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A Man to Be Wrestled With

LONERGAN AND THE QUESTION OF KNOWLEDGE

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THERE ARE SOME ARTISTS, writers and scholars whose work receives widespread recognition only late in life. Bernard Lonergan belongs to that band. A Canadian, he became a Jesuit in 1922 and was ordained in 1936. Until his retirement in 1965 he was Professor of Dogmatic Theology at the Gregorian University in Rome. Within his communion he was known as an expositor of Aquinas, but it is only comparatively recently that his name has become known to a wider public.*

Insight† is a major restatement of Thomism in a post-Kantian setting. It is Thomist in so far as it builds upon a natural theology on the basis of reflection on what can be observed. It is post-Kantian in that it does so within the framework of a critique of knowledge. Lonergan himself calls his method transcendental in that it bases metaphysics upon epistemology. It looks at what is involved in knowledge and sees that each form of knowledge contains elements which go beyond itself. Ultimately we are confronted with the transcendent which is God.

The work falls into two parts. Part I deals with 'Insight as Activity' and looks at what is happening when we are knowing. Part II deals with 'Insight as Knowledge' and examines what is known when this is happening. 'The possibility of transcendent knowledge . . . is the possibility of grasping intelligently and affirming reasonably a transcendent being. And the proof of the possibility lies in the fact that such intelligent grasp and reasonable affirmation occur' (p. 640). It is not enough to proceed, as the ontological argument does, with a deduction of God's existence from a definition of God. Moreover,

* *Introducing the Thought of Bernard Lonergan*: Three papers reprinted from *Collection* with an introduction by Philip McShane. Bernard Lonergan, Darton, Longman & Todd, 1973. 61 pp. £0.80.

† *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* by Bernard J. F. Lonergan, Philosophical Library, New York, 1970, 784 pp., £2.50.

'what has to be added to mere conception is not an experience of God but a grasp of the unconditioned. Affirming is an intrinsically rational act; it proceeds with rational necessity from grasp of the unconditioned; and the unconditioned to be grasped is, not the formally unconditioned that God is and that unrestricted understanding grasps, but the virtually unconditioned that consists in inferring God's existence from premises that are true' (p. 672).

Proof is not an automatic process that results in a judgment. All that can be set down by the theologian is a set of signs. 'The signs can represent a relevant virtually unconditioned. But grasping it and making the consequent judgment is an immanent act of rational consciousness that each has to perform for himself and no one else can perform for him' (*ibid.*).

The existence of God, then, is known as the conclusion to an argument and, while such arguments are many, all of them, I believe, are included in the following general form.

If the real is completely intelligible, God exists. But the real is completely intelligible. Therefore, God exists (*ibid.*).

In writings so voluminous as Lonergan's it is tempting to take short cuts. But, as E. L. Mascall has remarked, to do so is like trying to take short cuts in South London. One almost invariably gets lost and has to retrace one's steps. The bald statement of Lonergan's conclusions both fails to do justice to the reasoning behind them and at the same time provokes the questions: What do his terms mean and how does he validate them? Part of the difficulty is not that he has written too much but that he has not written enough.

If, however, one must take a short cut—if only for the sake of getting one's bearings—perhaps the best place to start is the paper on 'Cognitive Structure', reprinted in *Introducing the Thought of Bernard Lonergan*. Lonergan contends that human knowing is a dynamic structure. To know something is more than just taking a look at it. It involves 'many distinct and irreducible activities: seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, tasting, inquiring, imagining, understanding, conceiving, reflecting, weighing the evidence, judging' (p. 16). None of these activities by itself amounts to knowing. Without some form of experience through the senses, there is simply no contact with things outside us. There is thus nothing to be known. But to look at something without understanding is mere gaping. Knowing, then, is not mere sense-experience. Moreover, judging is also necessary, for 'it is only by judgment that there emerges a distinction between fact and fiction, logic and sophistry, philosophy and myth, history and legend, astronomy and astrology, chemistry and alchemy' (p. 17). Knowledge does not consist in one or other of the operations of experiencing, understanding and judging, but in all of them together. Hence, it is a dynamic structure.

Lonergan contends that, 'knowledge in the proper sense is knowledge

of reality or, more fully, that knowledge is intrinsically objective, that objectivity is the intrinsic relation of knowing to being, and that being and reality are identical' (pp. 21f.). Knowledge involves a kind of drive which goes 'beyond data to intelligibility; beyond intelligibility to truth and through truth to being; and beyond known truth and being to the truth and being still to be known' (p. 22). The ground of objectivity in knowledge does not lie simply in experience, as empiricists have maintained. Nor does it lie in the rationalist's idea of necessity or the idealists' idea of coherence. The empiricists, rationalists and idealists are right in their affirmations, but wrong in their exclusions. 'For the objectivity of human knowing is a triple cord; there is an experiential component that resides in the givenness of relevant data; there is a normative component that resides in the exigencies of intelligence and rationality guiding the process of knowing from data to judging; there finally is an absolute component that is reached when reflective understanding combines the normative and the experiential elements into a virtually unconditioned, i.e., a conditioned whose conditions are fulfilled' (p. 24).

Reality is not like a flat picture which is known once it falls within our field of vision. For as a whole and in its parts reality has dimensions of intelligibility which reach far beyond the surface of sense-experience. 'The possibility of knowing, then, is an unrestricted intention that intends the transcendent, and a process of self-transcendence that reaches it. The unrestricted intention directs the process to being; the attainment of the unconditioned reveals that at some point being has been reached' (p. 25).

Loneragan's work is very impressive. All the same, I find certain unresolved difficulties raised by *Insight*, and his other writings of which three may be mentioned here. (i) Lonergan makes considerable use of the term 'the virtually unconditioned'. In the course of a discussion of Reflective Understanding he proffers the following clarification: 'The formally unconditioned has no conditions whatever. The virtually unconditioned has conditions indeed but they are fulfilled' (*Insight*, p. 280; cf. *Introducing the Thought of Bernard Lonergan*, p. 24). My lack of understanding may well be hampered by my non-Thomist background. But it is not easy to what Lonergan means here or how he could justify his language. On the face of it the definition appears self-contradictory. Does the virtually unconditioned mean that which is conditioned by nothing other than itself? If so, I am still not sure as to the exact steps by which Lonergan has got there. This is partly due to the ambiguity of words like 'grasp' and 'intelligible' (cf. *Insight*, p. 672). Is Lonergan saying: We *posit* the existence of God, because it requires a rationally dynamic structured mind to conceive reality and therefore such a mind must lie behind the universe as is capable of conceiving and implementing it? In this case, we are not exactly 'grasping', or understanding God, but affirming that such a God must

exist, even though we do not understand him in the same way as we understand persons and objects of our immediate experience. Or is Lonergan asserting that, because God is real, he must be intelligible to us. This would suggest that he is directly knowable and rationally comprehensible to us even in the depths of his being, provided only that our minds have sufficient intellectual stamina to press on with the quest for intelligibility. I can follow the former argument, but can anyone say without qualification that he can grasp God or that God is intelligible to him?

(ii) In *The Openness of Being* (p. 89) E. L. Mascall has noted an apparent difference between Lonergan and himself. He suggests that the difference might be due to the fact that 'Lonergan, while repudiating the Kantian view of God as a merely regulative principle of our thinking, appears to discover God as a constitutive principle of our perception of finite being rather than as a constitutive principle of finite being itself.' Whether Lonergan is actually doing this depends on how he would answer the questions under (i). If Mascall is right, the inevitable question arises: But does not this leave a gap between God as the constitutive principle of our perception and God as the constitutive principle of finite being? And if so, how is the gap to be bridged? Is it to be done by some restatement of Bishop Berkeley's formula: *Esse est aut percipere aut percipi*?

(iii) It may be asked whether the approach of *Insight* is not too intellectualistic. To ask this is not to make the silly quibble that an erudite work of philosophy is pitched too high intellectually. Nor is it to fall into the self-contradictory complaint that a work on epistemology is concerned with the intellect. Rather it is to ask whether this type of natural theology leads us to a God who is *pure intellect* and the source of all things that know and are known and how other attributes may be predicated of him. In other words, how can we say that this God is holy or loving? How is this God to be identified with the Trinity? Lonergan shows himself aware of the question in the epilogue to *Insight*, where he claims that his account of knowing is consonant with the pattern of knowing in the Catholic understanding of revelation. But why should one believe in the God of the Christian church? Is not the God of metaphysics enough?

To this question *Method in Theology** goes some way towards supplying an answer. For Lonergan, method does not mean following a set of cast-iron rules which any fool can use to get correct results. Rather, it is 'a framework for collaborative creativity' (p. xi). Lonergan looks first at method in the natural sciences. Then he goes beyond their procedures to something that he regards as more general and more fundamental, namely, the procedures of the human mind. He discerns in them a transcendental method or basic pattern of operations in

* *Method in Theology* by Bernard J. F. Lonergan, Darton, Longman and Todd, 1972, 405 pp., £4.50.

every cognitional enterprise. This transcendental method, he maintains, is relevant to the formulation of more special methods appropriate to particular fields. To some extent, therefore, he takes up the theme of *Insight*. But he goes on to apply it to what he sees to be the special tasks of contemporary theology.

'A method is a normative pattern of recurrent and related operations yielding cumulative and progressive results' (p. 4 and *passim*). It is transcendental in that its fundamental processes are not confined to any particular field or subject. The 'transcendental method is concerned with meeting the exigencies and exploiting the opportunities presented by the human mind itself' (p. 14). Its operations involve experiencing, understanding, judging (i.e. affirming the reality of what is involved) and deciding (i.e. deciding to operate in accord with the norms immanent in one's intentional operations).

Theology does not lie outside these operations. In so far as it is a branch of human knowledge, it shares the common features of cognitional process (p. 23). The question of God is again introduced in the context of intelligibility. Why should the answers that satisfy man's intelligence yield anything more than a subjective satisfaction? Why should they be supposed to possess any relevance to the knowledge of the universe? We assume that they do. We can point to the fact that our assumption is confirmed by its fruits. Thus we implicitly grant that the universe is intelligible. Once this is granted there arises the question whether the universe could be intelligible without having an intelligent ground. And this is the question of God (p. 101).

The question of God, then, lies within man's horizon. Man's transcendental subjectivity is mutilated or abolished, unless he is stretching forth towards the intelligible, the unconditioned, the good of value. The reach, not of his attainment, but of his intending is unrestricted. There lies within his horizon a region for the divine, a shrine for ultimate holiness. It cannot be ignored. The atheist may pronounce it empty. The agnostic may urge that he finds his investigation has been inconclusive. The contemporary humanist will refuse to allow the question to arise. But their negations presuppose the spark in our clod, our native orientation to the divine (p. 103).

Method in Theology does not confine the question of God to epistemology and abstract metaphysics.

As the question of God is implicit in all our questioning, so being in love with God is the basic fulfilment of our conscious intentionality. That fulfilment brings a deepset joy that can remain despite humiliation, failure, privation, pain, betrayal, desertion. That fulfilment brings a radical peace, the peace that the world cannot give. That fulfilment bears fruit in a love of one's neighbour that strives mightily to bring about the kingdom of God on this earth. On the other hand, the absence of that fulfilment opens the way to the trivialisation of human life in the pursuit of fun, to the harshness of human life arising from the ruthless exercise of power, to

despair about human welfare springing from the conviction that the universe is absurd (p. 105).

At times the argument is reminiscent of William Temple's *Nature, Man and God* culminating in what Temple called 'the hunger of natural religion'. For the God that Lonergan is speaking of here is the God of the Christian revelation. At the same time the passages just quoted exhibit a characteristic of Lonergan's style of argument. He defines his position as one which is consistent and fits the facts. Rival views are refuted by indicating their inner inconsistencies or their logical consequences.

The second part of the work is devoted to an exposition of the eight 'functional specialities in theology'. (i) *Research* makes available the data relevant to theological investigation. Special research is concerned with assembling the data relevant to a particular question or problem, while general research locates, excavates, deciphers scripts and languages, collects and catalogues. Perhaps one day it will give us a complete information-retrieval system!

(ii) *Interpretation* is concerned with what was meant by a text or utterance in its historical context in the light of the circumstances and intentions of the writer. (iii) *History* is basic, special and general. Basic history is concerned with who did what, where and when. Special history deals with cultural, institutional and intellectual movements. General history is basic history illuminated and completed by special history. It would offer—if it were attainable—a total view or some approximation to it. History is important to theology because of the historical origins of Christianity and because the Christian church exists in history.

(iv) *Dialectic* deals with conflicts centring in Christian movements. Comparing the different viewpoints within the church will bring to light the irreducible differences, what is complementary and what can be regarded as successive stages in a single process of development. (v) *Foundations* is the study of conversion in the sense of the transformation of the subject and his world. (vi) *Doctrines* express both judgments of fact and judgments of value. They are concerned with the affirmations and negations not only of dogmatic theology, but also of moral, ascetical, mystical and pastoral theology. Such doctrines stand within the horizon of foundations. They are rooted in history and receive their precise definition from dialectic. (vii) *Systematics* is concerned to work out appropriate systems of conceptualisation, to remove apparent inconsistencies, and to move towards a grasp of spiritual matters both from their own inner coherence and from the analogies offered by more familiar human experience. (viii) *Communications* is concerned with theology in its external relations.

This division of theology may well sound strange to Protestant ears. Does it not suggest that some aspects of theology such as the study of the Bible as the Word of God communicated by men has been relativised

or subsumed under a variety of headings? At first sight this schematisation might suggest that the knowledge of God has been transformed into an abstract anatomy. Lonergan is himself aware that his division involves some novelty for members of his own communion. But he defends it on the grounds that this view of the branches of theological activity arises from an analysis of the 'distinct and separate stages in a single process from data to ultimate results' (p. 136).

The remaining papers reprinted in *Introducing the Thought of Bernard Lonergan* deal with 'Existenz and Aggiornamento' and 'Dimensions of Meaning'. They show Lonergan taking his thought a step further and dealing with the crisis of culture which confronts the church in the modern world. There are two kinds of authenticity (p. 40). In the one, the individual can seek to be faithful to and perpetuate a tradition. In the other, the individual can ask whether the tradition itself is authentic. It is possible for an individual authentically to maintain a tradition which itself is not authentic. The question is further complicated by the fact that in every age the church is culturally conditioned. Christians express themselves in the language of their times but when the times change the language and the traditions often remain. To Lonergan, this is not so much a threat as a challenge. Doubtless, there will remain a right wing of the church that is determined to live in a world that no longer exists. There will also be a scattered left wing captivated now by this and now by that, always ready with an instant theology. '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 to be made, strong enough to refuse half-measures and insist on complete solutions even though it has to wait' (p. 61).

The evaluation of Lonergan's thought will go on for many years to come. His discussion is often difficult but is certainly rewarding. In the meantime, for those of every Christian tradition who are concerned with the question of knowledge and the validity of thought, Lonergan is a man to be wrestled with.