' (pp. 266–7).

¹'The Dehellenization of Dogma', in *Theological Studies*, June 1967, pp. 339, 343.