Lonergan's Transcendental Method: The First Canon

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Abstract

This is an introduction to the first of eight canons that provide a skeleton to the injunctive, reflective, and functional wholeness of both *Insight* and *Method* based on the formal pre-mathematical work of C. Spencer-Brown's as laid out in his *Laws of form* (1969).

Introduction

As is commonly known, Lonergan's *Insight* was never written to be read in an analytical fashion. Rather, it is a work to be experienced as a set of injunctions in the same way that a cooking recipe or a musical score is a set of instructions for making a cake or playing a piece of music.[1] The cake or music in this case is the subject playing himself: the dynamics of Lonergan's transcendental method. That playing is the central object of *Insight*, the self-appropriation of one's own rationality that has at its core an intellectual conversion toward Lonergan's critical realism and away from naïve realism, empiricism, conceptualism, and other limiting epistemological positions.

Reflective understanding often involves a sustained intentionality without forcing answers.[2] A time-consuming approach far at odds with the exciting and demanding work of the detective, reflection may be the primary method for appropriating both *Insight* and *Method.* The simple reason is that ultimately the self-appropriation of one's own rationality is achieved through evaluation not understanding, even though an understanding of insights and different realms of meaning come first. This is especially true for appropriating Lonergan's functional specialities, which are not understandable without recognizing the way they are grounded in his transcendental method.

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[1] "[The] primary form of mathematical communication is not description, but injunction. In this respect it is comparable with practical art forms like cookery, in which the taste of a cake, although literally indescribable, can be conveyed to a reader in the form of a set of injunctions called a recipe. Music is a similar art form, the composer does not even attempt to describe the set of sounds he has in mind, much less the set of feelings occasioned through them, but writes down a set of commands which, if they are obeyed by the reader, can result in a reproduction, to the reader, of the composer's original experience." C. Spenser-Brown, *Laws of Form*, (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1969), 77, hereafter referred to as *Laws*.

[2] "To arrive at the simplest truth, as Newton knew and practiced, requires *years* of *contemplation*. Not activity. Not reasoning. Not calculating. Not busy behaviour of any kind. Not reading. Not talking. Not making an effort. Not thinking. Simply *bearing in mind* what it is one needs to know. And yet those with the courage to tread this path to real discovery are not only offered practically no guidance on how to do so, they are actively discouraged and have to set about it in secret, pretending meanwhile to be diligently engaged in the frantic diversions and to conform with the deadening personal opinions which are being continually thrust upon them." *Laws*, 110. Italics in the text.

Another factor is that *Insight* and *Method* are not only separated by more than twenty years but each work has its own specific intentionality. Yet, there is an underlying unity, a natural continuum from the first to the second: Insight lays the philosophical grounds for providing a suitable method for theology at a time when theology transcends any one person or group.

A clue to a possible approach in uncovering the underlying skeleton that grounds both works might be found in Spenser-Brown's *Laws of Form*. In this work he lays out a way of working that is eminently suitable to the injunctive, reflective, and unifying task of bringing together both *Insight* and *Method.* At the core of his approach is the idea of making a distinction.[3] To draw a distinction is to indicate something of value, for without value there is no reason to make any distinction.

- Commands call something into being, may conjure up some order of being, or may be a call to order. In general they take the form of " draw a distinction", "let there be a distinction", "find a distinction", "see a distinction", "describe a distinction", "define a distinction", or "let a distinction be drawn."[4]
- Names act as reference points or tokens, e.g., "call so-and-so such-and-such." Names refer to things of value.
- Instructions are designed to take effect within whatever universe has been brought into being through a distinction. Axioms, postulates, theorems, initials, and consequences are terms that refer to specific kinds of injunctive commands.
- Canons are orders or sets of orders that permit or allow, but do not construct or create.[5]
- Proof of any assertion is derived from the logical coherence of the person engaged with judging. Proofs are not axiomatic in form.[6]
- Descriptions are not proofs as such but ways in which the reader can relate theoretical material to concrete realities.[7]

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[3] "The theme of this book is that a universe comes into being when a space is severed or taken apart. The skin of a living organism cuts off an outside from an inside. So does the circumference of a circle in a plane. By tracing the way we represent such a severance, we can begin to reconstruct, with an accuracy and coverage that appear almost uncanny, the basic forms underlying linguistic, mathematical, physical, and biological science, and can begin to see how the familiar laws of our own experience follow inexorably from the original act of severance." *Laws*, xxix. In this paper we do not use Spenser-Brown's actually theorems relating to such basic forms. Instead, we use his basic approach to highlight the underlying form or skeleton of Lonergan's work in both *Insight* and *Method* combined. RCB.

[4] *Laws*, 79-81.

[5] "The more important structures of command are sometimes called canons. They are the ways in which the guiding injunctions appear to group themselves in constellations, and are thus by no means independent of each other. A canon bears the distinction of being outside (i.e. describing) the system under construction, but a command to construct (e.g. 'draw a distinction'), even though it may be of central importance, is not a canon. A canon is an order, or set of orders, to permit or allow, but not to construct or create." *Laws*, 80.

[6] "In discovering a proof, we must do something more subtle than search. We must come to see the *relevance*, in respect of whatever statement it is we wish to justify, of some fact in full view, and of which, therefore, we are already constantly aware. Whereas we may know how to undertake a search for something we can *not* see, the subtlety of the technique of trying to 'find' something which we already *can* see may more easily escape our efforts." *Laws*, 95. Italics are in the text.

[7] "Another point of interest is the clear distinction . . . that can be drawn between the proof of a theorem and the demonstration of a consequence. The concepts of theorem and consequence, and hence of proof and

With this in mind we take up the first of eight canons that constitute a "recipe book" of instructions or injunctions for readers to follow when undertaking to appropriate Lonergan's transcendental method and its multiple implications for metaphysics, ethics, and theological method.

The First Canon

In any epistemology, metaphysics, and/or philosophies there exists an initial distinction of value that establishes the essential form of all that is to follow.

The value of the first canon is that by placing an accent on the clue that leads to the eventual development of a philosophy it is possible to anticipate not only the general manner of its further development but the initial stance on any number of questions. This applies not only to Lonergan's own exercise in *Insight*, but the general metaphysical and ethical stance of other suggested comprehensive philosophies.

The First Distinction

Make a distinction within the realm of all possible cognitive events related to human understanding.

Name this distinction "insight."

Let this distinction be called into being according to the following axioms:[8]

Axiom 1: an insight comes as a release to the tension of inquiry.

Axiom 2: an insight comes suddenly and unexpectedly.

Axiom 3: an insight is a function not of outer circumstances but inner conditions.

Axiom 4: an insight pivots between the concrete and the abstract.

Axiom 5: an insight passes into the habitual texture of one's mind.

If the content of this distinction has value, let that value be known by the name "insight."

Let the value of an insight take the following form:

1. An insight will occur if and only if a question arises; if there are no questions, there will not be an insight to provide a possible answer; therefore the presence or absence of a particular question or set of questions determines the conditions for the emergence of a field of inquiry or a general body of knowledge.

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demonstration, are widely confused in current literature [in mathematics and logic] where the words are used interchangeably. This has undoubtedly created spurious difficulties." *Laws*, xxii. When "value" is discussed in the core of this article, it refers to demonstration, i.e. a demonstration of value. RCB.

[8] Bernard J. F. Lonergan, S.J., *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* (Toronto: Volume 3 of the Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan, edited by Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran, University of Toronto Press, 1992), 27-31, hereafter known as *Insight*. It is interesting to note that Lonergan's five elements are less descriptive than a set of starting points that later turn out to be of great significance. RCB.

2. The occurrence of an insight cannot be predicted; it signifies an event that goes beyond what is currently known or expected; there is no way to derive an insight from anything that has gone on before; therefore, an insight represents the emergence of something new into the world.
3. Ultimately, an insight has its grounds in the internal psychic conditions of the subject, not the external sensate world; therefore, the development of any field of knowledge depends on the development of the internal conditions of each individual.
4. An insight brings together into one moment of understanding both the sensate world of the concrete and an abstract world of ideas; this allows us to live in a sensate world that is mediated through the abstract, i.e. we live in a world mediated by meaning; the affirmed reality of any abstraction rests in an insight that connects it with the concrete—verification and negation are real possibilities.
5. An insight does not have to be repeated each time an answer is sought to a question; an insight can become habitual to the point that it becomes who one is; each generation does not have to repeat the insights acquired by prior efforts but can build upon their work; therefore, progress is not a distinct possibility but a working reality that sets the context for all human living.

Theorem 1.1: Encapsulation

Let any insight specific to an individual be objectified by being encapsulated in a definition; concepts emerge through this process of encapsulating an insight in a definition.

Encapsulation can take one of three distinct forms of increasing abstraction (*Insight*, 35-36, 37):

1. Nominal definitions set the conditions only for the proper use of the term within any community or collective culture as part of that culture's sensate world mediated by meaning.
2. Explanatory definitions provide an explanation to questions of immanent intelligibility that demonstrates why the term must be defined in the way that it has been defined. Such definitions belong to the abstract world of explanatory theory.
3. Implicit definitions shed any explanatory context specific to an area of study, thus giving the term full levels of abstraction of an extremely general and widely employable manner.

Let the internal conditions of the subject be paramount through the recognition of a clue, the reality of a tension (a need to know), and an image that brings the concrete into the process of pivoting with the abstract (*Insight*, 31-35).

Let the value of definitions take the following form:

1. At their most basic level, they provide a means for the common use of any term within any community so that the insight becomes in some sense universal among the community that uses it.

2. Nominal definitions are specific to a particular group living in unique geographical and historical circumstances; they enable common commerce, political action, and social conventions to exist beyond the immediate moment.
3. Definitions provide clues as to the level of abstractness: nominal refer only to common use, explanatory to a higher level of abstraction, while implicit definitions operate at the highest possible level of generalization.
4. Definitions provide the criteria for making a judgement concerning the reality of any such definition, i.e. they provide the means to determine what evidence is to be collected and the weight to be given to such evidence.
5. Definitions provide the grounds upon which higher levels of theorizing can be raised, thus setting up a chain of concepts, images, and definitions that span the range from the concrete sensate world up to and including the higher reaches of the human mind.
6. Such a chain of definitions allows for proofs involving the testing of this link between the sensate world and the world of the abstract (cf. axiom 4).

Theorem 1.2: Expansion

Let insights coalesce around a single question or cluster of questions.

In any such cluster, the intentionality of the human mind is invited to find order and consistency rather than exist in a state of confusion and disorientation. This involves a process of homogeneous expansion as limitations to various operations are relaxed or extended to their full range (*Insight*, 39-40).

If the inquiring human mind expands any such collection through a process named "homogeneous expansion", the field of endeavor eventually encounters anomalies and/or paradoxes that cannot be resolved through any process of expansion.

Postulate 1.2.1: Paradoxes/Anomalies
Let there exist questions within any field of study that cannot be answered within this field of inquiry.

Postulate 1.2.2: Emergence
Let the subject then seek a higher perspective or viewpoint that will place the prior field of study within a larger more comprehensive context. The lower point of view will remain valid within its own range, but will now be conceived as one possible approach within a higher viewpoint (*Insight*, 41-42).

Postulate 1.2.3: Vertical Liberty
Let the emergence of such a higher viewpoint provide answers to the questions, anomalies, and/or paradoxes that arise within the lower viewpoint.

Such a higher level viewpoint itself consists of a cluster of related insights subject to the same dynamics of homogeneous expansion and the emergence of higher viewpoints.

Postulate 1.2.4: An Upper Level
There exists an upper level of abstraction involving implicit definitions that cannot itself be abstracted and which contains all lower levels within its boundaries; the process of moving through a series of ever higher viewpoints cannot be sustained forever.

Postulate 1.2.5: Conversion
Let this process of expansion to higher viewpoints be an essential feature of any form of conversion, as lower levels are displaced by the emergence of higher orders of intelligibility.

Postulate 1.2.6: Communications
Let those who operate from a higher perspective understand those coming from a lower one, but those operating from a lower perspective find higher perspective horizons, intentions, and values beyond their comprehension.

Let the value of higher viewpoints include the following:

1. Higher viewpoints give meaning and direction to the unrestricted desire to know, in the sense that any field of study and/or inquiry will eventually led to the recognition of anomalies and/or paradoxes that can only be resolved by a shift to a higher perspective. This means that any human mind not constrained to practical issues will eventually rise up through a series of questions to those questions that may be considered "ultimate", i.e., the intelligibility of the universe, the existence of God, etc.
2. The presence of higher viewpoints may have a counterpart in our accounts of world processes, i.e., world process may represent a sequence of "evolutionary" changes that start with the very simple (the "soup" of the big bang), move on through the emergence of particles/radiation, to chemical reactions, to complex molecular chains of proteins, etc.
3. The presence of higher viewpoints asserts the reality of questions that cannot be answered without a shift in perspective; hence the importance of understanding the horizon and intentions of the human subject operating within a manifold of questions.
4. If this movement toward higher perspectives represents progress in the exercise of human intelligence, that decline may be conceived as moving down rather than up this ladder of perspectives in increasing degrees of fragmentation.
5. Decline could then be represented by a disinclination and/or aversion to the asking of certain questions; it may turn out that some questions cannot be raised at all, automatically discounted as being "irrational" or "non-real."
6. Humans live in an emergent world whose properties can be known but the actual next emergent scheme remains a mystery, unknowable prior to the actual insight. This remains true not only for individuals through their life-cycle but for entire civilisations.

Theorem 1.3: Negation

Postulate 1.3.1: Inverse Insights

Let continued frustration with inquires within a field cast doubt upon the validity of the question being raised.

Let the name "inverse insight" refer to an insight that negates the legitimacy of the question (*Insight*, 43-50).

Let the value of an inverse insight include:

1. The possibility of a far better question that can open up an entirely new field of inquiry, which not only means that efforts will no longer be wasted on fruitless lines of questioning and but resources can be put to better use on more productive avenues of research.
2. The fact that an inverse insight can take place opens up the possibility that intelligibility can legitimately be denied, i.e., can be proved as a real affirmed negation of an anticipated intelligibility through an act of insight and not a failure of imagination.
3. The reality that entire systems of thought can be swept into the dustbin of history, known but not accepted as valid, an affirmed unproductive approach.
4. The way in which this negation is proved depends upon the emergence of an alternative approach that places the former area into suspect, which means that negation of a question is linked with the processes involved in the emergence of a higher perspective.

Postulate 1.3.2: Empirical Residue

Let there be observable data that has no intrinsic intelligibility (*Insight*, 50-56).

Let the empirical residue have a dual function: to signify a realm of data that exists yet does not have significance of its own, and to denote those realms of data that are part of the discussion and yet not part of the essential intelligibility of the data.

Let the value of the empirical residue lie in the fact that it permits a setting aside of observable data in order that human intelligence can focus on what is really of importance, what is essential as opposed to what is incidental (*Insight*, 52-53).

Postulate 1.3.3: Abstraction

Let the process of abstraction involve this process of separating out what is truly important in the data from what is incidental and/or inconsequential.

Let the value of an abstraction include:

1. The importance of abstraction not as a stripping away of bits of reality but the affirmation of the essential intelligibility of phenomena; this lies at the core of any insight.
2. This process of abstraction negates intelligibility to data by affirming that that data is incidental to fully understanding what is there to be experienced.
3. This affirmation may turn out to be wrong.
4. When combined with the emergence of higher viewpoints, the empirical residue allows for shifts to ever higher perspectives not by ignoring lower levels but by affirming the reality of an essential pattern that exists throughout lower levels—something that then allows the lower levels to be set aside as mere alternative possibilities, necessary to give

meaning to higher viewpoints but inconsequential when it comes to proving this abstract higher pattern.

5. The empirical residue allows human beings to escape the constraints of living in a pure sensate world; if it were not for this process of abstracting out the essential of a situation we would have to live out our lives overwhelmed by streams of experiences and sensations; therefore, the existence of the empirical residue allows human beings to live a truly human rather than animal life.

Commentary

The initial distinction named "insight" is Lonergan's starting point for all that follows in both *Insight* and *Method*. It is a differentiation that creates a universe of discourse that only later can be affirmed as the proper ground for any metaphysics, ethics, and/or transcendental knowledge. All subsequent discussions—be they concerning mathematics, the empirical sciences, common sense intelligence, reflective thought, metaphysics, ethics, and/or transcendental knowledge—must extend from, be enhanced by, and at least not negated by—these essential elements of human understanding. In short, all further discussions must take the distinction of "insight" as the primary form of inquiry.

This first distinction is Lonergan's starting point. Once affirmed (let there be an "insight" such that . . .), there are three questions that require answers if what follows in Lonergan's approach is to be considered internally consistent.

1. Since an insight is a function not of exterior but of interior conditions, there must be a way of giving it an "external" communicable form. What external or objectified forms do insights take?
2. We never have only one insight; instead, insights join up with each other. What happens when insights are considered as a dynamic collective?
3. Finally, if an entire philosophical position is to have any meaning, its individual statements must be subject to negation, i.e., they must have the property of being falsifiable. Within this universe of "insights", what types or forms of negation exist?

The three theorems of encapsulation, expansion, and negation form the core features of Lonergan's initial invitations or injunctions in chapter 1 of *Insight*. Of course, there is more to this chapter, for along with the "incidentals" of the examples used come a series of invitations and/or directions for the reader to follow that sketch out a few of the implications of his transdisciplinary approach. The emergences of primitive terms as well as the importance of images and the need for an appropriate symbolism are only a few of Lonergan's invitations to the reader's self-appropriation of their own coming to know, to understand.

Coming up. *The Second Canon: Multiple Realms of Meaning*. There exist multiple realms of meaning such that each realm manifests its own distinct sought-for insights, its own unique way of organizing and using such insights, and its own specialized methodology for achieving valid results. This is in effect a continuation of the "expansion" theorem, though as we shall see in subsequent canons this expansion lays the experiential ground for Lonergan's cognitive

operations of experiencing, understanding, and judging as well as the grounds for differentiation of mind.

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