

The Cognition Theory of Bernard Lonergan, S.J. in Relation to Mystical Knowledge

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The writings of the transcendentalist Thomist, Lonergan (1958; 1971) are an attempt to come to terms philosophically and theologically with the pace of change in the modern world¹. His monumental work *Insight* (1958) presents Lonergan's cognitional theory and was based on what he called "a long and methodical appeal to experience" (1973:12). His later work, *Method in Theology* (1971) offers a transcendental methodology for dealing with the question of God's existence and attributes by taking as a starting point a subject's religious experience: breakdown and religious conversion. It is religious conversion that leads to a knowledge based on love, a mystical knowledge.

Four levels of consciousness within the act of knowing

The act of knowing is a series of operations that occur at differentiated levels of consciousness. In the first level, one gathers data from experience-sense data, ideas, emotions, subjective feelings. All is gathered together in an activity of awareness of one's experience. The first step, not particularly easy and therefore often overlooked, is to be attentive to one's experience. It is an essential part of education, according to Weil (1950:66): "Although people seem to be unaware of it to-day, the development of the faculty of attention forms the real object and almost the sole interest of studies...every time that a human being succeeds in making an effort at attention, with the sole idea of increasing his grasp of truth, he acquires a greater aptitude for grasping it, even if his effort reduces no visible fruit"². The effort to attend to experience, to notice patterns, to omit nothing from one's gaze is essential if the act of knowing is to be an authentic one. Be attentive.

Once the data of experience is amassed, the knower enters another level of consciousness, that is, understanding. At this point, the knower needs to ask questions which assist in understanding the data of one's experience. "Experience does not become significant and is often not even noticed except insofar as we approach it with a view to understanding it" (Dunne 1985:14). While the task of attending to experience does not admit of questioning or evaluation, the task of the second level of consciousness is to query and to wonder why. How did it happen? What were the reasons? One is not, to use Eckhard's phrase *sunder warumbe*, acting without a why or wherefore (Soelle 2001:49). All the questions asked are for understanding and in asking questions, the knower is being intelligent.

¹During a question and answer period after a lecture on the relationship between the philosophy of God and the functional specialty, systematics, Lonergan was asked to clarify what he meant by the cultural shift that was occurring in the early 1970's. "What I'm talking about is a crisis in the Church, the crisis in the Church that involves radical change in theology brought on by the inadequacy of the philosophy and the scholarship and the notions of science that we had in the past" (1973: 63).

²In this same essay, "Reflections on the right use of school studies," Weil (1950:66) actually begins by linking the quality of attention that one gives to studies with the development of one's capacity to be attentive in prayer to God.

At some point, when there are no more relevant questions about details and motivations, the knower enters the next level of consciousness. Here the questions are more for reflection on the correctness of what one understands. The task at this level is verification of what one has perceived and understood. Am I right? Is it so? Are my thoughts true? Lonergan speaks about the humbling and necessary exercise of self-correction. It is a process that is a part of the exercise of reflecting, weighing up the evidence, and judging. In his own style, which is at times surprisingly colloquial, Lonergan writes: "Insights are a dime a dozen and most of them are wrong...a second one complements the first, qualifies, corrects it...it is only after you have had a hundred that you begin to get a grip on some subject and to gain some light on the matter" (1958:217) The self-corrective process involved in knowing-testing our insights, weighing them, adding another idea and amending others-this phase of self-correction anchors one's knowing in genuine reality. Be reasonable.

In Lonergan's critical realism, there is a fourth level of consciousness that calls for decision/action. In the previous level, the question was asked as a way to validate the truth or validity of one's understanding of the data of experience. The next level calls for a moral response by asking the questions "should" or "ought" (Dunne 1985:61). Based on the worth or goodness that presents itself, the task is a responsible decision. Be responsible. This is the level of moral transcendence, Lonergan says, where there "is the possibility of benevolence and beneficence, of honest collaboration and of true love, of swinging completely out of the habitat of an animal and of becoming a person in a society" (1971:104). This "swing out of the animal habitat" is precisely the result of a more profound consciousness as one experiences, questions, verifies and values. "Consciousness, then, is a mirroring of knowing in the sense in which we all know: experiencing, understanding, and judging" (1958:220). The four moments within the act of knowing: experiencing, understanding, judging and deciding are guided by Lonergan's transcendental³ precepts: Be attentive. Be intelligent. Be reasonable. Be responsible.

Self-appropriation and interiority

Two concepts become important when dealing with Lonergan's systematic approach to knowing: self-appropriation and interiority. Lonergan writes that "the aim in Insight, self-appropriation, is a movement to the world of interiority" (Croken., *et al.* 1996:114). As the term implies, self-appropriation means taking responsibility for the conscious and intentional operations that are implicit in the act of knowing (Shute 1994:167). The world of interiority to which Lonergan refers is the world of connatural knowledge⁴. Self-appropriation moves a person from academic knowledge to heart-felt, interior knowledge. The development of interiority occurs concomitantly with endeavours at self-appropriation at each level of consciousness, including the necessary self-corrective process of validating one's judgements. Unlike theoretical or discursive knowledge, mystical knowledge comes through the self-appropriation that moves one from the world of theory to the world of interiority. Mystical knowledge is knowledge of ultimate reality that is mediated through one's interiority; "...and the outstanding example in that field is of course the life of the mystic, in which interiority develops and constitutes, as it were, a means through which God's presence ceases to be an unidentified undertow in one's living" (Croken., *et al.* 1996:116).

Interiority, authenticity, conversion

The movement within an individual toward greater interiority necessarily includes a growing awareness of one's inability to live according to the transcendental precepts. The presence of bias easily creates blindness as opposed to attentiveness; dullness in place of intelligence; rationalization rather than reasonableness; and inaction instead of responsibility (Kidder, Pauline 1994:43). Genuine efforts

³According to Dunne (1985:61), transcendental precepts transcend specific content and refer directly to the metaphysical elements of reality.

⁴Lonergan writes: "Thomas à Kempis said that he would sooner feel compunction than define it. To define compunction is an operation in the world of theory. To feel compunction is something that occurs within one whether one can define it or not" (Croken, *et al.* 1996:114).

at self-appropriation and self-correction lead to greater authenticity. At each level of consciousness, there is the possibility of breakdown or conversion: intellectual, moral, or religious.

Intellectual conversion to greater attentiveness and intelligence means abrogating the myth that one can be objective, to see what is real, not just what is immediate (1971:238). A moral conversion requires that decisions be made on the basis of value rather than preference or satisfaction; living authentically by rooting out bias and opting for the truly good (1971:240). Religious conversion is “being grasped by ultimate concern. It is other-worldly falling in love” (Ibid).

Unlike intellectual and moral conversions, the impetus for religious conversion does not come from an individual’s self-awareness or reflection. Religious conversion is a received moment of self-transcendence, a self-transcendence that is neither cognitive nor moral, but personal. It is a response from a human person with an “intrinsic openness to the infinite” (Rahner 1997:2). The experience of religious conversion calls for a “total and permanent self-surrender” and it leads to an overwhelming experience of the free and unconditional gift of love⁵. The religious experience of unrelenting and unrestricted love constitutes one as a Being-in-love.

With the realization that one is a Being-in-love comes a new and mystical knowledge as well as a new basis for valuing and acting⁶. The individual is gifted with a whole new sense of and relation to reality that is no longer notional. Describing the difference between a metaphysician and a mystic, Lonergan says: “The metaphysician thinks of reality in its totality; the mystic experiences⁷ it” (Croken, et.al. 1996:104).

Religious conversion leads to the living of a fifth transcendental precept: namely, Be-in-love⁸. Conn (1987:262) takes Lonergan’s dynamic at this level of consciousness to mean an affective conversion of desire. Feelings in this context are a source of value and personal commitment. In the same way that falling being-in-love renders a person swept away by feelings of concern and care for another, so the nature of affective conversion translates in a radical movement away from self-absorption to a passionate commitment to others expressed in action (1987:270). However, the gift of love is not reserved for others alone but is given in total self-surrender to the “unknown beloved” (1971:109).

Bernard Lonergan’s cognitive theory presents a way of understanding the movements within a person that lead to authentic living: attentiveness, intelligence, reasonableness, responsibility, being-in-love. Though living authentically does not guarantee a life free from oversights or misunderstandings, mistakes or sins (1971:252), it does open a way toward interiority. This is the door to mystical knowledge. It is knowledge based on love that floods one’s entire being in an unconditional and unrestricted manner (Romans 5:5).

⁵A favourite text of Lonergan’s seems to be: “God’s love flooding our hearts through the Holy Spirit given to us” (Romans 5,5).

⁶Lonergan writes: “Such being-in-love has its antecedents, its causes, its conditions, its occasions. But once it has blossomed forth and as long as it lasts, it takes over. It is the first principle. From it flows one’s desires and fears, one’s joys and sorrows, one’s discernment of values, one’s decisions and deeds” (1971:105).

⁷Italics are Lonergan’s.

⁸Although Lonergan did not develop a mystical theology based on the transcendental precepts, Johnston’s Being in love (1988) uses the transcendental precept, particularly Be-in-love, as the basis for teaching on the practice of Christian prayer.