

Patterns of Response to Lonergan's Paradigm-shift Challenge

Robert Henman

In preparation for the Halifax Lonergan Conference, Philip McShane offered his part of *Bernard Lonergan: His Life and Leading Ideas*, by Pierre Lambert and Philip McShane (published 2009 in French & English) and also provided an article, one of 41 *Field Nocturnes*. After reading these works I reread sections of *Understanding and Being*. (CWL 5, University of Toronto Press, 1990) Sections 1.4 and 1.5 challenged me to reflect on my own success at self-appropriation. After 31 years "at it" I sensed my own gap in a new way concerning self-appropriation. That can be a humbling experience and yet what came to mind were McShane's repeated remarks about "Beginnings", and in particular about a misreading of chapter One of *Insight*. (CWL 3 University of Toronto Press, 1992)

So I prepared a paper and, like others, passed it by McShane, meeting a mix of encouragement and discouragement.¹ What I present here is the final paper, or might it be called a non- paper.² McShane's basic question about papers was, and is, about effectiveness: who are you talking to and what effect is it expected to have?

This question led me to reflect on the immense volume of literature that has emerged in print on Lonergan's works over the past 50 years. It certainly did not seem to bear in mind - or in print - the question of effectiveness. Yet a pause over the remark on page 99 of *Method in Theology* about "effete", regarding my own and others' writing, would seem to make the issue a very discomforting one. I have very seldom expressed my own difficulties in this regard and I suspect I have that in common with others. But let me pause over the 50 years of Lonergan studies.

The literature that has flowed forth out of Lonergan's work would seem to need a pause over the issue of effeteness. Why might it be effete? Is it possible that Lonergan's 'position' on philosophy is, to many, just another theory of mind, so leading to a usual flow of contrasts and comparisons?³ This flow is a pattern of response that maintains the status quo of the academy. Bluntly, the mood is, 'how could anyone actually resolve the cognitional,

¹Phil recommended that my efforts be more concretely contextualized within functional collaboration.

²This brief paper is not an expansion, comparison or contrast of Lonergan's work. It is more of a reflection on present process, therefore the denotation of "non-paper" seems to suit the tone.

epistemological and metaphysical problems that have plagued western philosophy for over two millennia?’ That would be an arrogant position.

Still, on January 22 of 1935 Lonergan wrote a letter while in Rome to his Provincial⁴ stating that he had solved a major problem in philosophy. He writes: “The current interpretation of St. Thomas is a consistent misinterpretation.” He continues later in the letter: “I can prove out of St. Thomas himself that the current interpretation is absolutely wrong. Not only can I prove it, The explanation I can give and I can prove and I can confirm from every view-point:...” Arrogant? The issue comes down to the reader solving the same problem and if it was solved for each individual reader of Lonergan’s published works I suspect a very different pattern of response would have emerged over the past 50 years.

Why does the problem have to be solved for each individual? Section 1.2 (page 19) of *Understanding and Being* titled “The Existential Element” provides us with a hint. *Self-appropriation is something you do yourself.* Once one acknowledges, *that intellect is intelligence, you discover that you have terrific problems in epistemology. It is much simpler to soft-pedal the fact that intellect is intelligence than to face out the solution to the epistemological problem.* We are, even after years of reading Lonergan’s print, a very fixed product of a long axial period in history. In other words, we are reading within the context of a massive cultural distortion, truncation. Was Lonergan, then, naïve in thinking that his “little book”, as he often referred to **Insight**, would take off? Phil shared with me decades ago that, after reading the book in the late 1950s, his thought was; “This stuff isn’t going to take.” He did not mean that it was mistaken, but that the paradigm shifts involved were beyond the philosophic mood of the times. I know that he is even more emphatic now about the final paradigm shift, that of functional collaboration.⁵

But there has been a fairly wide response to Lonergan’s work. What are the flaws in that response if its presence has little or no effect? And why is it that this pattern of response provides the false notion that Lonergan offers just another theory of mind, or care, or science, or theology that

³One can do a survey of literature that has flowed out of Lonergan’s print over the past 50 years to check this observation. Another existing format is the effort to rewrite *Insight* in one’s own words. What that is about would require more of a psychological analysis perhaps.

⁴Draft of *Bernard Lonergan: His Life and Leading Ideas*, Pierre Lambert & Philip McShane, pages 40 and following.

⁵Anyone who has been reading McShane’s articles on his website <http://www.philipmcshane.ca/> or articles and books he has published should be quite aware of his emphasis on functional collaboration. The issue is perhaps that

attracts people to compare it to all the theories of mind over the last two millennia.⁶ I am thinking of the periodic table. Did the later 19th century chemists compare the periodic table to efforts in alchemy⁷, in phlogiston theoretics, or to the muddles of the previous nineteenth century? The periodic table subsumed alchemy, mistaken views on oxygenation, and the work after Lavoisier into the history of chemistry and it provided a system to move forward. With this all in mind; if Lonergan scholars believe that Lonergan has discovered the periodic table of minding, why has the subsummation of theories of mind not occurred? I have answered my own question in my adverting to cultural fixity, to a larger meaning of the word *belief*. The belief has not shifted to a fully empirical stance.

But what do I mean by fully empirical? Let me go back to 1977, when I took my first introductory course “into myself” with Philip McShane.⁸ What attracted me to read Lonergan’s “big book?” Was it because it was about me? Someone was making sense of me and placing me in history. Years later I would feel some sense of embarrassment about my motivations, my drive, and it is mainly about the question of my self-placement in history. I was focused, by a narrow empiricism, on my own struggle, on the experience of not genuinely surviving childhood,⁹ but not on the larger empiricism that would locate me comprehendingly and effectively in the distortion of this axial period.¹⁰ The result of this was - and perhaps this is something I share with other discoverers of Lonergan? - a naive shift of optimism in my work and in my teaching. In light of McShane’s hints and questions of recent times, my work now appears less effective than I previously surmised.

such awareness does not lead to a differentiation of consciousness manifesting a theoretic shift or appreciation for the need of collaboration and these have not occurred in the “Lonergan school” of thought.

⁶ It is interesting to read the discussion questions asked of Lonergan after the 1958 Halifax Lectures. There are approximately 280 questions, some are “What” questions, some are questions of verification, some are “What to do?” questions, and a few are designed to compare, contrast or breakdown Lonergan’s intentionality analysis. The problem is that the “breaking down” is functioning out of little or no understanding of intentionality analysis. That tends to keep one where one is. Is that the present situation 50 years later?

⁷ I am thinking here of various theses or published texts being acknowledged with an addendum added that Lonergan is mentioned on page such and such or in footnotes Is that not the height of haute vulgarization? We might think of an article submitted to a journal of chemistry in 1919 (50 years after Mendeleev’s work) where the author expresses how he or she is closing in on producing gold from experiments with sulfur and lead and a footnote to the periodic table is on page such and such. The article would hopefully be rejected.

⁸ I had returned to university after 9 years employment with the Canadian Government to take a course titled “The Question of God” with McShane. I did not expect it to have more to do with me than God.

⁹ In private conversations Phil and I have often reflected on a phrase; “No one survives childhood.” I have often used it in my classes and there is usually a blatant denial by some, that they have surely survived life. One can only smile politely at such a response.

Why the effete-ness? McShane has in recent years been talking about *haute vulgarization* and its effect both on Lonergan and on the movement associated with his name. But, if one thinks carefully about this mood one finds that it has two prongs. Back to my own efforts after 1977. There was, yes, a suspicion that all was not well, a suspicion of decay, something so uncomfortably present in and from my own childhood, my own education. But the suspicion did not grow into an empirical attitude about, say, the longer cycle of decline. It was, rather, a compacted mood associated with that final section of chapter 7 of *Insight*. So, there was a naive and false optimism about self-appropriation: name the levels of questioning in myself, and tell others:¹¹ thus, on into a mindless optimism about bypassing the longer cycle of decline. Nor is this just my mistake, or that of naive followers. So, Fr. Robert Doran, in his recent book *What is Systematic Theology?*¹² shares my earlier naivete and carries it into a present Lonerganist movement when, on the third last page of that book, he twice remarks “all is in place”. Nothing much is in place except a view - unshared with the general culture - of levels of value that include a value of psychic reorientation. Are there others like Doran? Are we just not in the real world? Does *haute vulgarization* reign supreme? But it seems best, at this stage, to bring in Lonergan’s remarks about this disease, one that has haunted Christian thinking throughout its history, but became a haunted house, or a ghost train, after the isolation of Trent.

So, Lonergan characterizes the disease:

¹⁰Our distortion I believe to be a vast unknown. How can we know what we might be before arriving, but should not that unknown pull us forward, collaboratively, if we agree at least on that one point?

¹¹In a recent article on my website “Initiating Beginnings Towards a Manifestation of Our Self-Assets” Roberthenman.com I mention this problem (page 2) of introducing students to Lonergan rather than to the student her or himself, a massive contribution to the perpetuation of nominalism, haute vulgarization, and the longer cycle of decline.

¹²Robert Doran, *What is Systematic Theology*, University of Toronto Press, 2005, page 204.

“...there can be acknowledged both theory and common sense but the acknowledgment of theory is a devalued acknowledgment. It is simply through what the French call ‘haute vulgarisation.’ People have great respect for the great theoretical names-Newton and Einstein, Aristotle and Aquinas, weren’t they wonderful people!-but they have no personal experience of the intellectual pattern of living, of what it is to live the way a theorist lives, to have that pure domination of intellect as a part-time mode of one’s subjectivity. They do not know by experience what that is, they are not familiar, strictly and accurately, with any field of theoretical objects. They have a very inadequate notion of what theory is, yet at the same time they really are not in the world of community, they do not apprehend the concrete, the individual, the particular, as they really are; their apprehension is mediated by universal norms, laws, criteria, classifications, serial types, and so on, so that they do not know what the concrete is. They are lost in some no man’s land between the world of theory and the world of common sense.”¹³

On page 155 of the same text in a different article Lonergan goes on: “Theory is proposed and studied, but in the subject there is no real serious differentiation of consciousness; all we get as a theory are the broader simplifications offered by a professor to introduce or round off a lecture or a course, or the products of *haute vulgarisation*.”

Back then to the response to Lonergan: is it the case that we are lost thus in a no man’s land - or woman’s, but perhaps women have an advantage of concreteness and hope¹⁴ beyond the malepsyche? The pattern of response to Lonergan’s work does not then appear to have been one of serious concrete scientific curiosity motivated by a detached open desire to understand. General bias, supported by axial decay, keeps us from an authentic self-

¹³Bernard Lonergan, *Philosophical and Theological Papers 1958-1964*, CWL 6, University of Toronto Press, 1996, p. 121.

¹⁴Alessandra Gillis Drage, *Thinking Woman*, Axial Press, 2006. This text offers a vital context for the normative unfolding of the liberation of consciousness in women.

appropriation. If there is to be a subsummation of the axial period, it will be as Lonergan says, because a few make the effort collaboratively at self-appropriation.¹⁵

I recall some years ago at a Boston Conference where participants were invited to an evening gathering to share how they “got into Lonergan.” I did not attend. On page 18 of *Understanding and Being* Lonergan speaks of getting together and talking things out. He wasn’t talking about how you got into Lonergan. So, on page 19 Lonergan says, “self-appropriation is something you do yourself.” Somehow, this “evening sharing” did not attract me as assisting in my self-appropriation. I spent the evening with another group in a honest and brutally-humbling struggle with the fact of the feebleness of our insights.

¹⁵Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, Herder & Herder, NY, 1972, page 368. The last line in this text “while we await common cognitive agreement, the possible expression is collaboration...” In an attempt to avoid haute vulgarization, just what might Lonergan have experienced in his colleagues to have led him to make that remark, or more concretely, is a view of history implicated?

Now the curious thing about Lonergan's final achievement is that he seeks to institutionalize that brutality within the strategy of dialectic. Is it not strange that the Lonergan experts manage to avoid that single discomfiting page of challenge, page 250¹⁶ of *Method in Theology*, climbing as it does towards a terrible self-exposure of our entrapment in *haute vulgarization* and our exclusion of serious theory, serious understanding? Dialectic, for Lonergan, is to be that open-heart surging towards global honesty. For most of his expert disciples, dialectic is a matter of comparison of Lonergan with this person and that, an effete and very false exercise. "Empiricism, idealism and realism name three totally different horizons with no common object" (*Method in Theology*, 239), and, as far as I can judge, the position is unique to Lonergan, the counterposition, the common heritage of all contemporary thinkers.

Where then do I point? I think I am just taking up the pointing that is present in McShane's treatment of *Leading Ideas*. We must face the failure to enter seriously the world of theory, of serious understanding, the world that Lonergan identifies neatly in the personal lift possible through taking *Foundations of Physics* seriously.¹⁷ But, more concretely, we can face it by coming together honestly in the second half of page 250 of *Method*. And, remotely but equally concretely, we must step out of the simple *haute vulgarization* that allows us to continue writing simple-minded papers that have no effect. What are we to replace them with? The answer must come slowly, but it seems quite clear that it is to come from the effort to implement Lonergan's answer to his own problem of cosmopolis: a global push, beginning with the Lonergan community, for functional collaboration.

That slow coming has many conditions and many aspects, but to get into them here would, very likely, turn my non-paper into an effete survey. So I stick to my single point: let us move away from comparison in that conventional sense, and relocate our efforts in following Lonergan's directive against effeteness in a humble effort to get functional collaboration underway. Find out where we are, functionally, in our paper-writing and our talking. And, I cannot help adding, getting Lonergan off-stage in favour of centering attention on post-axial scientific self-appreciation.

Recently I had a brief conversation with a boy of seven years of age. I asked him what grade he was in. He replied that he was in grade two. I asked him: "How is grade two?" He replied: "It is very difficult to find

¹⁶I am still growing in my small appreciation of what McShane is about with his focus on page 250 of *Method in Theology* as his **Cantower**, **Sofdaware**, and **Quodlibets** projects attest.

¹⁷I recall almost 30 years ago my struggles with chapter 5 of *Insight* challenging me to work through some basic texts in physics that my father left for me after his death in 1973. (His hobby was theoretical physics) Two of those texts were Peter Bergmann's *The Riddle of Gravitation*, Charles Scribner's Sons, NY, 1968 which I realized later was a popularized attempt at Einstein, and A. D'Abro's 2 volumes; *The Rise of the New Physics*, Dover Publications, 1951 which challenged me to a realm of meaning quite foreign to my former education. That challenge, as a difficult and occasional dominant mode of my subjectivity, remains.

something interesting there.” I was amazed at his courage to be so empirical and honest. I offered a reply which I suspect provided little hope for this boy. His response to my answer was “Hmmm.” Is that not a sadness¹⁸ of our axial times that we would want to shift into educational joy? That young boy, if he is to survive somewhat, will have to find the courage to face at least 10 more years of that difficulty. We are really quite helpless in the face of his problem. And what is to be done about the millions who face year after year, day after day, minute after minute, now and in this future century or millennium, the dehumanizing environment that invites them to grow away from themselves? How will they survive? By survive I mean the need met to develop personal and communal schemes to offset that environment. Some of us may help the lost boy, and the lost boy and girl in ourselves. But communally we must reach, honestly and repentantly, for that larger view of creative non-effeteness that bubbled up in Lonergan’s tired consciousness in 1965.¹⁹

¹⁸I worked indirectly with the Halifax Education System for a decade from 1986 to 96. I recall some teachers in September telling me how great it was to be back. In early November, they were counting the weeks to Christmas, in late May they were counting the days to year’s end, and in mid June they were counting the years to their pension. The students are not the only one’s suffering.

¹⁹1965 was the year Lonergan first shared in conversation his discovery of functional specialization which appeared in print six years later in *Method in Theology*, Darton, Longman & Todd, Gr. Br., 1971.