

# Living in a World Mediated by Meaning

January 19, 2018: Phase 1, Day 2—Freedom

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## 1. OVERVIEW.

1. Our species' primary across-the-board distinguishing feature is not the tools we create nor the exercise of reason, but our ability to create and manipulate symbols.
2. Our greatest act of creation is not technology per se, but worlds mediated by meaning that form a symbolic abstract realm that stands between us and the sensate world.
3. Created from questions inspired by experience given form through an insight, such worlds are a composite of a basic intelligence (reason), aesthetics (feelings), drama (story telling), and biology (reproduction, etc.).
4. Our penultimate skill, second only to our capacity through reflection to decide on what is truly dear to our hearts (terminal value), is to make judgments that separate reality from illusion, truth from fiction.
5. Unfortunately, actualizing our potential for making reasonable judgments and responsible decisions is limited, so the worlds mediated by meaning created by different individuals and carried forward in time through institutions are flawed.
6. Flaws lead to decline; sound operations lead to progress; and the journey in which we are called is redemption, especially the reversal of long term decline due to common sense bias.

**2. MEDIATION.** “[T]here is the notion of mediation. Operations are said to be immediate when their objects are present. So seeing is immediate to what is being seen, hearing to what is being heard, touch to what is being touched. But by imagination, language, symbols, we operate in a compound manner: immediately with respect to the image, word, symbol; mediately with respect to what is represented or signified. In this fashion we come to operate not only with respect to the present and actual but also with respect to the absent, the past, the future, the merely possible or ideal or normative or fantastic. As the child learns to speak, he moves out of the world of his immediate surroundings towards the far larger world revealed through the memories of other men, through the common sense of community, through the pages of literature, through the labors of scholars, through the investigations of scientists, through the experience of saints, through the meditations of philosophers and theologians.” (*Method*, 2017, p. 29.)

**3. AN INCONVENIENT TRUTH.** Emotional needs, the drive for self-preservation, the biological demands of our animal side, the dramatic stories we like to tell of battles between good and evil, egoism, group bias—all these and more can distort any meaningful world until it resembles more magic and myth, illusion and delusion, than reality. Institutions embody entire worlds mediated by meaning, but meaning itself does not reside in institutions, the roles and tasks of its members, or the terminal value that it espouses. Control over meaning, so essential for the creation of sound worlds mediated by meaning, is grounded in the authenticity of the subject. Keeping in mind that Lonergan's way of controlling meaning is through a methodology that provides cumulative and progressive results (his transcendental method)—and not normative cultures nor a methodology fitted to empirical sciences, and that meaning is derived from the transcendent cognitive operations of the human mind—the key to creating fit worlds mediated by meaning is through (psychic), intellectual, moral, and religious conversion. This requires a process of self-appropriation, for it is only when a person verifies and objectifies how they themselves come to know, that they truly know what it is to know. Then there is moral conversion, where a person is willing to suffer personal inconvenience for the sake of a higher value such as truth or justice. And finally religious conversion. This involves falling in love with the Divine Mystery, and once this happens a person gives up the human drive for power by accepting the reality of a Divine Mystery in human affairs. Without these three fundamental shifts in who the person is, which in the end is really one single conversion even, then any created meaningful world will be incomplete, corrupted, and thus unreliable. We are a work in progress, both good and evil, and our task is to radiate a bit more light than darkness. (See *Method*, chapter three, for Lonergan's reflections on the broad scope of meaning in our lives.) Lonergan's approach makes substantial demands upon the subject that transcends human capabilities for long-term gain (the problem of liberation).

**4. PROPORTIONATE BEING.** Insights do not arise out of the blue; they are the result of a tension of inquiry from a mind that seeks to know. It is through insights that profound if not radical shifts take place in the creation of symbols, of

concepts, of things and their relationships. They combine both concrete reality and the world of the abstract, thus insuring a fit between the sensate world and the world mediated by meaning. But insights do not come out of the blue; they rise from questions being asked. And these questions depend on the experiences of the subject, both immediate and mediated. No experiences; no questions. No questions; no insight. No insights and there's nothing about which to make a judgment. When it comes time to make a judgement, to collect and weight the evidence for saying "yes" or "no" or "perhaps", there has already been a considerable degree of preselection. At this point, If the answer is yes, the insight becomes part of the world mediated by meaning; if no, then rejected—at least theoretically. All in all, it is a knowing that is proportionate to being human. Transcendent knowledge through revelation and/or the awakening of one's true self as the creator, sustainer, and enhancer of worlds mediated by meaning grounded in the Divine Mystery is another possibility.

**5. EPISTEMOLOGY.** There are a number of epistemological positions, each of which generates its own horizon, objects, and operations. From Lonergan's perspective, intellectual conversion involves a shift away from a naïve realism that equates seeing with knowing and toward a critical realism based on the conditioning and sublating cognitive operations of experiencing, understanding, judging, and deciding. But there are other epistemologies such as empiricism and idealism that also distort the collecting and weighing of evidence. And as Lonergan puts it: "Empiricism, idealism, and [naïve] realism name three totally different horizons with no common identical objects." (See *Method*, chapter ten on Dialectic, section three on "conversions and breakdowns" for the source of the quote and relevant passages.)

**6. WORLD PROCESS.** There have been a series of empirically based concepts of world process that range from Aristotelian, to Galilean, from Darwinism to Indeterminism—but all have their flaws. In his analysis of empirical heuristic structures, Lonergan postulates a world process of emergent probability where there exist emergent levels of conditioning and sublating strata, each with their own identifiable things and recurring schemes of operations. Each recurring scheme is grounded in laws that form chains of "if . . . then." Each scheme has an associated probability of emergence and once operational a probability of sustainability. The result is a complex, open-ended, dynamic, and non-linear system that is perhaps best understood through such emerging theoretical disciplines as adaptive systems, self-organizing systems, network theory, and non-linear systems, that latter including complexity and chaos theories. This often non-intuitive world is the world within which we live out our lives. (Lonergan's world view may be found in *Insight*, chapter 4, section 2 on "complementarity in the known", contrasted with other world views in the following section "clarification by contrast." An accessible introduction to non-linear system may be found in the YouTube channel "Complexity Labs" at <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCutCcajxhR33k9UR-DdLsAQ>.)

**7. WORLDVIEW.** It is truly amazing how diverse worlds mediated by meaning can be. Not only do we have multiple differentiations of mind but we have the unique common sense worlds that vary between one department and another in an institution, between one neighborhood and another in the same city, between one country and another, and finally between one civilization and another. And they are not all compatible. According to Ronald H. Nash, in *An Introduction to Philosophy*, a world view contains all of a person's answers to the basic question of life, "almost all of which contain significant philosophical content" (p. 13). The fundamental element is what a given world view says or does not say about *God*. (Does God exist? What is God's nature? Is God a personal being . . . etc.) This leads to *metaphysics*, where such questions as these arise. What is the relationship between God and the universe? Is the existence of the universe a brute fact? Is the world best understood in a mechanistic, nonpurposeful way? Is the universe self-enclosed or is there a being beyond nature? Then there's *epistemology*, i.e., a theory of knowledge. Is knowledge about the world possible? *Ethics*, where "ethics is more concerned with the question: Why is that action wrong? Also, are there moral laws that apply to everyone or is morality relative? The last of Nash's list is *anthropology*, i.e., the fundamental nature of man and human society. These five areas of human interest and concern have been answered in many ways. Taken as a whole, they constitution the fundamental orientation of an individual or of an institution that underlies areas of conflict and cooperation behind the news that is being reported.

**Exercise for the week:** "What do you see?" Doris Lessing's teaching device for young children that allows them to explore the meaning of things. But the game morphed into: What were you thinking? What made you think that? And are you sure that thought is true? (Doris Lessing, *Mara and Dann: An Adventure* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), pp. 23-24.)