

A TRIBUTE TO PHILIP MCSHANE

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Introduction

Always my writing is personal and positional, thus meeting the challenge of Lonergan to the future of global collaboration: *Fusionism* as I now call it.¹

In as much as my beginning quotation by Phil may appear to express the central drive of his life, it serves well to contextualize my discussion of his influence on me and as well as his large body of work, with its extension and expansion of Lonergan's leading ideas. Any effort to offer a tribute to someone as intellectually diverse and at home in transcendental method as Phil risks putting him in a box. There were no walls in his mind, and this presents me with the challenge of exploring a life that reaches beyond the norm. So, my comments will oscillate around his influence on my own development and the expanding contributions of his many achievements to the future of initiating cosmopolis.² It may offer insights into the person without my speculating on the depth and breadth of his intellectual ability.

Personal Influence

In 1973, at the age of 24, I took an introductory course in economics. It was mind-numbing, and I related to my wife, "If this is university, I am not interested." Later, in 1977, persuaded by my wife, I decided to take up the challenge again, and my second course was with Phil. It was titled "The Question of God," and he used his textbook *Music That Is Soundless*. My earlier experience of university was soon dismantled. Phil was anything but mind-numbing. Not only was my curiosity awakened, but I felt I was finding a home, a direction that my previous career had not offered. The course was an introduction to myself that called into question all that my prior religious upbringing had fed into me. I finally had an

¹ McShane, *Bernard Lonergan: His Life and Leading Ideas*, 8, n. 4. For a discussion of the meaning of *Fusionism*, see the essays available at www.philipmcshane.org/fusion.

² Lonergan, *Insight*, CWL 3, 263–67.

image of the Trinity and of the Divine essence, grounded in my own experience, rather than a rote absorption of the catechism. I discovered through Phil's lectures and readings that in some odd way, I was on my own, but not in some negative manner. It was a release into a community of collaboration, and I ran with it.

My second course with Phil was an introduction to philosophy, and he used his textbook *Wealth of Self and Wealth of Nations: Self-Axis of the Great Ascent*. The title was immediately bewildering. It was my second introduction to myself. The course complimented and expanded on the first course with Phil. It was very slow going, as I had no background in philosophical thinking and only my high school sciences to bring to discussions. I would soon learn that the nominalism and memorization schemes of my earlier education had to be supplanted by explanatory understanding. I would later learn much of this from Phil in terms of his pedagogy. His puzzles and mathematical and geometrical examples would assist in that revision, and the turning to the subject was next. Phil was patient and I was demanding, visiting his office often with questions leading to discussions. My curiosity had not only been awakened, but it now had direction.

In 1984, shortly after I had completed graduate studies in theology and philosophy, Phil invited me to teach in the philosophy department with him at Mount St. Vincent University. I would teach with him until 1994 when he retired. From my undergraduate classes with Phil, I developed a style of teaching that I retained until retiring in 2019 at the age of 70. That approach first required that I understand a topic sufficiently to be able to lecture without notes. I listed a few headings on the board and off I went. That approach keeps one on one's toes and prepared to handle questions that one might not expect. Such questions also encouraged me to revise my course lectures each year in terms of my own developing understanding. In attempting to introduce students to themselves, I was always developing new methods or approaches. Some students caught on, but many did not. That reality moved me to ponder better approaches. This too, I learned from Phil, as he was constantly revising his own strategies of pedagogy.

Phil would challenge me by asking me to teach courses for which I had no direct background. Two of those courses were bioethics in gerontology and medical ethics for medical students in their final year at Dalhousie Medical School. I would go to the medical library for six months and brush up on entry-level content and some historical aspects of the related sciences, and then I would work out how to incorporate and

teach such topics with generalized empirical method (GEM). It was a learning experience, and I believe Phil encouraged me to do so for that very reason. These experiences also helped in my own critical analysis of education, which I would draw on years later in carrying out research in education.

After Phil retired in 1994, the department dropped the courses that he had developed and that we both had taught. It left me in a quandary about what to do. I shifted over to the social sciences to teach ethics, Peace and Conflict Studies, and Child Studies. Again, these were learning experiences and the foundations that my own operations provide, enabling me to gradually become more at home in teaching from the perspective of GEM. I would later begin to introduce basic principles regarding economics and functional specialization into the Peace and Conflict Studies course. I was beginning to experience the challenge and expansiveness of teaching from foundations that Phil exhibited in his writings on the various sciences.

As much as I was now on my own, teaching self-identification to students, Phil and I kept in touch, and he was always available for my questions about how to approach various aspects of teaching with GEM heuristics in mind. His books and articles, as well as Lonergan's, were a constant source of assistance in helping me better understand what I was teaching and how to do it better. I realized early on that I was teaching against the grain, and I suspected Phil had had enough of it; I realized that his last few years of teaching brought little joy to him. I began to experience that also in my last 10 years of teaching. Students lacked any experience of science and were taking courses simply to obtain credits and graduate with a degree. The system of memorization and nominalism that goes back to early grades had killed off curiosity in the majority of students, and I too began to lose the desire to continue. Phil and I had many discussions over this. He would say, "Focus on the money, Bob." So, for the last few years I did, but the day arrived in 2019 when that no longer was enough, and I retired.

During those last ten years of teaching, Phil had proposed various directions of research to me, one being neuroscience. I devoted five years to it, managing to publish four articles³ and eventually a book exposing

³ The first article, "Functional Research in Neuroscience," was published in *Seeding Global Collaboration*, ed. by Patrick Brown and James Duffy (Vancouver: Axial Publishing, 2016): 1–27.

errors in methodology in that field. I asked Phil to write a Foreword for the book, and he did so. I published the book with Axial Publishing.⁴ He invited me to work with him on various conferences and to act as general secretary for SGEME.⁵ These ventures were all part of Phil's constant creativity and served to offset the unpleasant experience that teaching had become.

"Always my writing was personal." How was Phil's writing personal? Perhaps it is time to attempt an answer to that question. Phil had the ability to locate an individual's talent and potential within an orientation towards the 13.7 billion years of cosmic history and the billions to follow. His incarnate sense of history, somewhat like the image of St. Francis always seeing the individual tree in the forest, was always with him in his conversations, teaching, and writings. It seemed to me that Phil was in the flow of history and that he knew it and felt it. There is a profounder sense to the word "personal" in the epigraph for this tribute insofar as Phil was not one to ever resort to nominalism. If he did not understand something, he either said so or waited until he did understand before pronouncing. He had a genuine respect for seriously understanding himself and encouraging others to do the same, manifesting his adoration for Divine understanding.

Conclusion

I have attempted to present a context for understanding Phil. It has been said that genius is rare and history seems to prove that. Phil once shared with me: "I am no genius, but I know one when I meet one." I believe his self-description was on the mark. He was one of those who not only recognized genius but was able to build on such work. In 1979, Phil had been invited to assist in the opening of Lonergan College at Concordia University in Montreal, Canada. His opening lecture for the launching ends with a quotation from Leo Strauss:

⁴ Robert Henman, *Global Collaboration: Neuroscience as Paradigmatic* (Vancouver: Axial Publishing, 2016). The three chapters of the book were previously published in *Dialogues in Philosophy, Mental and Neuro Sciences*, 2013, 2015, and 2016 (accessed January 31, 2022), available at <https://www.crossingdialogues.com/journal.htm>.

⁵ The Society for the Globalization of Effective Methods of Evolving (accessed January 31, 2022), available at <https://sgeme.net>.

“The teachers themselves are pupils and must be pupils, but there cannot be an infinite regress: ultimately there must be teachers who are not in turn pupils. These teachers who are not in turn pupils are the great minds or, in order to avoid any ambiguity in a matter of such importance, the greatest minds. Such men are extremely rare. We are not likely to meet any of them in any classroom. We are not likely to meet any of them anywhere. It is a piece of good luck if there is a single one alive in one’s time.”

In Canada, in Quebec, we have had a piece of good luck.⁶

Phil was referring to Lonergan, but I think the central message applies to Phil as well. Such persons who recognize genius also seem to be very rare in history. In Philip McShane, we have had a piece of good luck. He dedicated much of his life to figuring out how to effectively intervene in historical process.⁷

In 1980 or so, Phil shared with me that after his first reading of *Insight*, he had the thought: “This stuff is not going to take.” He spent the next six decades of his life attempting to prove himself wrong. The best tribute we can offer to Phil would be to take his work seriously in terms of his focus on the need for theory and functional collaboration.

⁶ McShane, “Lonergan’s Quest and the Transformation of the Meaning of Life,” in *Lonergan’s Challenge to the University and the Economy*, 143. The inner citation is from Leo Strauss, *Liberalism: Ancient and Modern* (New York: Basic Books, 1968) 3.

⁷ See “Resolute and Effective Intervention in the Dialectic,” *Phenomenology and Logic*, CWL 18,305–308.