

FOUNDATIONS +

Lonergan’s chapter on Foundations stresses two major components. The first is the importance of *intellectual, moral, and religious conversion* as radical shifts in horizons and intentions that sublata prior judgments, understandings, and experiences held up to that time. The second is *a differentiated mind* that can clearly and distinctly distinguish between different realms of meaning, the respective strategies used to gain the kind of knowledge sought, and the possibility of cross contamination when boundaries are not respected. In both cases, horizons are set and intentions laid out as key terms are identified and put into place. But there’s something missing, something that provides depth to what otherwise might be a dry discussion of foundations. And that is Lonergan’s *patterns of experience* common to all common sense modes of understanding and being in the world.

Lonergan’s description of patterns of experience may be found in chapter 6 of *Insight: Common Sense and Its Subject*. For our purposes, it is enough to say that whatever our foundational stance may be, it consists of biological, aesthetic, intellectual, and dramatic interests. In other words, human intellect or “being rational” is only one component of one’s foundations. *Biological considerations* (the “selfish gene”) involving our reality as an animal species play a major role (mating, having children, raising children, providing shelter and food, etc.) The *aesthetic dimension* adds feelings to the mix, an important component as what we do or don’t do has far more to do with emotional responses than reason (formation deals with training one’s emotions to bring them into alignment with what is truly of value). Finally, as a social species, we live *deeply embedded in dramas* ranging from personal relationships, to the story of our lives, to the meta-dramas that shape whole cultures, whole civilizations. We are already familiar with *intellectual experiences*, i.e., wanting to know, insights, etc.

As a point of interest, *symbols* such as the cross or the crescent encapsulate elements of all four experiential realities in one image. This unifying factor is extremely important in anchoring any foundational stance as it unites time and space into one moment of unity, of intelligibility.

FOUNDATIONS ARE UPSTREAM TO RATIONALITY

Reason provides the means, for reason has to do with distinguishing truth from falsehood; foundations provide the context within which discernment is carried out and terminal value set.

The 1957 movie *Bridge on the River Kwai* illustrates this distinction. Japanese prisoners were brought in by train to construct a railway bridge over the River Kwai in Burma. Lieutenant Colonel Nicholson, played by Alec Guinness, is shocked by the poor work his men are doing under the direction of the Japanese. He ends up directing the work of building the bridge, using engineering knowledge and techniques plus the careful analysis of the site to create a sound and reliable train bridge. This is the real application of rationality to the task at hand.

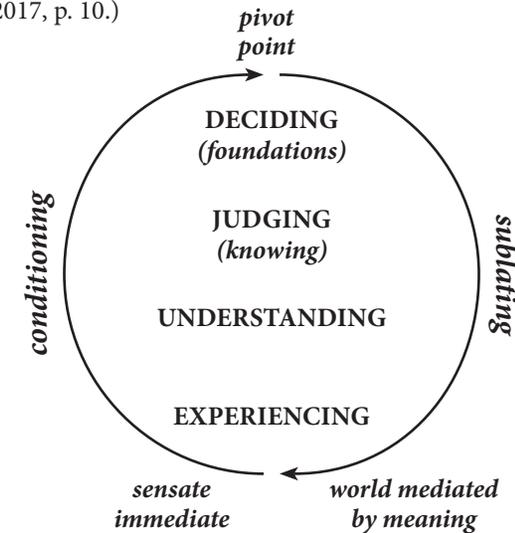
But the task works in favor of the enemy. Unknown to the Colonel, a British Major Warder played by Jack Hawkins, is sent to destroy the bridge. Parachuting in, they plant demolition charges on the bridge and wait for an important train to arrive the next day. But overnight, the water level in the river drops, exposing the demolition wires laid out across the river. Nicholson sees the wires, calls the Japanese soldiers, and attempts to stop the demolition of the bridge. The major tries to stop him, launching a mortar round across the river. Wounded by the explosion, Nicholson exclaims “What have I done?”, stumbles toward the detonator and collapses on the plunger just in time to destroy the bridge and send the train plunging down into the river.

“What have I done?” represents not the restoration of reason but a foundational shift at the level of deciding what should or should not be done. Consumed by his own struggle with the Japanese Commandant Saito, played by Sessue Hayakawa, and applying rational-based engineering skills as a tool to alleviating the harsh conditions of the prison camp, his horizons and intentions had shrunk to this microcosm of reality. Then, suddenly, his foundational stance changed to include the war, his position as a Colonel in that war, and his responsibility not to aid the enemy. Drama, emotions, all flood through him as his actions are set in a wider context. This high level change sublata his understanding of all that had gone before in the camp. In the end he destroys all that he managed to accomplish.

Ever wonder why political stakeholders and participants are so irrational?
Or why it is so hard to bring rational arguments into planning and policy-making?

CONDITIONING & SUBLATING

Foundational discernment takes place at the cognitive level of operations Lonergan calls “deciding.” Such operations are dependent or conditioned by prior cognitive operations, yet given a radical change in who the person is, it also sublata all the lower levels by placing them in a different horizon constructed around different intentions. Lonergan’s four shorthand labels actually refer to a complex pattern of operations: “seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, tasting, inquiring, imagining, understanding, conceiving, formulating, reflecting, marshaling and weighing the evidence, judging, deliberating, evaluating, deciding, speaking, writing” (*Method*, 2017, p. 10.)



All this (cycle) happens so fast, is so instinctual, that we only learn to pay attention when something goes wrong. In that case, we have to go back to basics. *Conditioning* operates from the bottom up, starting with basic experiences of the sensate world, asking questions, having insights, judging the correctness of these insights, and finally—based on what we know—acting on the basis of what we truly value. Each higher level is restricted to what has been accomplished at the lower level.

Sublation reverses the process, or completes the circle, by starting with any radical change in who we are and what we value (conversion). Such an event changes what we consider to be real (our judgments), which in turn sublata (or conditions downward) our understanding of ourselves and our world, that ends with experiencing a quite different world—now mediated by meaning—from that with which we started off.

The lives of such saints as Paul (once Saul), Francis of Assisi, Ignatius, Augustine, all illustrate such radical sublating changes.

Note: both conditioning and sublating are essential process in anticipating what there is to be known via Lonergan’s world view of emergent probability.