

MEANING AT THE CROSSROADS
A Jig with Bernard Lonergan and Phil McShane

Stephen J. Costello

Though I had done my doctorate on Paul Ricoeur in the early nineties at University College Dublin, I was interested in Bernard Lonergan, not least because the sheer size of *Insight* appealed to me. I remember thinking as an eighteen-year-old: “Wouldn’t it be impressive if I could say I read it?” Later, when I was a senior tutor in philosophy, a friend insisted I read it, saying Lonergan’s philosophy would really suit me. I sensed then that his work was important for me without fully knowing why at the time. It was self-appropriation that won me over. Though I was a philosopher by training, I was also a psychoanalyst interested in questions of meaning and interpretation. Years later, I would embark on a second training, this time in Viktor Frankl’s school of logotherapy and existential analysis, which was a spiritual psychology that placed meaning and purpose centre-stage.

Fast forward a few decades. Now I am attending a few courses on the intensive journal method of Ira Progoff with Bill Matthews, SJ at the Lumen Dominican Centre in Blackrock, Ireland. At the break, we chat about meaning. I bring up the work of Viktor Frankl. Bill asks me, “What level of meaning are you talking about?” I look blankly. “What function of meaning?” he asks. He kindly explains that there are levels and functions of meaning. “Says who?” I ask. “Lonergan,” he replies. Ah that name again.

I go to Milltown Library and begin to devour the various volumes of this Canadian philosopher-theologian: *Collection, A Second Collection, A Third Collection, Topics in Education, The Way to Nicaea, Verbum, Philosophical and Theological Papers 1965-1980*. I pay particular attention to Lonergan’s essays “Time and Meaning” and “The Analogy of Meaning” *Philosophical and Theological Papers 1958-1964*, as well as “Dimensions of Meaning” in *Collection*.

I should preface these preliminary remarks by saying that many years previously I had reread *Insight* and *Method in Theology* and had used Lonergan’s theory of conversion to add to an aspect of Charles Taylor’s thought. I presented my Lonerganian critique of Taylor and delivered my lecture with Taylor in the audience! It subsequently was published in *The Taylor Effect* as “Beyond Flourishing: ‘Fullness’ and ‘Conversion’ in Taylor and Lonergan.”

I was largely self-taught in Lonergan. Though Brendan Purcell taught Lonergan to his MA students in the UCD department of philosophy, by this stage I had departed. I had kept up my chats with Bill in Milltown and Brendan Purcell, as well as with Brendan Duddy, SJ. Then a friend of mine who was also a great friend of Phil McShane said, “You should really contact Phil McShane. He’s a world expert on Bernard Lonergan.” I duly did and the rest, as they say, is history. We had a long and regular correspondence over many years. He sent me puzzles and most of his emails began or ended with “ho ho” and “Step-han”! It was an extraordinary journey though not always easy. He expected a lot from me. I was aware that this man had not just an academic insight into Lonergan but had internalized his thought in the most profound way. His many personal stories and memories of conversations with Lonergan that he graciously shared with me were fascinating. One such was this email:

Re: Voegelin, well, you have the offer of a decent balance from Lonergan, no? and ho ho from myself of course. Generally speaking, theology is in a shambles. So my cheap advice is to leave the rock at the bottom of the hill, and enjoy the Son Shine. I recall now a very serious protestant theologian, a really sound thinker, Charles Hefling, going to Lonergan for advice: should he start a sort-of Newman climb towards Catholicism? Lonergan quoted the Beatle’s song at him “Let it be....” I recall, too, an evening conversation with Lonergan in Boston, and his nice aside to me: “The people in Rome: they’re barely Christian.” And then there was his remark to me in a Dublin taxi in 1961: “The bark of Peter? Well, the Pope is the captain; the clergy are the crew, and the laity are in the hold.”

There you are, some thoughts for today.

Phil sent me a number of his own books—*Profit: The Stupid View of President Donald Trump*, *Music That Is Soundless*, and *The Allure of the Compelling Genius of History*. I had to confess that I found his prose difficult to comprehend. I had hunches, intuitions, aha moments. His style was inimitable. I told him a few times that I was no good at mathematics or economics, but he ploughed on, and over time Lonergan’s method began to percolate and metastasize within me. I suggested to him that I put my thoughts on paper and subsequently that I present Lonergan’s ideas on meaning to logotherapists. Phil encouraged me all the way, reading and commenting on what follows below until the short manuscript was ready to try out on my students, going so far as to describe it as “outstandingly marvelous.” It would be a map of meaning. But first, the menu exercise.

This was one of the first existential/experiential exercises Phil asked me to carry out. The instructions were the following: get a menu, preferably in a foreign language, and record what happens in the restaurant—what you experience. It begins with getting a menu; it finishes when you hand it back or put it down, when you have settled on a dish. Muse through self-attentively what happens in you and to you, as you move from sitting serenely to feeling concern about eating: from confusion to clarity. There is a contentment in handing back the menu to the waiter. This experience will poise the self-luminous reader. Tune into your emotions to find the basic and subtle shifts that occur in you from the moment you receive the menu to the moment you return it. Of course, we need to get beyond the menu to creating our own menus.

I diligently carried out these suggestions. I became aware that I was moving from annoyance and irritation to some kind of acceptance and surrender. There was the element of dark faith, of trust. But based on some reasonableness, some understanding. It reminded me of the Ignatian exercise—sifting through consciousness in order to discern subtle but significant or even seismic changes—movements leading us to consolation or desolation. Following Lonergan, Phil was urging me to move from blindness to being open-eyed, bidding me to be more attentive, intelligent, reasonable, adventurous, and responsible.

Phil added “be adventurous,” which (as he said to me) runs all through Lonergan’s works,¹ but a focal point is *Method in Theology*: “Being intelligent includes a grasp of hitherto unnoticed or unrealized possibilities.”² *Being loving* “is the full set in its proper achievement” (Phil in a personal communication with me).

To be authentic is to be one’s true self—a most prized achievement, according to Lonergan. We achieve authenticity through self-transcendence; by going beyond ourselves we come to know what is really true and truly good. And we achieve self-transcendence by following what I began to call the *Big Five*. These “transcendental precepts,” or

¹ In “‘What-To-Do?’: The Heart of Lonergan’s Ethics,” Phil identifies “be adventurous” as the dominant transcendental of Bernard Lonergan’s life. See page 78.

² *Method in Theology*, CWL 14, 52. Throughout this essay I am unpacking the two what-questions that Lonergan legitimately compacted: “What is it?” and “What ought it to be?” The two questions are modally distinct, but they are both questions about being. See further Appendix A: Two Diagrams, in *Phenomenology and Logic*, CWL 18, 319–323.

foundational processes, will, if followed, lead to a fuller, happier, more productive and purposeful life. Obeying the five precepts is about heightening one's consciousness, and that is something each one of us must do *in* himself and *for* himself. This involves an awareness of myself as intending subject in so far as I experience, understand, judge, plan, and decide.

Moving through these intentional (i.e., directed) operations of consciousness constitutes us as conscientious persons, and its absence leave us inattentive, unintelligent, irrational, unadventurous, and irresponsible. No additions or alterations need to be made. The way *it is* is the way *we are*. The opposite of authenticity is alienation—self-estrangement, when you are not aligned with or attuned to what you really are in the core of your humanity. You are then out of touch and out of thought.

So, Lonergan's method became more metabolised, distilled by me, not just intellectually but personally, as the five levels of consciousness (empirical, intellectual, rational, adventurous, and responsible) took form and flavour, assumed shape and significance in my life. I was beginning to apply these steps/stages in my own life in relation to my concrete consciousness. Consciousness is self-presence, immanent awareness. Knowing is a compound of:

1. Experiencing
2. Understanding
3. Judging
4. Planning
5. Deciding

We thus:

- *experience* at the *empirical* level
- *understand* on the *intellectual* level
- *judge* on the *rational* level
- *plan* on the *intellectual* level
- *decide* on the *responsible* level

So, for me, these were concrete, personal, practical, and transformative. These were the lists that I was writing out in my attempt to simplify Lonergan's thought for my own students as well as myself. The transcendental trajectory certainly activated in my own soul the search for the One 'behind' the conceptual edifice.

This method is "open-eyed," permitting and promoting us to being (more):

- Attentive in Experiencing
- Intelligent in Understanding
- Reasonable in Judging
- Adventurousome in Planning
- Responsible in Deciding

This, for me, was the big attraction. It could be *applied* to everyday concerns. The method covers all that is. Under Phil's tutelage, I was adapting this method until it became second nature. I was seeking to live the five levels in a very real way.

Once I wrote a long email to Phil showing links and crossovers between "attention" in the Stoics (*prosoche*) and in the work of Iris Murdoch and Simone Weil. He wasn't impressed! He gently guided me back to Lonergan, who was to be the linchpin and fulcrum. I sought to be more attentive. Paying attention puts us in the present.

Bill Matthews had asked: What is the meaning of *my* life? He suggested I need Progoff's journal methods to complement Lonergan, but Phil disagreed, saying that autobiography was already present in Lonergan. Phil was always a purist!

We live in a world motivated and mediated by meaning. Meaning doesn't *drive* us, it *draws* us. Just as instincts *push*, meanings *pull*. Viktor Frankl put meaning centre-stage, painting a picture in broad brushstrokes, in his Logotherapy and Existential Analysis (LTEA). But it was Bernard Lonergan who defined and refined various levels and modalities of meaning in a most nuanced manner through a generalized empirical method that "does not treat of objects without taking into account the corresponding operations of the subject," and "does not treat of the subject's operations without taking into account the corresponding objects."³

There are thus *two* components of meaning, one objective and the other subjective. The human person is always making a *subjective* selection from a spectrum in an *objective* world. In other words, we all see the world, but we see it through our own eyes (unique vision/perspective): thus, ME-aning (as Phil wrote it to me). However, we see more than our perspective. Genuine objectivity is the fruit of authentic subjectivity. What this did for me was sort out the epistemological intricacies of realism versus idealism, subjectivism versus objectivism.

³ Lonergan, *A Third Collection*, 141; CWL 16, 136.

Meaning resides in the person also while pointing to the reality beyond what is meant/intended by the person. I have to extract meaning for myself (the self-appropriation of meaning) in my being (interiority) as well as through what I do and have. This was Lonergan's great insistence, and Phil's too. It was never just an academic exercise but was to be *lived*, incarnated in one's history/lifeworld.

I became almost evangelical about this, as this type of layered approach and analysis is schematized by Viktor Frankl and his followers. There wasn't just subjective and objective (ultimate) meaning which Frankl had talked about—there were *five* carriers:

1. Intersubjective (the different meanings of a person's smile or scream, for example. The 'we' that emerges from the mutual love of an 'I' and a 'Thou')
2. Symbolic (affective and elementary)
3. Incarnate (it can be intersubjective, artistic, symbolic, linguistic, etc.—the meaning of a person's life)
4. Artistic (the meaning of art)
5. Linguistic (the objective significance of names, the sense and referent of expression etc.)

Not only did this differentiation of carriers of meaning make sense to me, it clarified and amplified—ameliorated—Frankl's philosophy. Lonergan's message of meaning needed to be heard by all logotherapists.

What Lonergan was doing for me and *in* me was this: I was convinced that Frankl could not proceed alone, that we needed Lonergan's analysis of meaning to fill in the gaps. I was finally getting to grips with Phil's insistence that generalized empirical method was one of the greatest, most interesting, and refined—at once practical and philosophical—investigations/inquiries of the twentieth-century. And this was the life lesson I had the privilege of learning from Phil McShane and his mentor Bernard Lonergan, SJ.

Pre-Covid, I had informed Phil that I had set myself this task and would present Lonergan on meaning at the next logotherapy conference to be held that summer. Phil was delighted when my paper was accepted. Unfortunately, I would not deliver it due to the pandemic, but I hope to next year and I will be dedicating it to one Phil McShane, *in memoriam*. If death leaves a heartache no one can heal, love leaves a memory no one can steal. *Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam dílis.*