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Insight

**Insight: A Study of Human Understanding,
Volume 3**

Bernard J.F. Lonergan

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Insight is Bernard Lonergan's masterwork. Its aim is nothing less than insight into insight itself, a comprehensive view of knowledge and understanding, and to state what one needs to understand and how one proceeds to understand it.

In Lonergan's own words: 'Thoroughly understand what it is to understand, and not only will you understand the broad lines of all there is to be understood but also you will possess a fixed base, and invariant pattern, opening upon all further developments of understanding.'

The editors of the Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan have established the definitive text for *Insight* after examining all the variant forms in Lonergan's manuscripts and papers. The volume includes introductory material and annotation to enable the reader to appreciate more fully this challenging work.

Insight: A Study of Human Understanding, Volume 3 Details

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From Reader Review Insight: A Study of Human Understanding, Volume 3 for online ebook

Paul says

There is totes a hardback edition, Goodreads. Nice red boards and everything.

I really struggled over the 3 to 4 star rating. It really doesn't matter. At 770 pages of actual text, you have to want to know what he has to say. It's mostly readable. It's a series of suggestions and sketches out a possible way of looking at things; there is nothing that would constitute a proof in even a weakened, philosophical sense of the term I hesitate to even use the word "argument" to describe much of anything in this book. In the closing pages he confesses to being a professor of dogmatic theology...one of the best plot twists I've ever read: totally unexpected, and yet it describes the whole tone of the book. My God, Popper and Carnap feel the need to stop every two to ten pages for the Response to Comments and then the Response to Dipshit Comments Made by People Who Solely Like To Argue, and this guy just floats along as if he's never actually been challenged on a single point in his entire career. Everything he says needs to be tried and tested and pounded upon and seen whether any of it really works, but I find myself scratching my chin and thinking it might be worthwhile.

Let me give an example. A core claim in this book is that Lonergan understands human cognitional process so well he can use it to erect a completely unassailable central nub of metaphysics, upon which any possible actually working way of understanding what the whole universe of being has in common must be erected. This cognitional process includes as its most prominent feature a three-step structure of knowing, which proceeds in an Aristotelian-Thomist fashion 1) from sense input or introspection of, say, an emotional process to 2) insights which provide "understanding" of possible real structures of the world that provided those sense inputs to 3) reflection and judgement on whether the insights actually correspond to reality. That needs to be compared with actual neuroscience. There have to be predictions that can be made on that basis that could be checked. Lonergan's "proof" of this theory of cognitional process does in fact contain a stray element of proof, in that he notes that anyone who wants to argue with him about the truth of his theory will engage in some sort of reflection and judgement, i.e. use of reason, to conclude that his theory is wrong. That's good so far as it goes, but it does not bring us very close to determining whether the three steps are complete and properly described as Lonergan states them, which of course I cannot present in detail here.

Let me resume what else I remember of Lonergan's long, repetitive, smug, but nevertheless intriguing system:

The notion of the empirical residue, which is largely just where things are in spacetime, and leads to the scatter of observations away from the predictions of classical [i.e., simplified] laws and models, which scatter Lonergan refers to as statistical law.

The notion of schemes of recurrence and emergent complexity, evolution someone else would have called it, which allows families of simple entities to assemble into composite objects that turn out to have their own systems of rules, e.g. from subatomic particles to atoms to molecules and crystals to cells to multicellular organisms to organisms with minds, etc. In this context, he spends a paragraph or three insisting on a dry little unconvincing point that the composite entity completely assumes the simpler entities and it is no longer sensible to talk about them individually. Right, like it makes any sense to say that I can't speak of John Q. Core Electron in this aluminum atom (why the example of an aluminum atom, specifically, came to mind and has stayed in my mind ever since I couldn't quite tell you) because now it's an *atom*, doncha know...well, I tried parsing the text there for several minutes and gave it up as bad business and went on. Just in the past few days my reading about medieval philosophy has possibly given me the answer, that Lonergan

was still defending Thomas' point about the individuality of the substantial form against multiplicity of forms...

The notion of the social surd, the tendency of people to initially set up a society or system according to thought-out rules and then corrupt the system by means of "common sense", which is to govern ones actions by the rules that will maximize payoff in the shortest term and which are discovered by trial and error. This inherent tendency causes the decline of civilizations, the need for new insights, and the tension between those with a coherent vision and those whose "common sense" and "practicality" drag society further down. The social surd is the irrational [get it?] set of laws, customs, etc. that come into existence and swallow up the initial rational aspects of the society. [For those of you keeping score at home, I bring you: 1) health insurance, 2) postsecondary education, 3) immigration law and enforcement...] "Social surd" is of course one of those fairly fun names that Lonergan is very proud of coining. He also uses the completely redundant word "obnubilation" more than once and LOVES the word "scotosis", which I thought he had made up to mock Duns Scotus until I looked it up just now.

This brings us to the main dish, the carving out of a metaphysics according to Lonergan's ideas of cognitional process, which are, again, a neo-Thomist progression from 1) the conscious stream and sense input to 2) the construction of possible schemes of understanding the inputs to 3) checking, reflection, and judgment upon the schemes as certain, possible, or false, resulting in knowledge. He maps these onto 1) "potency", "central potency" being an entity as separate and individual in spacetime; 2) "form", "central form" being its unity as a single entity and "conjugate forms" being its actual properties, rules of interaction, and also, as I haphazardly understand the classical terminology, accidents...but perhaps those are "conjugate potency"?...oh, bother; 3) "act", "central act" being the entity's actual existence. This spells out a system of metaphysics of proportionate being, i.e. being sized so as to fit our understanding.

Two unreasoned sketches in three chapters follow. The first is a skeletal ethics, grounded on the "unrestricted desire to know" and involving the addition of a fourth story of cognitional process, willing and taking action based on a decision in the third story. The second is a suggestion that this same unrestricted desire to know leads to transcendental knowledge, the God of classical natural theology, and onward to a recognition of the need, and certainty that the need has been fulfilled, for this transcendental Being Itself to have implemented a plan of salvation for humans that would of necessity include a suspiciously large number of Catholic elements.

Thus the end of the book, even more so than the first course in metaphysics that takes up its third quarter and change, demands elaboration and checking, work of enormous proportions. The vision is intriguing enough that I do want to see if there are enough of the cultists hinted at in the preface that any of this elaboration and checking has actually been done...

Justin says

You have to read this. It will change your life.

Ray Lang says

One of the most profound books I've read. Lonergan brings the reader very meticulously through a logical chain starting with common human experiences, such as insight and wonder, and drawing very broad

conclusions about the reality of noetic experience, and what that entails.

Eric Cheulen says

After about 100 pages, I knew that Lonergan was building up to an well-considered conclusion. But his progress was so painfully slow, that I concluded the game wasn't worth the candle.

??v?? ϙααα says

A great scope by Bernbard Lonergan... finest thinker from XX century...

Jim Sullivan says

This work should be read after completing Method in Theology.

Colm Gillis says

What an interesting book!! This offers a really novel angle on human understanding. Written almost as a series of mini-essays? the loose structure is open to criticism of being unwieldy. But the fascinating dialogue that occurs renders such critique superfluous. A ground-breaking study which is challenging but rewarding to read.

S says

Because status updates don't work well for this purpose, I've decided to list my ever expanding notes into my review.

Father Lonergan's project is, undoubtedly, the relatively less known treasure that responds not merely to the analytic (I perhaps shouldn't use this term: it seems like instead of appealing to linguistics he appeals to mathematics) and continental divide, but more importantly, the scientific and philosophical divide.

I am so terribly happy I've found this book.

You see, dear friends, what Lonergan is doing is nothing less than taking us on a guided tour of our own inner experience as it relates directly to whatever it is we consider knowledge. It's structure is rhetorical rather than poetical, which is not to say he's arguing, but to say that he's not obfuscating.

At least for now, I'll list two important quotes and try to demonstrate their significance.

"The Pivot between the images and the concepts is insight."

On a slightly sentimental note, it is astonishing how frequently we take our own intellectual capacity for granted. This is probably because it just simply isn't taught. Probably because you can't teach Kantianism to middle-schoolers. But, that's a different contention.

This is the movement by which we come to know: 1) Experience, 2) Percept, 3) Image, 4) Concept {though, if you wanted to collapse 1 & 2, I don't think anybody would readily dispute that operation}.

There is a middle ground between Image and Concept formation. In Thomism, there is the notion of the Active and Passive Intellects.

Lonergan is giving us a thorough going account of the process of insight, and in so doing, explaining its conditions and its consequences, and thereby giving a summary account of epistemology as it should be approached with respect to not merely common-sensical styles of knowing, but also the severely more rigorous mathematical knowing.

This is my favorite statement to date: "For what is primitive is not the content of some primitive insight but the content of some primitive experience to which no insight corresponds."

It is not easy to explain how intensely important this assertion is. It goes back to, I'm not entirely sure, probably at least Duns Scotus. Haecceity. But, the most thoroughgoing re-interpretation of the idea I'm familiar with is Heidegger's. This is the pivotal meaning: there is experience that we have that bears no direct conceptual correlate. This is the radical individuality of the object. This is what you see in a still-life, my friends. This is why a still-life is important. It shows us a state-of-affairs that is not otherwise. Furthermore, it emphasizes the profundity structurally inherent in every single moment of our lives. This is one of the principle sources of Wonder, which has been called the principle source of philosophy. The next thing you look at, consider that in the history of history, never before has that thing been there then the way it is, nor will it ever be again. And, yet, nevertheless, the thing ENDURES.

If I'm reading Lonergan correctly, he has spelled out this insight in the clearest possible terms available. He calls it empirical residue. It is the pre-conceptual stuff of intentionality. It's good stuff. You should try it.

Further reflections on Scotosis: this seems to happen on an individual scale (like when we don't sufficiently explore or face certain facts, despite certain functional demands present in our psychological system {mind, psyche, internal life}) and (this is my extrapolation) on a cultural scale, like when a society en masse ignores fundamental social problems, which result in cultural pathologies (drug abuse, absurd consumerism, dependence on entertainment for a sense of community, a lack of institutional means by which community involvement is necessitated {without coercion, though with meaning}).
