

MC SHANE'S INFLUENCE ON MY UNDERSTANDING OF LONERGAN (AND OF MYSELF)

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I first met Philip McShane at the end of the 1970s, in Montreal. He was, if I remember well, giving a summer course at Concordia University. He invited me to his apartment.

I had read some of his works. The one which enlightened me most was *Lonergan's Challenge to the University and the Economy*. My favorite chapter was "Lonergan's Quest and the Transformation of the Meaning of Life" (chapter 8). I had highlighted statements such as:

After twenty years of grappling with Lonergan's meaning I have no doubt about the proximate relevance of his thought for the men and women in streets, subways, offices and churches, for those who govern, for those who teach, for those who enter kindergarten. It is this proximate relevance that I wish to intimate ...¹

That book gave me a fair outlook on what Lonergan had been up to from the 1930s on, but mostly on the relevance of Lonergan's thought for non-academic readers.

At the time, I was preparing questions for a series of interviews with Bernard Lonergan, which were scheduled to be held a little later at the Thomas More Institute. (These interviews, conducted with Charlotte Tansey and Cathleen Going, would be published in 1982 under the title *Caring About Meaning*² in the Thomas More Papers series).

On my way to Philip McShane's apartment, I anticipated an encounter with a renowned scholar, and I was intimidated. So I was pleasantly surprised to be greeted warmly by a man who looked more like an artist than a professor. His casual dress, his guitar, the general outlook of his apartment helped create a relaxed atmosphere.

¹ McShane, *Lonergan's Challenge to the University and the Economy*, 130.

² *Caring About Meaning: Patterns in the Life of Bernard Lonergan*, ed. Pierrot Lambert, Charlotte Tansey, and Cathleen Going (Montreal: Thomas More Institute, 1982.)

At that time, I had been introduced to *Insight* by Father Gaston Raymond at the Dominican University College in Ottawa. Fr. Raymond lead his students through the many philosophical issues of that work in an original one-year course where we read in parallel *Insight* and Plato's *Republic*. Later, in the seventies, I took part in the translation of *Method in Theology* as a member of a team of translators directed by Louis Roy.

So I could say I had a fairly good "layman's" acquaintance with Lonergan. But meeting Philip McShane and reading his overview of Lonergan's relevance was a great step forward.

An informal group, called "*Réseau Lonergan français*," was formed in the early 2000s and organized an annual symposium. In the first years, presentations focussed on Lonergan's thought. Later symposiums were dedicated to current issues from a Lonerganian perspective.

I set up a French Lonergan Website in 2001, at the request of Br. Dunstan Robidoux, OSB (the French website is a sub-site of "For the Good under Construction"³). I posted several interviews with Lonergan scholars on that site, including one with Philip McShane, who stated in our conversation that in *Joistings* 22,⁴ in which he was reviewing Bill Mathews' book *Lonergan's Quest: A Study of Desire in the Authoring of Insight*,⁵ he was stressing the unity in Lonergan's thought, the unity of his life and his project, mentioning specifically the import of two early writings by Lonergan: "The Form of Inference"⁶ and "Geometric Possibility."⁷ In that interview, Phil had already summarized Lonergan's three main achievements: a theory in economics, functional specialties, and the rediscovery of Aristotle's cognitional theory.

In the 2000s, I became a course designer/discussion leader at the Thomas More Institute. I invited Philip McShane for a special meeting with a group of students. What struck me then, as well as at the symposium held the next day at Concordia University, where we sat on the same panel, was his "spirit of inquiry," that is, his keen interest in

³ "Lonergan Institute: For the Good Under Construction," accessed January 31, 2022, <http://lonergan.org>.

⁴ *Joistings* 22, "Reviewing Mathew's *Lonergan's Quest*, and Ours," <http://www.philipmcshane.org/joistings>.

⁵ William A. Mathews, *Lonergan's Quest: A Study of Desire in the Authoring of Insight* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006).

⁶ *Collection*, CWL 4, 3–16.

⁷ *Collection*, CWL 4, 92–107.

issues of the day. Phil's approach resembled Bernard Lonergan's own mindset, as I had experienced in the interviews for *Caring About Meaning*: thinking about people in attendance, rather than posturing as a renowned author.

Then, around 2009, Phil contacted me and asked me to write a book with him. Co-authoring a book with Philip McShane? I was taken aback. He was confident that I would write a novel biographical sketch (about 100 pages). So I agreed.

He came to see me in Gatineau (in a senior's residence where I was living with my wife) and spent 48 hours there. We talked a lot. He explained his project: A two-part book, Lonergan's "Life and Leading Ideas."

We talked about Lonergan's life. Phil introduced me to "Bernard Lonergan as subject." I knew all the milestones of Lonergan's life. Of course, Phil could add a lot of personal anecdotes. But mostly he introduced me to the dramatic features of a human being suffering from solitude and misunderstanding in his own community, among fellow Jesuits who didn't understand his capital project—assigning him to theological studies even though his main interests and personal inquiries were philosophical, interrupting the development of his major work *Insight* to send him to the Gregorian University in Rome. Phil had an intimate knowledge, of course, of Lonergan's periods of suffering, anguish, and addiction ... as well as of the man who was true to his own intellectual standards and the requirements of the times.

My conversations with Phil brought me closer to the man, Bernard Lonergan. Phil urged me to read J.W.N. Sullivan's *Beethoven: His Spiritual Development*. I was always surprised, as many people were, by Phil's way of relating Lonergan and his thought to unexpected musical or literary references. Now, Beethoven?

Phil drew my attention to Sullivan's emphasis on the organic pattern in Beethoven's last quartets ... Phil helped me understand that there was an organic feature in Lonergan's work, involved not merely in "leitmotifs" such as the upwards-downwards model. So in my part of our co-authored book, I mentioned that "organic pattern." But I must admit that I still need to discover the full implementation of that pattern in Lonergan's work... Maybe I should delve into the meaning of notions such as "transvaluation."

I had met Bernard Lonergan only a few times (mainly for the interviews in *Caring About Meaning*). But, under Phil's supervision, I tried to present Bernard Lonergan "as subject." I learned about Lonergan,

of course, through my conversations with Phil, who had been his close friend and a support in his second effort to teach economics in Boston, and also in his contact with music. So I was up to a deeper understanding of Lonergan's thought.

I learned a lot about Lonergan, but also, mainly, about myself in the process. And I am still on my way to a better apprehension of my own thinking and writing capacity. It took a few months before I could submit to Phil a few pages. Of course I was able to write down the main lines of Lonergan's life, but Phil's expectations put me out of balance. His part was done in a few weeks, and I had a hard time getting out of a hagiographical outlook... so I wrote virtually nothing for months. Phil's encouragements finally got me on the move.

I sensed a kind of empowerment in this undertaking based on trust and cooperation. I went further than I had expected. Such empowerment, I would say, is a Lonergan experience.