

Philosophers in Jesuit Education session: Nov 9, 2007, ACPA, Milwaukee, Hilton Hotel, Miller Room,
4:00 to 6:00 PM.

Bernard Lonergan: An Ignatian Thinker

Elizabeth A. Murray
Department of Philosophy
Loyola Marymount University
2007

As a philosopher Bernard Lonergan is recognized as holding a unique position in the Twentieth Century. He is a critical realist who stands firmly in the tradition of Aristotle and Aquinas while also being post-Kantian and post-Hegelian. While affirming the possibility of attaining objective truth about the real, he distinguishes his position from the dogmatic realism of Gilson and even the transcendental Thomism of Maréchal and Coreth.¹ His articulation of rational self-consciousness, the virtually unconditioned, and judgment enables him to transcend the immanentism of critical idealism. As a theologian, while recognized as a dogmatic theologian contributing in the areas of Christology and Trinitarian theology, his major innovation is his work *Method in Theology* (1972) in which he differentiates the eight functional specialties of theology. Late in his career he also resumed his early interest in economics and completed manuscripts dealing with circulation analysis. Lonergan said of himself: "Fortunately, I don't think I come under any single label."²

Philosopher-theologian-economist, Lonergan saw himself primarily as a methodologist. In this emphasis which can be seen throughout his works, I have come to see Lonergan as an Ignatian thinker. In fact, the more I learn of the Ignatian tradition through my years at Jesuit institutions, the more I have come to see a decidedly Ignatian cast to Lonergan's thought. That Lonergan, himself a Jesuit, should think like a Jesuit is not at all surprising. But for me as a faculty member at a Jesuit university, the resonance of the tradition which informs my

institution in the thinker who has most influenced my philosophic development has been enlightening.

Let us consider six aspects of Lonergan's thought and their correlates in the Ignatian tradition:

- (1) Emphasis on method – the directives of the *Ratio*
- (2) Self-appropriation – *Spiritual Exercises*
- (3) Self-consciousness – Meditation
- (4) Dialectic – Discernment
- (5) Polymorphism of human consciousness – Emphasis on the education of the whole person
- (6) Work in economics – Concern for social justice

No doubt, additional correlations could be drawn; this is not meant to be an exhaustive list, but rather a starting point for discussion.

(1) Lonergan's focus on method is fundamental to all of this thought. His concern in theology is primarily to provide a critical method for a discipline which he considered to be somewhat floundering in its riches. In philosophy, his major work *Insight* develops a 'generalized empirical method,' which starts with the broader phenomenological field of the data of consciousness rather than the empiricist restriction to sense data. He painstakingly demonstrates that his method is the transcendental method of human knowing in any field. In the course of this work he further distinguishes specific methods: the classical and statistical methods of mathematics and science, the genetic method of the human sciences, the dialectical method of metaphysics, and the method of hermeneutics. In this focus on tackling problems methodically, Lonergan stands in the tradition of thinkers like Descartes and Husserl. He also echoes Ignatius's original concern with how to go about educating young men in his schools. Ignatius designed a curriculum which could be instituted in every school with specific directives, such as: "The pedagogy is to include analysis, repetition, active reflection, and synthesis; it should combine theoretical ideas and their

applications.”³ Ignatius focus on directives and structure rather than only on what was to be studied is echoed in Lonergan’s focus on method.

(2) Lonergan wrote *Insight* as “essay in aid of self-appropriation”⁴ by which he means one’s own rational self-consciousness clearly and distinctly taking possession of itself as rational self-consciousness. He further characterizes this work as a set of exercises through which it is hoped the reader will be able to get an insight into insight. He repeatedly invites the reader to advert to his or her conscious activities as they work through the passages in the book. The point is not examples from post-Einsteinian physics, but one’s own acts of questioning, imagining, and the presence or absence of insight. The approach taken in *Insight* clearly correlates to the approach taken by Ignatius in the *Spiritual Exercises*. Both see development taking place not merely through the imparting of knowledge, but through the active performance of the participant. Ignatius intended *The Spiritual Exercises* to be a text for the retreat director not for the one taking the retreat.⁵

(3) To engage in the exercises in *Insight* one must advert to the presence one has to oneself. Self-appropriation requires a heightening of consciousness. Not only is every conscious act intentional, it is also self-conscious. This self-consciousness inherent in every act makes it possible to advert to the act as one carries it out. This heightened awareness is somewhat difficult to describe, but Lonergan does not consider it mysterious or any special gift. Further, with Husserl and Sartre, he does not consider such self-consciousness to require any infinite regress of reflective acts. It is a matter of shifting one’s attention from the content to the act as it is performed. The focus required for self-appropriation is similar to the prayerful meditation on selected texts from the life of Christ in the *Spiritual Exercises*. As familiarity with one’s own conscious and intentional acts is required for intellectual self-appropriation, so attention to the work of one’s imagination is required for Ignatian mediation.

(4) Lonergan’s aim in *Insight* is twofold: it is not only insight into insight, but also insight into the principal devices of the flight from understanding.⁶

Lonergan traces the threat and effects of the love of darkness throughout *Insight*. In the chapters on society and culture, he exposes the fundamental roots of progress and decline. In his metaphysics, he outlines a basic position on knowing, objectivity, and reality in contradistinction to representative counterpositions in the history of philosophy. Lonergan develops a post-Hegelian dialectic that while incorporating the notion of *Aufhebung* insists upon a Kierkegaardian either/or. His ethics not only affirms human rationality, responsibility and freedom, it also outlines moral impotence. And, his treatment of God's grace does not overlook the reality of basic sin and evil. Lonergan describes three forms of conversion -- religious, moral, and intellectual, in terms of their dialectically opposed horizons. This stress on a radical either/or throughout Lonergan's thought, is consonant with Ignatius's theme of the Two Standards, the banner of Christ and the banner of Satan, in the *Exercises*. Spiritual development for Ignatius is gradually learning how to discern in our own thoughts and hearts that which comes from God and that which comes from Satan.⁷

(5) Lonergan states that the key to philosophy is the polymorphism of human consciousness. He identifies seven distinct orientations or patterns in the flow of conscious living: the biological, the aesthetic, the artistic, the dramatic, the practical, the intellectual, and the mystical.⁸ We are not only disembodied intellects, but we are involved in the pulse of life in which our attention is variously drawn to other pressing interests, needs, and constraints. More fundamentally, there is a duality in our knowing, that of extroverted animal knowing and intelligent and rational human knowing. Insofar as these two strains are not carefully distinguished, one's philosophy is likely to be in part incoherent. Acknowledging this duality in one's nature is admitting to the ineluctable tension of human existence. He writes: "As a man cannot divest himself of his animality, so he cannot put off the *eros* of his mind;" and "Nor are the pure desire and the sensitive psyche two things, one of them 'I' and the other 'It'....If my intelligence is mine, so is my sexuality."⁹ Lonergan's philosophy

embraces the whole person. This explicit inclusion of the many dimensions of human living, echoes one of the fundamental aims of Ignatian pedagogy—the education of the whole person. This aim which appears in our 'Mission and Identity' statements carries forward the spirit of the very first Jesuit colleges in which students studied classical ballet as well as logic, medicine as well as philosophy.

(6) The suffering brought on by the Great Depression motivated Lonergan to tackle economics, to study both Marx and Adam Smith. Notwithstanding the trend to social action that increasingly developed in Jesuit communities in subsequent decades, Lonergan continued to think that a most effective way to heal social ills was through years devoted to studying the fundamentals of philosophy and economics. He often recounted the effect that one solitary scholar who labored away for years in the British Museum had on global economic and social conditions—that thinker was Karl Marx. Lonergan late in his life still saw the pressing need for creative efforts in economics given the hegemony of multinational corporations: “The new system needed for our collective survival does not exist.”¹⁰ Lonergan’s lifelong concern with social and economic conditions responds at a deep level to the Ignatian tradition of social justice and the preferential option for the poor.

It is clear that Lonergan’s intellectual development and works reflects a lifelong commitment to the Ignatian tradition. His intellectual life seems to have been consonant with his spiritual life.

What lessons can we draw from this comparison for our own efforts in teaching philosophy at Jesuit institutions? Is it worthwhile to incorporate into our teaching an emphasis on method, philosophic exercises, reflective self-consciousness, radical discernment, an acknowledgement of polymorphic consciousness, and the issue of global economic conditions in our concern with social justice?

¹ Bernard Lonergan, "Metaphysics as Horizon," in *Collection*, CWL, Vol. 4, ed. Frederick Crowe and Robert Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967), pp. 188-205; Paul St. Amour, "Lonergan and Gilson on the Problem of Critical Realism" *The Thomist*, 69 (2005): 557-92.

² Bernard Lonergan, *Caring about Meaning*, ed. P. Lambert, C. Tansey, and C. Going (Montreal: Thomas More Institute, 1982), p. 219. For an account of the position of Lonergan in the history of philosophy, see *The Lonergan Reader*, ed. Mark D. Morelli and Elizabeth A. Morelli [Murray] (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), pp. 3-28.

³ Carl E. Meirose, SJ, ed. *Foundations* (Washington: Jesuit Secondary Education Association, 1944), 152. For an account of Ignatian pedagogy, see Elizabeth Morelli [Murray] "An Ignatian Approach to Teaching Philosophy," in *Teaching as an Act of Faith*, ed. Arlin C. Migiazzo (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), pp. 233-253.

⁴ Lonergan, *Insight*, CWL, Vol. 3, ed. Frederick Crowe and Robert Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), p. 16.

⁵ Robert W. Gleason, S.J., Introduction to *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius*, trans. Anthony Mottola (New York: Doubleday, Image Books, 1964), p. 22.

⁶ Lonergan, *Insight*, p. 5.

⁷ Gleason, p. 13.

⁸ Lonergan, *Insight*, pp. 410-411.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 498-99.

¹⁰ Lonergan, "Healing and Creating in History," in *The Lonergan Reader*, p. 570. Lonergan is here quoting from Richard J. Barnett and Ronald E. Muller's book, *Global Reach: The Power of Multinational Corporations* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974), 385.