

B O O K R E V I E W :

Insight: A Study of Human Understanding

by Bernard J. F. Lonergan

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Insight: A Study of Human Understanding. By BERNARD J. F. LONERGAN, S. J. New York: Philosophical Library, 1957. Pp. 815. \$10.00.

Leo XIII found scholastic philosophy in a sorry state. He called for a reconstruction in which the best of old scholasticism would be restored and completed by new thought. His motto for reconstruction implies that he recognized philosophy as a dynamic process; Leo did not confuse the love of wisdom with its attainment.

The Leonine reconstruction has not proceeded rapidly and smoothly. Still, scholastic philosophy has neither stood still nor regressed. Historical studies have helped us to understand Aquinas and other scholastic doctors. For the interpretation of the medievals, we now demand textual studies made according to precise methods; we have thrown off the burden of the commentaries and the *ad mentem* summaries.

Moreover, some excellent analytic studies concerned with particular points of doctrine have been made. Many of these studies, it is true, have been ambivalent with respect to philosophic verification, sometimes using authority and slipping unconsciously into a traditionalism on philosophic issues. Still the monographic studies have made us aware of philosophic problems and we have developed some sophistication in thinking about them.

There are some who see no need for any work besides the historical and analytical studies to carry on the Leonine reconstruction. Yet to others it seems we must still advance in two ways. First, we must face the philosophic issues as they are now presented. We must talk about what our non-scholastic colleagues are talking about and we must make ourselves intelligible to them. Second, we must present philosophic syntheses which can stand independently of any allusions to medieval texts or citations of authorities.

This preface leads to my general evaluation of *Insight*. This book is genuinely and competently philosophic. It stands independently of any historical positions. It depends only on the readers' own experience and intelligence to validate its conclusions. Its appeal is not to a parochial audience. It is not written in scholastic jargon. It raises issues which are now interesting to non-scholastic philosophers and deals with these issues in a way which should be illuminating to them.

I realize this judgment of the importance of the book is strong. But Lonergan's book is unusual. *Insight* deserves to be read and studied, discussed and criticized. This book, I believe, is the first perfected philosophic product of the Leonine reconstruction. *Insight* might initiate a new era in scholastic philosophy.

Using the act of the intellect as a point of departure, Fr. Lonergan has built a complete philosophic synthesis. We can indicate the content and

the order of the work by using the old titles for the systematic courses, although these labels are not appropriate to this book. Beginning with epistemology, Fr. Lonergan develops the main positions of a scholastic cosmology, ontology, rational psychology, ethics, and natural theology.

In epistemology, Lonergan treats the types and sources of knowledge and error, certitude and degrees of certitude, and the grounding of first principles. He refutes scepticism, relativism, empiricism, and idealism. In cosmology, he treats change and its types and conditions, time and place, matter and form, causality in nature, contingency, and evolution. In ontology, he treats metaphysical composition, substance and accident, essence and existence, the transcendentals, the causes, analogy, distinctions, relations, and individuation. In rational psychology, he treats the cognitive and appetitive processes with special emphasis on the distinction between sense and intellect, the substantial unity of man, the spirituality and immortality of the soul, and freedom of choice. In ethics, he treats the main principles with respect to the end, the moral act, virtue, and law. He also makes interesting points concerning the common good and society. In natural theology, he treats the existence and attributes of God, divine knowledge and love, and creation. He also shows the possibility of miracles, revelation, a supernatural order, and the church. The scholastic will detect treatment of all these topics and will be comforted by the regularity and ease with which the right answers come. From this point of view, the book constitutes a well-integrated course in scholastic philosophy, including the philosophical portions of apologetics.

Yet *Insight* is not a text-book, and the account I have given of its content according to topics hardly suggests the significance of the book. Indeed, it is difficult to convey briefly what Fr. Lonergan has done, since *Insight* is written in a dialectical pattern similar to that of a Platonic dialogue. Thus, while the ostensible subject of the book is insight, the act of the intellect, he manages to treat all the topics mentioned above by making his treatment of insight relevant to an ever-broadening context. Insight thus serves not as the subject of a monograph but as the reference-point for building a philosophy.

The structure of the book may be indicated as follows. By a long and careful development, the author prepares the reader to understand and affirm a group of absolute principles. The implications of these principles are then drawn leading to the range of conclusions mentioned above. The process of drawing implications, however, is not logical but dialectical. "What must be granted if the principles are granted in order to maintain the principles solidly, consistently, and unambiguously?" is the question which guides the construction.

The book has two parts. In chapters I-X, the reader is brought to understand understanding as distinct from experience. In chapters XI-XX, the

reader is brought first to affirm his own existence as an intelligent knower and then to accept the developed position as an implication of his self-affirmation.

The first part can be divided into four parts. In chapters I-V, the author works from illustrative instances of understanding in mathematics and natural science to develop an understanding of the nature of understanding, different modes of understanding, and the conditions which are required for the occurrence of understanding. In chapters VI-VII, he analyzes the non-explanatory function of intelligence in common-sense knowledge, clarifying the limitations and imperfections of such knowledge. In chapter VIII, he considers substance and substantial unity, basing his treatise on the character of explanatory as distinct from common-sense knowledge. Finally, in chapters IX-X, he clarifies the notion of judgment as distinct from and added to mere apprehension.

The second part of the book also can be divided into four parts. In chapters XI-XIII the author elicits from the reader an act of self-affirmation as an intelligent knower, and then explicates this act as a knowledge of being objectively real. In chapters XIV-XVII, using the notions of being and objectivity and the structure discovered in the knowledge process, the author builds an ontology of the structure of beings and of the concrete universe. He also presents a defense against any alternative metaphysics by showing how his position can interpret and place any other position. In chapter XVIII he develops the principles of ethics by extending the metaphysical structure to cover the reality of moral obligation as well as of actual existence. Finally, in chapters XIX-XX, working from the ideas of being and cause and any affirmation of existence, he proves the existence of God and treats the problem of evil.

This summary indicates the general structure and content of the work. I will now indicate the method of *Insight* by pointing out Fr. Lonergan's functioning principles. The principles he uses in developing the argument, not the ones he talks about, are three: the desire to know, the isomorphism of the structure of knowledge with the structure of what is known, and reflexivity.

Man's desire to know is taken to be unconditioned and unrestricted. The satisfaction of this desire is considered to be an absolute value. Thus the desire to know serves as a term to which all knowledge is related and thereby unified. This desire also serves as a norm for judging acts of knowledge motivated by other desires. The desire to know is the means of transcending experience. Further, using this principle the author can blend speculative and practical considerations throughout the book. This blending is not confusing the two but uniting them by their joint origin in intellectual appetite. Beginning in chapters six and seven on common-sense knowledge, the author leads the reader to view rationality as a practical norm. Fr.

Lonergan can then treat error as malicious interference with the dominion of reason and cultural decline as the result of such viciousness. The starting point of apologetics is then the need for something to counteract the kingdom of darkness. The desire to know is the ultimate value-source of the adverse judgments which the author makes concerning other positions.

The second principle, the isomorphism of the structure of knowledge with the structure of what is known, permits him to infer a metaphysics from one's self-affirmation, once that act has been explained so that it involves the acceptance of his theory of knowledge and objectivity. For example, the distinctions between experience, understanding, and affirmation ground the distinctions between matter, form, and existence. Using this principle, Fr. Lonergan begins from instances of insight, proceeds to an articulation of the process of knowledge, and then infers the general structure of whatever can be known, that is, of being. The content of the instances becomes insignificant in this procedure, and the metaphysical structure which is inferred can be posited independently of any special scientific theories. For metaphysics works from the structure immanent in knowledge as a process, using the processes of direct knowledge as data. Special sciences base themselves on empirical data and so must operate within metaphysical structure, although they are not determined by that structure within their own domains. The result is that all sciences are incorporated into a single systematic world-view, the multiplicity of ways of knowing with all their richness being maintained within the general framework.

Reflexivity, the third principle used by the author, is difficult to explain. An example of the use of this principle in a classical text is Aristotle's defense of the principle of contradiction. That defense depends on the impossibility of communicating and therefore the impossibility of denying the principle if it is not accepted. Fr. Lonergan proceeds in a similar way, not with respect to the principle of contradiction but with respect to the structure of cognitive process as he has elucidated it. He maintains that his account is not subject to revision since any attempt to revise it would have to proceed according to the same process. Just as in Aristotle dynamic contrariety lies behind the principle of contradiction, so in Lonergan dynamic cognitive process lies behind the known structure of cognitive process.

Reflexivity not only functions negatively, as a means of pointing out that the adversary is refuting himself out of his own mouth, but it also functions positively as a norm for construction. What one says in building his own position must be in accord with what one holds it possible to say on that position. On the other hand, to beg the question is a fallacy. Fr. Lonergan tries to be careful to meet the demands of reflexivity himself. He maintains that his conclusions are independent from the instances he uses, but not

from all instances. He also maintains that his conclusions can be reached without following his method, but not as clearly, completely, and effectively.

Criticisms of *Insight* can be made from the point of view of rhetoric. The book would benefit from less explicitness and repetition and from many more self-references. Some of the sentences could be broken down. Occasionally the terminology is unnecessarily obscure, a glossary might be helpful. The index seems accurate but I did not find it helpful. Of course, the usefulness of an index varies with different readers. All in all, as philosophical writing goes, *Insight* is a well-written book. Had Kant written as well, he would be more popular and better understood than he is.

In *Insight* interpretations of many other philosophical writings are offered: The book is not intended to be a history. Historical allusions are used to clarify the position presented and to furnish grist for the dialectical mill, not to bolster the argument itself. Fr. Lonergan's use of history is like Aristotle's treatment of his predecessors. Many questions might be raised concerning the historical accuracy and adequacy of the author's statements concerning other philosophical positions. We restrict our questions here to the single problem of whether the philosophy presented in *Insight* is in agreement with the philosophy of Aquinas.

Lonergan thinks his philosophy agrees with that of Aquinas. He recognizes that he has augmented the old with something new, developing a novel method, but he does not admit that he diverges substantially. In raising questions about this problem I do not presume that I solve it. To decide whether *Insight* conflicts with Aquinas' philosophy is a task for a very careful historical investigation.

Two things should be kept in mind. First, Fr. Lonergan may not agree with Aquinas. Second, if he doesn't he could be philosophically adequate anyway.

The author has published two series of articles in *Theological Studies*, the last of which appeared in 1949. These articles were professed interpretations of Aquinas' writings. Fr. Lonergan wished to keep his history and his philosophy distinct. A fair method of attacking him on historical grounds, then, would be to attack the interpretation presented in the articles, using the development in *Insight* to clarify the intended interpretation.

In this type of criticism, the following questions might fairly be asked of him. Is it not the case that a philosophy is constituted of method and arguments, not merely of conclusions? Do not conclusions have their meaning from the philosophic means used reach them? Is not the use of insight as a reference-point for unifying what is understood and the use of the desire to know as a universal reference-point a method diverse from that which Aquinas employed? Can isomorphism be reconciled with Aquinas' principle that the mode of understanding is not the mode of

being? Aquinas constantly used this principle against Plato. Does the relationship which Fr. Lonergan posits between possibility, probability, and actuality accord with Aquinas' doctrine of being? Does Fr. Lonergan's doctrine of abstraction as an addition to the data accord with Aquinas' distinction between the potentially and the actually intelligible? If not, the doctrine of conception, definition, categories, form, and essence is also diverse. Does Fr. Lonergan's doctrine of judgment as the reflective grasp of the fulfillment of the conditions sufficient for fact accord with Aquinas' distinction between categorical and hypothetical propositions? If not, the doctrine of reflection, verification, modes of predication and analogy, and existence and action is also diverse. Does Fr. Lonergan's doctrine of science as the understanding and affirmation of correlations of data accord with Aquinas' distinction between understanding and reason? If not, the doctrine of inquiry and proof, the nature and division of sciences, intellectual principles and methods, and causal determination and order is also diverse. Do not the priority of intelligence to existence, the priority of self-affirmation to knowledge of the other, and the priority of dialectic to demonstration which Fr. Lonergan posits constitute a complete reversal of Aquinas' philosophy?

Apart from the historical accuracy of the author's identification of his philosophy with Aquinas', one can examine and criticize *Insight* as an expressed philosophy. I think Fr. Lonergan should face the following questions and I believe he would have serious difficulties with some of them.

How can necessary conclusions follow from contingent principles? Or, are cognitive facts necessary or metaphysical conclusions contingent? If the desire to know is somehow unconditioned, is not desiring to know a mere fact? Does the use of the desire to know as a principle require an equivocation on "unconditioned," i. e., on "necessary?"

How can the principle of the isomorphism of the structure of knowledge with the structure of being be defended from a starting-point within knowledge as distinct from being? If every assertion requires that the fulfillment of the conditions of the fact be grasped, does not the assertion of the principle of isomorphism suppose the grasp of the fulfillment of conditions which is given only outside knowledge, i. e., which is unknowable? To put the question in another way, if it is necessary to go from the structure of knowledge to the structure of being, how can one justify the transit without begging the question? If one accepts the evaluative theory of judgment and the isomorphic principle, is it possible either to distinguish knowledge and being without opening an unbridgeable gap between them or to relate them without identifying them?

How can knowledge be known as to its necessary characteristics independently of knowing the necessity of something which is not knowledge? Fr. Lonergan distinguishes between direct and introspective modes of cogni-

tive process. Does this distinction presuppose that cognitive process is knowable independently of anything being known? If so, there must be a third mode based on the first two, and so on indefinitely. When levels are distinguished in this way they are not of themselves related but must be referred by an extrinsic act. But if there is no infinite regress, must there not be only one mode of cognitive process to which self-awareness is immanent but which is primarily intentional of the non-cognitive? If there is only one mode of cognitional process, is it not impossible without question-begging or paradoxes based on reflexivity to ground a metaphysics on the structure of knowledge?

If things are what they are by being referred to insight, and if the whole philosophy is definite by being referred to the precognitive desire to know, how are relations what they are? If relations are not any "what" in themselves, what is their status? Relations are not things absolutely and they are not insights. If one distinguishes levels of the real to place relations, what about the relations between those levels? If *relata* determine relations and relations determine *relata*, what does it mean to say that insight determines both when insight too can be related? If insight is not related, then are we talking about human knowledge or about God? If we can't keep these distinct, can we keep anything distinct?

This series of philosophic questions might be extended indefinitely, and it would be easy to find many small points to argue, but all the questions I have raised are really concerned with one issue. What that issue is may be suggested by the questions or it may be suggested by a historical allusion. It seems to me that the philosophy which Fr. Lonergan has constructed is closely akin to the position of Plato. Aristotle criticized Plato for separating the forms, and I mean to suggest by my questions the possibility of criticizing Fr. Lonergan in an analogous way. My questions are merely a reformulation of the old criticisms to meet the new formulation of dialectical philosophy.

If *Insight* arouses counter-formulations as ingenious and competent as it is itself, Fr. Lonergan will have done us a considerable service. I believe that happy result may occur. And consequently I attribute that importance to the work which I stressed in the beginning of this review.

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