

“DEAR FOLKS”¹

John Benton

It took me years to get to grips with what I have expressed in the last page or so. It took me so long not because I am mentally deficient, but because I am human. Human understanding is little and a slow-growing thing. Basic humility is an ... acknowledgment of that fact and its concrete consequences.²

It's been half a century since Philip McShane made this statement. His authoritative perspective on **explanatory understanding** sets him apart³ from all others in effectively communicating Bernard Lonergan's leading ideas.⁴ But for the good fortune of McShane “cajoling or forcing [my] attention”⁵ to make little breakthroughs here and there,⁶ I would have abandoned my modest life in philosophy long ago.

¹ The title of the poem, “Dear Folks,” *The Complete Poems of Patrick Kavanagh*, Peter Kavanagh (ed.) (New York: The Peter Kavanagh Hand Press, 1972) 296. The Irish poet, Patrick Kavanagh, was a favourite of McShane and often-quoted in his work.

² McShane, *Music That is Soundless* (2nd ed.), 27.

³ “A recalling of my own experience may encourage you here. I had struggled with the book *Insight* from 1958 on, with the advantage of a solid background in modern physics, but it took me a great deal of the winter of 1964–5 to break through on the notion of thing: and I am only averagely stupid.” McShane, *A Brief History of Tongue*, 70, n. 20.

⁴ “Finally, there is the growth that is special to us, which is not so manifest, the growth of understanding—in all its modes. This last growth is at root an invisible business, but identifiable in wise eyes and sound judgments. Since it is invisible, it is not overly noticed, nor deeply cherished. Indeed, our culture (whatever it says about aged-advantaged citizens) does not seem to have much regard for elders and their growth.... The primitives were wiser in this regard. If we did have serious regard for elder growth, why would we not be embarrassed into an equally serious shift of perspective by psychologist Abraham Maslow's claim: ‘less than 1% of adults grow’?” John Benton, Alessandra Gillis, Philip McShane, *Introducing Critical Thinking*, 182.

⁵ Lonergan, *Insight*, CWL 3, 423.

⁶ In line with notes 3 and 4, “little breakthroughs” over many years recalls McShane's references to the French painter, Paul Cézanne: “I have made some progress. Why so late and with such difficulty ... ?” Maryline Assante, Rebecca A. Rabinow, Douglas W. Druick, *Cézanne to Picasso: Ambrois Vollard, Patron of*

So, it is a privilege to adopt this epigraph as my own, to share some luck, by encouraging young scholars working in philosophy to grow in explanatory understanding.

After meeting McShane in 1977,⁷ I became aware that university departments were comfortably operating in a philosophical culture that, for one reason or another, excluded the goal of explanatory understanding as a universal standard, a point Lonergan emphasizes in *Phenomenology and Logic*.⁸ “This point can be summarized in a phrase: the existential gap. The existential gap consists in the fact that the reality of the subject [the human individual] lies beyond [their] own horizon.”⁹ McShane reinforces Lonergan’s point in his Editor’s Introduction:

The seriously cultured reader should not miss the challenge to grapple with the existential gap, the existential distinction between [your personal comfort zone in academic pursuits and the] discomfoting pointing to horizons quite unfamiliar to the cultures of the new millennium. Those unfamiliar horizons are needed to meet the desperations of our modern and postmodern times.¹⁰

McShane directed my attention to the horizon of modern science from which to draw out the hiddenness of our **core desire** for explanatory understanding. This resulted in my rejection of the conventional overreach of commonsense description in philosophy that cuts us off from serious reflection on the **core reality of the subject**. His approach might have been expressed thus, ‘the object of philosophy is the philosophy of the object.’ It begins by raising the discomfoting question,

what are “reflection on the detailed content of science and on the details of procedure in scientific investigation”[†] or “attention to oneself in the performance of knowing”^{††} These will sound odd or implausible to most contemporary philosophers and will be of dubitable interest to scientific investigators. **And yet, what is your view or model of scientific knowing?**

the Avant-garde (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006) 16. For instance, see Benton et al., *Introducing Critical Thinking*, 63.

⁷ I had just completed the final year of my undergraduate degree in English Literature at York University, Toronto, Canada.

⁸ Lonergan, *Phenomenology and Logic*, CWL 18, 280–89.

⁹ CWL 18, 281.

¹⁰ CWL 18, xxiv.

Does it bear out with your experience, in instances, in detail, in, for example, physics, biology, or ecology?¹¹

The method described by McShane is ... an approach that regards questions in scientific practice, including questions about questioning. And so, [no philosopher seeking an explanatory viewpoint in any field of inquiry can] dismiss the possibility of such a method without performance-contradiction, for their view regards scientific inquiry ... The method advocated by McShane is something that needs to be tried. In that way, for instance, progress in one’s view of progress in physics will be based on what one finds by adverting to and drawing on one’s own experience in progress in physics ... But asking scholars to advert to their experience in scientific practice is not yet part of either the philosophic or scientific traditions. And to do so collaboratively and with precision needed to handle problems of our times will not be easy.¹²

For twenty-two years of teaching university-bound students, seven of which involved introducing philosophy,¹³ I was reluctantly trapped in the darkness of convention. With that in mind, it occurs to me that the image of building bridges might offer perspective to those of us without a solid background in theory. Let’s be honest. The scientific horizon from which Lonergan wrote *Insight* and McShane wrote *Randomness, Statistics and Emergence* is a bridge too far. What makes matters hopeless is that the bridge has been rendered impassable by detrimental reading habits dominating academic life.¹⁴

¹¹ Terrance Quinn, “Editor’s Introduction,” in *Randomness, Statistics and Emergence* (2nd ed.) ii; the bolding is mine. The inner citations are to (†) McShane’s Original Preface (p. lxiii) and (††) the last paragraph of the chapter “Problems and Content and the Problem of Method” (p. 10).

¹² Quinn, “Editor’s Introduction,” ii.

¹³ McShane, Alessandra Gillis, and I produced a philosophy text for the 2005–2006 school year. I believe *Introducing Critical Thinking* set a precedent in secondary education and, for a brief time, made Philip McShane a household name among my students. Unfortunately, but not surprisingly, our experiment with the book ended badly. In the wake of my retirement from public education, the principal ordered the school’s 80 copies to be incinerated.

¹⁴ Inadequate expression cuts across all disciplines in one inadvertent way or another, reinforcing ignorance and breeding arrogance. For instance, in scientific circles, a popular physicist such as Stephen Hawking supports the illusion that complex topics can be reduced to “clear and easy-to-read explanations,” a reflection of the entrenched tradition of inadequate linguistic expression

Might there be a preliminary bridge beyond that dark philosophical “no man’s land”¹⁵ from which to take a first step toward those massive achievements of Lonergan and McShane?

Perhaps you might stumble upon a sympathetic teacher with enough theoretical background to encourage you to **generate requisite personal data** by finding strategic examples from science.¹⁶

You might also explore the preliminary bridge offered by two newly-minted books. *Journeyism –A Handbook for Future Academics*¹⁷ invites readers to work with illustrations and examples from the **descriptive** world of **common sense**, followed by an invitation to growth in the **explanatory** world of **theory**.¹⁸ *Invitation to Generalized Empirical Method in Philosophy and Science*¹⁹ “invites readers to advert to various

(McShane, *A Brief History of Tongue*, 6). In equal measure, the culture of **haute vulgarization** has virtually paralyzed possible advances in the development of Bernard Lonergan’s leading ideas for over half a century and summarily rejected McShane’s decades-long attempts to intervene on his behalf. Its teachings inadvertently advocate for a massive overreach of description that, in effect, blocks the emergence of needed growth and progress in modern and historical contexts. “Common sense almost invariably makes that mistake; for it is incapable of analyzing itself, incapable of making the discovery that it too is a specialized development of human knowledge, incapable of coming to grasp that its peculiar danger is to extend its legitimate concern for the concrete and the immediately practical into disregard of larger issues and indifference to long-term results.” Lonergan, *Insight*, CWL 3, 253.

¹⁵ Today’s academic routines are inadvertently “lost in some no man’s land between the world of theory and the world of common sense.” Bernard Lonergan, “Time and Meaning,” *Philosophical and Theological Papers, 1958–1964, Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, vol. 6, eds. Robert Croken, Frederick E. Crowe, and Robert M. Doran (University of Toronto Press, 1996) 121.

¹⁶ Yet, McShane cautions, “great teachers are rare. You may not find one in any classroom. You may not find one anywhere.” A remark made at York University, Toronto, Canada in November 1978 at a conference entitled, “Hermeneutics and Structuralism: Merging Horizons.”

¹⁷ *Journeyism: A Handbook for Future Academics*, John Benton and Terrance Quinn (Toronto: Island House Press, 2022).

¹⁸ *Journeyism* is inspired by *Wealth of Self and Wealth of Nations: Self-Axis of the Great Ascent* and Benton et al., *Introducing Critical Thinking*.

¹⁹ Terrance Quinn, *Invitation to Generalized Empirical Method in Philosophy and Science* (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing Co. Pte. Ltd., 2017) xxviii.

strategically ordered examples in the sciences and philosophy of science.”²⁰ In the spirit of *Insight* and *Randomness, Statistics, and Emergence*, each encourage you

[to] climb, through a series of exercises. Reading the book without doing the exercises is not reading the book the way the author intended. But, taking the pointing of the last paragraph of Chapter 1 of *Insight* to heart, development in generalized empirical method will be in our own terms in, among other things, our experience in the developing sciences.²¹

Might you be willing to take to heart this “invitation to a personal, decisive act”²² Modern education has relentlessly victimized “all too many who have been educated out of their minds.”²³ Yet, we cannot let that misfortune deter us.²⁴

A serious commitment to coming to grips with explanatory understanding is both worthwhile and essential. Despite my poor ability, I have discovered that slow-growing understanding is normative. Although the experience of reading unfamiliar linguistic signs and mathematical symbols involves struggle with other questions that can often be uncomfortably slow and tedious to solve, it can be overcome with perseverance and patience.

If you are serious about making philosophical progress in your field of study, then there is no dodging McShane’s legacy of ‘tough love.’

[I]n so far as one is a serious thinker, claiming an adequate viewpoint, a central element in that viewpoint is one’s thought on the relationship of chemistry to botany. Without that thought one lacks a basic component for ... the heuristic conception of world process ... which would be adequate to our times ... [Therefore, one must] orientate philosophy ... towards a reflection on

²⁰ Quinn, *Invitation to Generalized Empirical Method in Philosophy and Science*, xv.

²¹ Quinn, *Invitation to Generalized Empirical Method in Philosophy and Science*, xii.

²² Lonergan, *Insight*, CWL 3, 13–14.

²³ McShane, *A Brief History of Tongue*, 28.

²⁴ Philip McShane, *The Shaping of the Foundations: Being at home in the Transcendental Method* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1976) 10–11. See “the menace of experiential conjugation.”

the detailed content of science and on the details of procedure in scientific investigation.²⁵

“So good luck and cheers.”²⁶

²⁵ McShane, *Randomness, Statistics, and Emergence*, lxiii and lxiv.

²⁶ Kavanagh, *Complete Poems* 296; the last line of the poem “Dear Folks.”