On Bernard Lonergan: Understanding Understanding

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Philosophers are seldom in the headlines, yet they are often the true revolutionaries of some succeeding age. Karl Marx blueprinted the political upheavals of the 20th century in the reading room of the British Museum; Soeren Kierkegaard's fiery polemics, scorned by the sturdy burghers of Copenhagen, are the foundation of existentialism. Today, a number of Roman Catholic intellectuals believe that a little-known thinker of commensurate stature has been patiently laying some philosophical land mines for the future. He is Canadian Jesuit Bernard Joseph Francis Lonergan, 60, whose followers assert that history may reckon him a mind to rank with Aquinas and Newman.

Some reasons for their enthusiasm are argued in the latest issue of *Continuum*, a lively, intellectual quarterly sponsored by Saint Xavier College in Chicago, The 244-page issue is devoted to analyses of Lonergan's work, including articles by English Jesuit Frederick Copleston, historian of philosophy, and by two of the nation's most theologically astute Catholic laymen: *Continuum*'s Editor Justus George Lawler and Michael Novak of Harvard. Lonergan contributed a typically abstruse essay on "cognitional structure."

THE NATURE OF KNOWING

Lonergan is not an easy thinker to appreciate. His dense, elliptical prose, studded with references to Thomas Aquinas and modern physics, makes its points in a methodical and mind-wearying manner. One typical passage hammers home a conclusion with: "In the thirty-first place..." Another problem is Lonergan's disinterest

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in hurrying his ideas into print, or giving them wide circulation. Many of his most important lectures exist only in Latin mimeographed notes made by his students; like the late Ludwig Wittgenstein of Cambridge, his reputation rests on the memories and convictions of his peers, a scattering of essays and book reviews, and one authentically towering masterpiece: a study of human understanding, called *Insight,* published in 1957.

Lonergan has written or lectured on subjects as varied as economic ethics, the philosophy of education and the spiritual meaning of the family. But his primary intellectual task has been the analysis of two dry epistemological problems—the nature of knowing, and of intellectual method—that have a practical application in an age of verbal confusion, in which different disciplines find it frustrating to communicate with one another. Both problems, essentially, are philosophic ones that Theologian Lonergan undertook to solve partly out of pedagogical necessity. He found it impossible to teach theology correctly without first establishing a viable underlying philosophy, which led him in turn to consider the fundamental question: What does it mean to know?

ARTISTS AS MORALISTS

Insight is Lonergan's attempt to understand the human act of understanding—an inquiry into "the dynamism of inquiry" that centers on "a personal appropriation of one's own rational self-consciousness." Lonergan's viewpoint is inherited from Aristotle and Aquinas, but has been expanded by Kant and Freud. Using a vocabulary uniquely his own, he has written a general field theory of the mind—the origin and nature of human insight, how it relates to its various forms of expression, whether in the formulas of the physicist, the word pictures of the poet, the concepts of the philosopher. *Insight,* say Lonergan's followers, spells out the possibility of a trans-cultural philosophy that would allow thinkers from different traditions—Thomists and logical positivists, for example—to understand one another by paying attention first to each other's basic cognitional activity: how one unifies data, why he does so in a particular fashion. To understand someone else, says Lonergan, a thinker must first understand how his own awareness of reality has been historically and psychologically conditioned by preconceptions.

Since the publication of *Insight,* Lonergan has been absorbed in the question of intellectual method, particularly for the theologian. He believes that Christianity is essentially a historical religion, borrowing many of its concepts from secular disciplines. The development of theology demands both an adherence to the truths of the past and a transformation in light of new scientific ideas about what

science is, post-Freudian insights into the nature of the psyche, changing ideas of the nature of history and man.

In his next book, Lonergan intends to outline a method for theological investigation that is analogous to the methods of modern science—thereby opening anew the possibility of mutual comprehension between Christian and secular thinking on ultimate questions of man. Lonergan admits that theology has not kept pace with man's intellectual evolution; the artists, he says, have become the true moralists of the age.

UP THE SPANISH STEPS

A shy, pale, hulking figure, "Bernie" Lonergan is a much-storied underground legend among Catholic intellectuals. Born in Buckingham, Quebec, near the Ontario border, he decided to enter the Jesuits at 17, studied at his society's Heythrop College near Oxford and at Rome's Pontifical Gregorian University. He spent 13 years teaching theology at Jesuit seminaries in Canada before moving to "the Greg" in 1953. There he follows a life as precisely organized as his thought. He teaches or writes from 8 until lunch, and after his siesta takes an hour-long walk that never varies: up the Spanish Steps, into the Borghese Gardens, back to the Greg. Since he teaches in Latin, he reads English at night, "to keep in contact with the language."

Lonergan's new students start by tittering at his singsong voice and unmelodiously flat Latin pronunciation, and end by despairing at his blithe unconcern for the frailties of lesser intellects. Once, after failing to get a philosophical point across to his class, Lonergan brightened, said: "I think this will make it clear," proceeded to cover the blackboard with differential equations. During a World War II discussion about the loss to mankind in bomb-gutted libraries, Lonergan argued that the important things were in people's minds, not in books. In answer, someone cited Shakespeare and got a copy to cite lines at random. In each case, Lonergan identified the quotation, imperturbably reeled off the rest of the passage.

FOR SECOND-RATE MINDS

Lonergan is a lonely figure inside the church, an ignored one outside it. The unfashionably Thomistic starting point of his vision repels non-Catholic thinkers grappling with the same issues; yet this unconventional revision of Aquinas outrages many doctrinaire Thomists. He has steered clear of ecclesiastical controversy, except once to blister an Italian theologian whose criticism, Lonergan believed, made him out to be a heretic. Moreover, he steadfastly refuses to popularize, or to publish applications of his theories to specific

problems: a systematic Lonergan theology, he half-jokingly insists, should be left for second-rate minds.

Even so, Lonergan's influence has begun to spread beyond the seminary. He has widened the horizon of some of the best priestly minds of this generation. He has even made converts on the faculty of the Greg, and one doctoral student there says: "Not since Robert Bellarmine have so many been influenced by one Roman thinker." But if Lonergan does turn out to be one of the memorable shapers of Christian thought, it will take another generation of thinkers exploring his insights to prove it. As another of his students puts it: "He's still 30 years ahead of his time."