

IN GRATITUDE
Remembering Philip McShane

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There has to be a beginning to every encounter in our lives, and it can often seem to be quite inconsequential at the time. My first experience of listening to Phil speak was at a public lecture which he offered to students one evening in September, 1962. I had seen the notice in the entrance hall of University College Dublin and was intrigued by the topic: “Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Architecture.” At the time I knew very little about Teilhard beyond the fact that, being competent as a geologist, paleontologist, philosopher and theologian, he wished to draw on all of these in doing theology. The title of Phil’s lecture seemed to be pushing Teilhard’s project even further.

I have, unfortunately, no recall at this stage of the actual content of Phil’s lecture, but I do recall the fascinated intensity with which we, his student audience, listened. What he was saying presupposed a range of understandings that we had not yet achieved, but it whetted our appetites hugely. This became clear in the subsequent question time period: nobody challenged what he had said; all wanted to hear more.

My next experience of hearing Phil occurred nine years later when, in August of 1971, I was fortunate to find myself attending the Institute on *Method in Theology* in Milltown Park, Dublin, where Bernard Lonergan was presenting his work for the last time before its publication in 1972.¹

It was my first and last opportunity to listen to Lonergan present what he had worked at for so many years. What prepared me somewhat for that event was that a fellow student had somehow gotten his hands on ‘De intellectu et methodo’ (1961)² and had shared it with me in 1965. What prepared me even more was that I had purchased my own copy of *Insight* in 1965 and later had, against all expectation, managed to find a hard-bound copy of *Collection* in a whimsically named bookshop called

¹ Transcriptions of these lectures are available on the Bernard Lonergan Archive, accessed January 31, 2022. www.bernardlonergan.com, 640A0DTE070–649Q0DTE070.

² Reported on in *Early Works on Theological Method 2*, CWL 23, 3–229.

“Erehwon” on Padre Fauro Street in Manila, in 1968. In particular, I got great mileage out of the final three papers in that volume.³

Lecturing morning and afternoon, Lonergan reached a point of exhaustion with just part of the final functional specialty still to be covered. We were told that the remainder of “Communications” would be presented by Philip McShane.⁴

For the many in attendance still trying to grasp the significance of the requirement laid on those operating in the fifth functional specialty to derive both general as well as special theological categories, Phil resorted to the blackboard and offered a contemporary heuristic of what it is to be a human being, a six-levelled creature:

$$f(p_i; c_j; b_k; z_i; u_m; r_n).^5$$

Sliding past, for that moment, just what kind of challenge might be involved in figuring out what the semi-colon signified, I found the diagram wonderfully helpful for indicating how the sixth level was intrinsically related to the previous five: religious faith makes us a part of redemptive process, healing all that has been distorted and protecting all that is in danger of going out of existence. Communications, as the culminating moment in each cycle of the ongoing process, meant that theology had to be interdisciplinary to be effective.⁶

³ I was happy to discover later that Phil re-published those three papers in *Three Papers from Collection* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1973). His introduction to the three papers included the memorable line: “What is Lonergan getting at? He’s getting at you!” I later built a philosophy course for students on that booklet, reversing the order of the three papers as published.

⁴ My guess at the time was that Phil might have been Lonergan’s own choice. I learned later from Phil’s own writings how he had visited the recuperating Lonergan in Canada in 1966 to hear from him the nature of the breakthrough to functional specialization achieved in February of 1965.

⁵ This image was to make its appearance in many of Phil’s later writings, along with many even more complex images.

⁶ “The use of the general theological categories occurs in any of the eight functional specialties. The genesis of the special theological categories occurs seminally in dialectic and with explicit commitment in foundations. The commitment, however, is to the categories only as models, as interlocking sets of terms and relations. The use and acceptance of the categories as hypothesis about reality or description of reality occur in doctrines, systematics, communications.” *Method in Theology*, 292; CWL 14, 273.

Shortly after the Institute in Milltown Park, I was requested to take up further studies. I thought it would be a good chance for me to struggle with *Method in Theology*. I also thought I needed to do it in Germany, hoping that I could assimilate, as it were by a sort of osmosis, the nineteenth century breakthrough to historical-mindedness. Initially, I did not expect to be allowed to focus on Lonergan's work, which was published early on in 1972. I did not know at the time that Matt Lamb had been in Münster some three years ahead of me and had J.-B. Metz as his *Doctorvater* and Peter Hünemann as his second reader. Both men were interested in aspects of Lonergan's work. Hünemann would have known that Lonergan had appreciatively referenced his Habilitationsschrift, *Der Durchbruch geschichtlichen Denkens im 19. Jahrhundert* (Freiburg-Basel-Wien: Herder, 1967) some five times in *Method in Theology*, while Metz in his political theology was deeply involved in setting up a theological research center at the interdisciplinary University of Bielefeld and knew of Lonergan's insistence on interdisciplinarity in the doing of theology.⁷

I did not get to meet Matt until the spring of 1975 when he returned to defend his thesis. He told me how he had produced over a thousand pages, but that this was not acceptable and so he had to pare things down.⁸

On the day following that conversation I made a courtesy visit to Metz in his office to thank him for agreeing to be my second reader. I explained that, while my work was in the same field as that of Matt, my work was a very slight book indeed. Without removing his pipe he said: "There isn't that much to be said!" I liked that.

However, in terms of getting deeper into Lonergan's achievement, there was, in my case, an enormous climb ahead. The good news was that I

⁷ What occasioned Lonergan to ask Phil to try and find an economist to read his 1944 economic manuscript in the summer of 1968 was Lonergan's reading of Metz's political theology at that time. *Lonergan's Challenge*, 193, n. 104. Prior to this, Phil did not know of the existence of the manuscript. For Lonergan, "the moral theology of the economic process is not based on a doctrine of the family wage." *Lonergan's Challenge*, 107.

⁸ Matt's work on Lonergan had to show links to both Wilhelm Dilthey and Metz's political theology but coming to grips with Dilthey must have taken at least a year. I, on the other hand, had only to link up with some English analytical thinker and Wittgenstein.

felt I could now keep working my way forward and relished the challenge, even if it would take a lifetime.

After four years teaching in Sydney, I was asked to go back to the Philippines to help set up a theologate for five contiguous dioceses in north-western Mindanao. That project took a full decade: 1980–1990. At the beginning of that period, a colleague kindly sent me a copy of Phil’s work, *Loneragan’s Challenge to the University and the Economy*. I was amazed at the number of fields addressed by Phil in a mere 143 pages.⁹

Jumping to the turn of the century, my more profound indebtedness to Phil began when he set up his website and embarked on an incredible series of essays, freely available to all who might be helped by them.¹⁰ Each set of essays was devoted to enabling a more adequate reading of the key works, *Insight* and *Method in Theology*. My hitherto inadequate reading came under critical scrutiny, and I discovered to my horror the extent of my complacently settling for a scholarly drifting of initial meanings. This revealed my habitual avoidance of Lonergan’s strategic invitation to pause and figure out *how* Archimedes had discovered the principles of displacement and of specific gravity and how many insights had to be in place for him to toss off his one-liner to the king, “Weigh it in water!” I just assumed that I “knew all that” from my high-school physics class, a class in which no mention, much less explanation, was ever made of Archimedes’ two-volume study on the properties of water. At that point, I probably belonged to the class of people identified by Descartes as those who think that little questions are beneath them.¹¹ Phil’s patient attempt in

⁹ Since the first publication of Lonergan’s economic works only occurred in the *Collected Works* series in 1998 (CWL 21) and 1999 (CWL 15), my first introduction to Lonergan’s work in economic theory was chapters 6 and 7 of *Loneragan’s Challenge*. I should not omit reference to the many resources to be found in that book’s additional sixty pages of notes.

¹⁰ *Cantowers* I–XLI; *Quodlibets* 1–21; *Softawares* 1–8; *Joistings* 1–21, available at <http://www.philipmcshane.org/website-series>. The essays followed one another with such rapidity that I, for one, could hardly keep up with the flow. What I have listed here only brings us as far as 2008. Many more series were to follow, right down to the very end when, on completion of the book *Interpretation from A to Z* (Vancouver: Axial Publishing, 2020), Phil indicated (p. 207) that he was initiating a new website series, *Questing 2020*, raising questions and tentative answers about these next decades.

¹¹ See the opening paragraph of *Insight*, CWL 3, 27.

series after series to help all those who wished to learn how to read Lonergan's work properly, not selectively, seems to me to have been nothing short of heroic. His dedication to sharing with our world Lonergan's extraordinarily important achievement in its full integrity was total.¹²

Only the pure desire to know can enable us to risk exposing ourselves to others in the interests of furthering truth. Lonergan knew just how desperate our times are and how little time is left to get things right on our vulnerable planet. Phil anguished over "the subtle non-acceptance of Lonergan's challenge to self-reading."¹³ The challenge of *Dialectic: The Structure*¹⁴ is the only way to speed up the self-correcting process, and that process urgently needs to be speeded up.

When we finally met face to face in April of 2008, in Seoul, I had the unreal sense of having known Phil all my life. This had to be because of how much time I had spent in his virtual presence through the endless flow of essays shared with myself and others over the preceding two decades. It is this selfless, patient sharing in aiding others to self-appropriate that is manifest in his doctoral study at Oxford.¹⁵

Over the two weeks in Seoul, there was much delightful banter and laughter between us that sometimes extended to at least some of our very varied audiences. Early on, Phil branded me as an 'Oriental Express.' You might think that this was meant as a compliment, but you would be wrong. What Lonergan had labored over for so many years could not be so quickly or easily appropriated by anybody. I could speak eloquently about generalized empirical method and fail to remember that speaking about it

¹² "The translators of Heidegger's *Being and Time* note that 'on any page of Heidegger there is a great deal happening, and we have felt that we owe it to the reader to let him know what is going on.' I am driven by a like responsibility with regard to Lonergan." *A Brief History of Tongue*, 156.

¹³ McShane, *A Brief History of Tongue*, 157.

¹⁴ *Method in Theology*, 250; CWL 14, 234–35.

¹⁵ "A summary can give the impression of capturing the essence of a position. But a summary expresses the essence only in so far as the summarizer has the essence of the position in his mind. In this respect one may note that the book *Insight* is a summary expression of a philosophic position. As such it provides a phantasm for the reader which requires elaborate supplementation if the reader is to reach the mind of the author. The present work, it is hoped, is a contribution to that supplementation." *Randomness, Statistics, and Emergence* (2nd ed.), lxiv.

did not necessarily mean habitually living within such consciousness. It has to be a slow process to make it habitual.

But Phil was never anything other than supportive of anybody who came into his life. I smiled when I read the following in his penultimate book:

My 44-month-old grandson Matthew tossed the strange question to me this week, “Grampa, what’s your superpower?” Out of instant confusion came a reply, “It’s walking slowly.” On reflection, quite a neat power: and its identification by Matthew still tickles his strange sense of humor. Might walking slowly become a beneficial ethos for these next millennia?¹⁶

Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam.

¹⁶ *The Future: Core Precepts in Supramolecular Method and Nanochemistry*, ii.