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## BERNARD LONERGAN ON A CATHOLIC LIBERAL ARTS EDUCATION

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*With a call for integration commonly expected in liberal arts education, this article explores the philosophy of Bernard Lonergan. Highly specialized disciplines, as valuable as they are to preserving and expanding a professional knowledge base, can nonetheless lead to the extreme compartmentalization of education. This article offers a philosophical foundation on which to build a truly Catholic liberal arts education.*

**A**t a time when John Paul II's *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* urges Catholic higher education to foster the dialogue between faith and culture, the issue remains "how to do it?" How are educators in Catholic universities to foster the encounter of faith with contemporary specialized knowledge? In fact, how are they to foster interdisciplinary dialogue in general? How can technical and scientific questions be placed within the framework of human questions, that is, questions about the ultimate character of the human person and human community? And how can such humanistic questions be set within a framework capable of critiquing positions and policies that are quite patently "inhuman"? Finally, how do all such human questions fit within a religious framework and within the framework of Catholic faith?

These are major questions for Catholic universities, questions that have been simmering for a long time. They are questions that require a strong vision. Indeed, they require a specifically philosophical vision strong enough to build bridges between faith and contemporary specialized knowledge. The Catholic philosopher who in my judgment most aptly addressed these questions was the Canadian Bernard Lonergan. The fact that Lonergan's influence continues to grow slowly but steadily is indicated by the fact that the University of Toronto Press is currently publishing the 25 volumes of the

*Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan.* Of him the Canadian philosopher Hugo Meynell (1991) wrote, "Of all the contemporary philosophers of the very first rank, Bernard Lonergan has been up to now the most neglected" (p. 1).

This paper presents an overview of Lonergan's vision of human understanding, some of his ideas on the nature of a liberal education, as well as his specific thoughts on the role of such an education in a Catholic university.

## **BERNARD LONERGAN AND THE INTEGRATION OF KNOWLEDGE**

Philip Gleason in his *Contending with Modernity: Catholic Higher Education in the Twentieth Century* (1995) tells the story of modernity sweeping over Catholic campuses during the 1960s and taking with it any vestige of an integrating vision rooted in neo-scholastic philosophy and theology. For prior to the Second Vatican Council this "neo-scholastic synthesis" had provided some sense of coherence to the curriculum in Catholic colleges and universities. Even psychology courses dealt with "the soul." With Vatican II, however, it became evident that not only was scholastic philosophy incapable of integrating the sciences, but it was incapable of integrating even the various theological disciplines themselves, especially those rooted in the new pluralistic historical studies. In his work Gleason (1995) tells this story of the painful collapse of scholasticism.

Gradually, there began to take place in Catholic universities, a battle between an over-arching integrating vision that tended to be "imposed from on high" and, on the other hand, the products of modernity: individual autonomous departments with scholarly competence in specialized disciplines. (p. 296)

Nevertheless, in spite of the contemporary penchant for eschewing any "meta-narrative" that would seek the integration of knowledge, still, the need for such integration reappears. We are not satisfied with fragmentation—and not just in Catholic colleges and universities, but in higher education in general. As James Turner (1998) characterized the present academic situation:

Knowledge lies scattered around us, in great, unconnected pieces, like lonely mesas jutting up in a trackless waste. That this fragmentation has impoverished public discourse is a more or less common lament; that it has emaciated education, both undergraduate and graduate, is too painfully obvious a truth to dwell on. So as we try to navigate through waves of uncertainty from one disciplinary island to another, all universities, not just Catholic ones, face the challenges and dilemmas of remapping the world of learning. (p. 255)

And that is what is needed—a “map”; that is, some way of knowing how the various areas of knowledge are related and whether we as human beings are going in the right direction. This was the aim of Lonergan’s magnum opus, his 1957 *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*. This work aims at “an insight into insight”—an explanatory understanding of the dynamics of human understanding, that is, the basic “method” followed by the human spirit at the basis of all other methods. Lonergan analyzes the concrete unfolding of mathematical, scientific, and philosophical methods, paying attention, as Einstein cautioned, to what scientists do rather than to what they say they do. In his 1972 *Method in Theology*, Lonergan extended his analysis to scholarly historical methods of understanding and how they can be functionally linked to theological methods.

In his work Lonergan traces the dynamic method of the human spirit unfolding through the basic levels of experiencing, understanding, and judging. In scientific activity these basic levels unfold through the processes of experimentation, hypothesis formation, and verification; in historical scholarship through the processes of research, interpretation, and historical judgment. The central chapter of *Insight*, “The Self-affirmation of the Knower,” invites readers to check within their own consciousness and find out whether or not this analysis of the basic method of the human spirit—of experiencing, understanding, and judging—is correct. If it is correct, then it is the basis for the integration of all areas of knowing. An accurate account of human interiority as it manifests itself in the various methods employed by the human spirit is the basis for a philosophical vision strong enough to integrate the various scientific and scholarly methods.

Consider Lonergan’s analysis of human understanding, particularly as manifested in teaching and learning. For Lonergan understanding is the core of teaching and of learning, of forming community, and of influencing history. Implied in such understanding, that succession of “ahas!” that constitutes human learning, are the following elements. There is, first of all, the experiential element, such as sensations, images, and perceptions. The good teacher knows how to appeal to the sense of touch and sight, the imagination and the feelings carried by images.

Second, the good teacher stokes the intellectual level: the questioning that comes from the mind and heart of the student, the moments of heightened awareness, of insight. The good teacher sets the stage for the emergence of insight and helps the student to formulate questions and insights in concepts, in words or even in images and works of art. The skillful teacher scans pupils’ faces to spot these moments of questioning and of dawning insight. This is exciting and touches a desire to know that comes from the depths of the human spirit. Ultimately, this desire leads to science, scholarship, philosophy, and even theology. But all such achievement is rooted in the prior desire to understand our experience correctly.

And that leads to the third level of human consciousness: the level of reflection and judgment. On this level we ask the question, “Is our understanding correct?” “Do I have it right?” Such questioning leads to affirmations or negations. Lonergan often repeated the refrain, “Bright ideas are a dime a dozen—what counts is if they’re correct!” John Henry Newman (1979) emphasized this act of judgment in his great work, *A Grammar of Assent*. It is the act by which we come to know the truth and, through the truth, we attain the real.

This analysis of the structure that constitutes our human knowing contrasts with the much more common analysis of knowing as “just taking a good look at what’s out there.” The aim of Lonergan’s whole pedagogy of “self-appropriation” is to wean people away from such a simplistic view of their own knowing; for mistaken notions on what it is to know are at the basis of much of cultural decline—including the decline of our educational processes.

Finally, there are the decisions that follow on knowledge: decisions that affect things and change situations in the world, but most of all, decisions that change ourselves. By our decisions we not only affect objects, but we also change ourselves and make ourselves who we are to be. This is the level of love and interpersonal commitment. Moral development leads to the free and personal choice of who one is going to be: what kind of person, with what values. The significance of such development is ordinarily apprehended through symbols, that is, through stories and songs and works of art.

Here, I think, is relevant Whitehead’s remark that moral education is impossible without the constant vision of greatness. Moral education communicates that vision in unnoticed ways. The vision gathers the way dust gathers, not through any massive action but through the continuous addition of particles that remain. (Lonergan, 1993, p. 102)

This is the structure of our human consciousness and it is involved in all we do—even if we do not know it—even if we deny it. It is Lonergan’s pedagogy of “self-appropriation”: bringing a person to the explicit awareness that “This in fact is who I am: one who experiences, questions and is capable of understanding, judging, deciding, loving.” *Insight* (Lonergan, 1957) aims at facilitating a philosophical conversion in one’s self-understanding: away from any materialism, idealism or relativism, to the critical realism that recognizes that the world is known not merely by sight or touch but by a combination of experience, understanding, and judging.

Lonergan points out that a failure to come to such self-knowledge and to live by such knowledge results in a materialist or hedonist undertow that drags down human progress. By their intelligence human beings progress; but by their false self-understandings and false philosophies they decline. Selfishness affects their activities and those of their group. Wars and conflicts

ensue and ideologies emerge that rationalize irrational situations. To paraphrase Sophocles' *Antigone*, "Whom the gods destroy, they first make blind."

For Lonergan, the accurate analysis of human understanding as it takes place in the practice of the sciences and scholarly disciplines, as well as in ordinary living, is the principle for the integration of the various disciplines. Such knowledge of the basic structure of human consciousness allows the person of faith to "sublate" all the other areas of human knowing into a faith vision. Such a "sublation" acknowledges the proper autonomy of all these other areas, but it also sets them within the higher viewpoint of faith.

To put the point in other words, one may note that particular sciences are specializations, that interdisciplinary studies build bridges between specializations to give us physical chemistry, biophysics, biochemistry, psychologies of the unconscious and social psychologies, that the ultimate ground of all interdisciplinary work is the basic and total science that results from understanding, both in their similarities and in their differences, the several methods of the particular sciences and, as well, the procedures of common sense. Only in virtue of such understanding is the theologian capable of thematizing adequately the Christian religion both in itself as a principle of sublation and in its effects upon the whole of human living. (Lonergan, 1984, p. 8)

Philosophy, as "the basic and total science," does not deal with the whole of knowledge, but rather with the whole *in* knowledge, that is, the integration of the disciplines. Without such an integration, particular disciplines can be left out of one's view of the whole and other disciplines tend to have totalitarian ambitions of going beyond their own proper borders. There results, as Cardinal Newman (1959) brought out in *The Idea of a University*, the fragmentation and distortion of knowledge.

It was Newman's theorem in *The Idea of a University* that to suppress a part of human knowledge has three effects: first it results in an ignorance of that part; secondly, it mutilates what of itself is an organic whole; thirdly, it causes distortion in the remainder in which man endeavors to compensate for the part that has been suppressed. On this showing, one is to expect that secularism not only leads to ignorance of religion but also mutilates knowledge as a whole and brings about distortion in what remains. (Lonergan, 1975, p. 185)

Lonergan lists a few concrete instances of such distortion. First, there is the rationalist and individualist belittling of belief by insisting on having people prove all their assumptions or else regard them as arbitrary. The effect of this rejection of belief is not only to destroy religious tradition but all tradition as well—even the tradition of science.

Such rationalist individualism in the twentieth century seems to have infected our educationalists. Students are encouraged to find out things for them-

selves, to develop originality, to be creative, to criticize, but it does not seem that they are instructed in the enormous role of belief in the acquisition and the expansion of knowledge. Many do not seem to be aware that what they know of science is not immanently generated but for the most part simply belief. (Lonergan, 1975, pp. 185-186)

A second distortion occurs in our very apprehension of ourselves and what it means to be a human person. Positivists, naturalists, and behaviorists insist that the human sciences must be conducted on the same lines as the natural sciences. But the result of such reductionism is to treat the human person as just a machine or as just one other animal. Human dignity and human morality are lost in the shuffle.

A third distortion concerns the tendency of technology to become a god to which human beings are bound as slaves. For Lonergan, the contemporary challenge is to accept the gains of modernity while working out strategies for dealing with secularist views on religion and with concomitant distortions in human knowledge, in our apprehension of ourselves, and in the organization of human affairs.

## **A LIBERAL EDUCATION: “ON THE WAY” TO AN INTEGRATED VISION**

Obviously, Lonergan's vision is a very demanding one. It requires a knowledge of the methods and "heuristic structures" of the natural sciences as well as the historical disciplines and the human sciences. Such a vision of how the sciences and disciplines are linked in an integrated way to human self-understanding and the progress of human culture is a high goal of human understanding. It does not come easily and without dedicated study of these methods and the basic method of our own spirit.

Still, a liberal education is on the way to such achievement. It helps the young arrive at some integrated vision of why they spend long years in school. It brings them to an appreciation of the value of knowledge in its own right and not just as a way to earning money. It fits into a moral perspective, the progress of human community, and the need for human healing. Finally, for religious people, a liberal education is linked to the deepest level of human values, the level of falling in love with and being in love with God.

In lectures Lonergan gave on the philosophy of education in 1958 at the University of Cincinnati, he linked his own views with those of the developmental psychologist Jean Piaget. According to Piaget, human development is an extremely complicated process from initial global operations of low efficiency, through differentiation and specialization, to the integration of the perfected specialties. Piaget's detailed analysis of groups of linked operations and the grouping of groups enables a person to differentiate the types of learning characteristic of children at various levels of development. His

analysis proceeds from the analysis of groups of physical operations to the child's ability to use words and language as a medium for dealing with reality. Here the child's actions are "mediated" by the meaning of words and language and it is here that Piaget's specialization meets Lonergan's (1993) specialization, that is, our ability to understand.

Next there is the insertion of language and symbols into these operations. Here there are operations of a different kind, operations with words, moving toward a group of operations with words. Children from two to six cannot carry on a conversation. If two children of this age are together, they will both be talking, but they are not talking to one another. Nor can they give an explanation or tell a story. They have not mastered talking as a group of operations. Piaget is satisfied that, with concrete operations, the grouping will brusquely emerge by the time the child is seven or eight years of age.... At the age of eleven or twelve, there emerges the grouping of operations that are not concrete, operations that use propositions or statements as intermediary. Then there emerges the capacity to argue and reason. (p. 199)

Such arguing and reasoning extends to reasoning that moves beyond appearances—beyond "what it feels like." Even though it seems and feels strange, gradually one can come to the conviction—one can accept as true—that the earth is indeed round and people on the antipodes are not walking "upside down" or falling off. One begins to judge, to judge truly and to attain reality, not on the basis of one's spontaneous feelings, but on the basis of the evidence for a true judgment. To reach such truths, and the probabilities attained by science, one has to reason. Anyone who has followed Lonergan's theological writings on the development of the Christian Creed and Nicea's "homousion," will see the relevance of this analysis.

Nor does human development stop. Lonergan applies Piaget's analysis to the notion of a general education, a liberal arts education as distinct from a merely professional education. Such an education requires the study of certain subjects rather than others, for certain subjects by their nature provide wider and deeper access to the meaning of the world, the human person, one's self. Such an appropriation of meanings develops one's "assimilative power," that is, one's ability to "read" the world, other people, and one's self.

In other words, you are educating, in the sense of developing assimilative power, by the study of language, by teaching people to read, so that they are able to read not merely comic books and the titles under the pictures in *Life*, but anything. If you spend long hours reading Thucydides and Plato, you do not find much that has been written since heavy reading. You are in training, and when you sit down with a book you have not got an irresistible tendency to go to sleep, or to get out somewhere and move around. There is a development in assimilative power in the study of languages and literature.... (Lonergan, 1993, p. 205)

The serious study of languages and literature, then, develops one's assimilative power, one's ability to be open to the structure of the complexities of the real world. Good literature helps one to read the world. This is particularly the role of the classic. For the classic is a work that in each age is read anew, precisely because it appeals to the invariant dynamisms of the human person.

This is the existential dimension of the problem of hermeneutics. It lies at the very root of the perennial divisions of mankind in their views on reality, morality, and religion. Moreover, in so far as conversion is only the basic step, in so far as there remains the labor of thinking out everything from the new and profounder viewpoint, there results the characteristic of the classic set forth by Friedrich Schlegel: "A classic is a writing that is never fully understood." But those that are educated and educate themselves must always want to learn more from it. (Lonergan, 1972, p. 161)

There is no doubt, then, that although Lonergan advocated a movement from a classicist mindset to a historically conscious mindset, nevertheless he himself advocated a classical or literary education for developing this basic power, "the human touch," "that basis within oneself" that enables one to judge about human affairs. So also did he highly recommend the study of mathematics as distinct from the premature study of the natural and human sciences.

Similarly, the study of mathematics rather than natural science, of philosophy and history rather than the human sciences, are all cases in which you are developing the assimilative power of the pupil or student, enabling him to do whatever he may choose to do in any particular field. (Lonergan, 1993, pp. 205-206)

Lonergan (1993) recounts a personal anecdote concerning his own education and the attempt to teach physics without having first mastered the mathematics.

Since I am addressing educators, I would like to add a final note. It's about something I suffered from. Teaching physics without the students knowing the relevant mathematics is not teaching physics. If they know the mathematics, there is nothing difficult about the physics...the teaching of physics without a proper account of the fundamental notions—namely, doing the mathematics...—gives an illusion of knowledge, a false idea of what the science is. And it clutters the mind. (p. 145)

So a premature specialization in the social sciences can also "clutter the mind." With a background in the more general studies of literature, history, mathematics, and philosophy that correspond to more general questions

about the human person and reality, one can then go on to master the various specialties of human intelligence, the various natural and human sciences. Without that development, one's mind can easily contract into the horizon of one particular specialization.

General education, then, aims primarily at the development of assimilative power. If a man learns to know man, through the reading of literature and the study of history, he will have a basis for stepping into the human sciences that is much more useful perhaps than the study of the human sciences. (Lonergan, 1993, p. 206)

Perhaps the point here is that the social sciences are to a great extent at the mercy of changing trends and styles. Overemphasis on such subjects at a young age can "clutter the mind" and interfere with the development of the student's assimilative power.

If he spent all that time studying the human science, what would he know? He would learn what his professor knew of what the bigger men had figured out five years ago, ten years ago, fifteen years ago, thirty years ago. By the time he set about working in the field, he would have something to do to keep abreast; and ten years later all of his stuff might be out of date. And would he have the capacity to judge the new, to jump with it or stand against it? If he has had this more general development in assimilative power, this more intimate communication of what it really is to be a man, the development of the human touch that comes through the traditional classical education or the literary education as opposed to the scientific education, he would have a basis within himself that would enable him to judge about men, and not become a crackpot. It is easy to produce crackpots by premature specialization. (Lonergan, 1993, p. 206)

Later on in *Method in Theology*, Lonergan (1972) will analyze various types of specialization, among them the "field specialization" that focuses on the data of a particular area to be investigated. The problem with being a field specialist and nothing else is that through it one gets to know more and more about less and less. Without the broader viewpoint that comes from the development of one's knowledge of one's self and the world, it is easy for such a specialist to become a "crackpot." The point of Lonergan's distinction of various "functional specializations" in *Method in Theology* is that they allow us to know what we are doing as we move from such specialization to communicating to others the results of our investigations.

To do this well, of course, requires the widest development of our assimilative powers. Indeed, according to Lonergan, it ultimately requires a conversion. Intellectual conversion, the accurate self-appropriation of the knower, is the key to an integrating philosophy. It is also the ultimate aim of a good liberal arts education. Such conversion is "a shift in a person's center of grav-

ity.” It is a move from being caught up in “one’s own little world” to being interested in “the world” attained through accurate science, philosophy, and theology. It involves allowing one’s being to be overcome by “the intellectual pattern of experience,” a conversion from one’s normal feelings and reference frames to the reference frames of intelligibility, truth, value, goodness—eventually, “God.”

What is geometry? To the boy in high school, geometry is what is in the book. But the experience of studying and doing geometry gradually forces a transformation of the notion of geometry from “what is in the book” to an intellectual habit that is independent of the book. (Lonergan, 1993, pp.161-162)

Such conversion eventually leads to “the theory of philosophic differences,” that is, the philosophy that enables us to discern and critique the prevalent philosophies of the culture around us. It allows one to move beyond one’s own restricted world, even one’s own traditional world, to accurately assessing the currents, theories, and philosophies of the world around us.

The importance of a theory of philosophic differences is that, if one gets a sufficient grasp of it, one can read fruitfully all sorts of material without losing one’s way. If one is limited in one’s reading and inspiration exclusively to the works written by Catholics that have been approved as safe, one is cutting down enormously one’s field of study, one’s sources. (Lonergan, 1993, pp. 177-178)

This “theory of philosophic differences” could be said to be the aim of all Lonergan’s writings. It is a development of the assimilative power to a heightened consciousness of how the various disciplines are related to each other and how one can move from one to another without losing one’s way. It is this cultural ability that is necessary if we are to undertake the dialogue of faith and contemporary culture to which *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* invites us.

## **A LIBERAL EDUCATION AND THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY**

Finally, throughout his writings Lonergan (1993) has some pithy and suggestive reflections on the nature of a specifically Catholic university. “The fact is that we have a Catholic educational system, with primary schools, colleges and universities. That is the concrete fact and it exists because it is Catholic” (p. 18).

But why a Catholic university? What is its point? Certainly not to be any less of a university than any other excellent university. In an early essay Lonergan basically stated that the nature of a Catholic university is to be

countercultural to the prevailing tendencies of social and cultural decline. Such decline can only be combatted from a horizon explicitly rooted in faith, hope, and love.

The secular university is caught in the ambiguities of civil and cultural development-and-decline; it may lag in consenting to aberrations but in the long run it has to yield, for it recruits its students and their professors from the socio-cultural situation that exists. No doubt the same situation constrains the Catholic university and the Catholic community. But the latter is armed against the world. The supernatural virtues of faith, hope, and charity are named theological because they orientate man to God as he is in himself. Nonetheless, they possess a profound social significance. Against the perpetuation of explosive tensions that would result from the strict application of retributive justice, there is the power of charity to wipe out old grievances and make a fresh start possible. Against the economic determinism that would result were egoistic practicality given free rein, there is the liberating power of hope that seeks first the kingdom of God. Against the dialectic discernible in the history of philosophy and in the development-and-decline of civil and cultural communities, there is the liberation of human reason through divine faith: for men of faith are not shifted about with every wind of doctrine. (1988, p. 112)

It is because its educational vision is explicitly rooted in divinely given faith, hope, and love that a liberal arts education in a Catholic university has to include such elements as service learning, a study of the classics, and the explicit recognition that faith has intellectual and cultural consequences. It was to spell out these consequences that Lonergan dedicated his life. He developed a critically grounded philosophy capable of being an interdisciplinary bridge between the sources of Christian revelation and the contemporary world.

To put it more concretely, we go to great expense to have Catholic universities; yet, our professors cannot be anything more than specialists in physics, specialists in chemistry, specialists in biology, specialists in history. If they can search and search for philosophic and theological aids to give them the orientation that would be specifically Catholic in their fields and still not find them, because neither philosophy nor theology are doing their job of integrating, then we have a problem. (Lonergan, 1990, p. 119)

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