

SELF-APPROPRIATION
What I Learned from McShane

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This article has four parts. In all the four parts, I will talk about how my encounter with Phillip McShane helped me grasp the task of self-appropriation. I will relate some resonances of what McShane taught me in his own writings. That way, I will show that what he taught me and what he wrote about are consistent with what he tried to do throughout his own intellectual career. Before I go into the task of articulating my task in this paper, I beg the reader's indulgence to quote at length a tribute in a recent work I paid to McShane (and Robert Doran whom we lost about the same time): "While the manuscript was being prepared, the Lord called to Himself two of my beloved Lonergan colleagues who have been pivotal to my professional career, Robert M. Doran and Philip McShane. While we here on earth are saddened for losing you, the angels in heaven added one more beat to their dancing steps because of you. For all the African students and colleagues you helped in this life, you will always remain a friend of Africa."¹

Personal Encounter

I first sat down with McShane when I was working on a project on the Catholic Intellectual Tradition (CIT), which he kindly guided me through and also helped to see through to publication.² My goal at the time was to identify the breadth and depth of Lonergan's contribution to this important project and to compare Lonergan's contribution to the contributions of other giants who have added to the CIT. Soon after this chance encounter with McShane, I started attending the Society for the Globalization of Effective Means of Evolving (SGEME) conferences in Canada, which McShane was organizing and leading at the time. These became the beginning of a long and fruitful friendship that would help me to know more about the intellectual striving of this Irish mathematician and physicist who devoted a great deal of his own intellectual career to helping

¹ See Cyril Orji, *Unmasking the African Ghost: Theology, Politics, and the Nightmare of Failed States* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2022) x.

² See Cyril Orji, *The Catholic University and the Search for Truth* (Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2015).

younger scholars make sense of Lonergan's work. McShane, on several occasions, compared Lonergan's achievement to the achievements of Galileo Galilei, Dmitri Mendeleev, James Joyce, Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn, and Ludwig van Beethoven. While he was guiding me through my project, he was also ready to talk about "Lonerganesque crisis."³ I understood it at the time to mean McShane's own frustration with the failure of his colleagues in Lonergan scholarship to engage in implementation of Lonergan's ideas. Implementation has always been a central concern of McShane's because implementation, for him, is a fruit of self-appropriation—the goal of Lonergan's project in *Insight*. McShane even took time to note that the "omission of a serious, extended entry on *Implementation*" in the new edition (as well as the old) edition of *Insight* has posed a serious challenge for understanding of Lonergan's ethics.⁴ With the benefit of hindsight, I have come to understand that McShane's thinking is that it is through implementation that people can get to see more easily how Lonergan is very much like Archimedes in so far as he was concerned about engineering progress.

Task of Self-Appropriation

In my work on CIT, standing like a dwarf and sitting on the shoulder of the giant Lonergan, to borrow a phrase from the 12th century theologian and author, John of Salisbury,⁵ little did I realize then that standing on the shoulders of such a giant to take a leap can be fragile without self-appropriation. Helping me see the lack of rigor and method that Lonergan saw in the Catholic educational system of his time and the subsequent

³ Phillip McShane, "Our Journaling Loneliness: A Response," *Journal of Macrodynamical Analysis* 3 (2003) 324–42, 325; see footnote 3.

⁴ "I wish to note here, however, one key omission in *Insight's* index, since it is relevant to the detecting of Lonergan's ethics. It is the omission of a serious, extended entry on *Implementation*. The entry in the new edition merely mentions two pages. Here I list a convenient but non-exhaustive set of direct references to *implementation* in the text of *Insight*. The new edition's numbers are given in brackets, here and elsewhere: 229 [254], 234 [259], 236 [261], 238 [263], 266 [291], 357 [381], 391 [416], 392 [417], 396 [421], 469 [493], 493 [517], 507 [530], 521 [544], 524 [547], 541[565], 685 [708], 726 [748]." Phillip McShane, "What-To-Do: The Heart of Lonergan's Ethics," 69, n. 1.

⁵ The exact origin of the phrase is unknown. It was used in the Middle Ages even before John of Salisbury and since then there have been different variations of the phrase.

steps he (Lonergan) took to introduce method into Catholic theology was McShane's way of teaching me the important task of self-appropriation. It was also part of his grand "efforts to coax, lift, Lonergan studies into a fuller global context through images, analogies, metaphors."⁶ Little by little, I began to understand the magnitude of the challenge this master-teacher whose teaching philosophy has been to "invite, cajole, not merely through persuasion towards steady exercising but also through glimpses of visionary ecstasy, the possibility of an Everest peek"⁷ was placing before me. I embraced McShane's challenge and started this exercise of self-appropriation with "the possibility of an Everest peak" in mind, no matter how utopian it might have seemed to me at the time. McShane pointed out to me the very same things he insisted on throughout his life, i.e., that the lasting achievement of Lonergan is his identification of generalized empirical method (GEM) and its basic strategy, which Lonergan in a 1976 lecture at Queens University characterized as operating on both the data of sense and the data of consciousness. He wanted me to use GEM as a segue to implementation in my work on CIT. He pointed out to me how GEM "does not treat of objects without taking into account the corresponding operations of the subject; it does not treat of the subject's operations without taking into account the corresponding objects."⁸ McShane has always insisted in his writings "that the successful implementation of that strategy in the next centuries pivots on an honest admission into consciousness of the tandemness of its demands,"⁹ and that this can only be realized in a luminous authentic subject. "What is needed and seeded, then, is an ever more refined openness to the restless heart of the internal dynamic of the personal and total search, in the reflective mode of generalized empirical method and functional specialization, an openness that would carry the search, in centuries to come, into a dialectic and evolutionary heuristic of the genera and species of ultimate meanings existentially present in human groups."¹⁰

⁶ See Philip McShane, *The Redress of Poise: The End of Lonergan's Work*, iv, available at <http://www.philipmshane.org/website-books>.

⁷ McShane, *The Redress of Poise*, iv–v.

⁸ Bernard Lonergan, "Religious Knowledge," in *A Third Collection*, edited by Frederick E. Crowe (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1985): 129–145, 141; CWL 16, 136.

⁹ Phillip McShane, "The Historical Reach of Lonergan's Meaning," *Compass: A Jesuit Journal* (Spring, 1985) 2.

¹⁰ Phillip McShane, "Scientific Methods and Investigation of Ultimate Meanings," *Journal of Ultimate Reality and Meaning* 11 (1988) 144.

I learned from McShane that anyone who ignores the work of Lonergan and the self-appropriation it suggests does so at their own peril. He taught me that Lonergan's work is not a translation into a new terminology of an already existing idea and that even though Lonergan is indebted to familiar figures in the tradition, such as John Henry Cardinal Newman, St. Augustine, and St. Thomas Aquinas, his work is not a rehash of an already familiar position.¹¹ The Catholic achievement or CIT is analogous to the Greek achievement, which Lonergan himself says "was needed to expand the capacities of commonsense knowledge and language before Augustine, Descartes, Pascal, Newman could make their commonsense contributions to our self-knowledge."¹² What Lonergan adds to CIT is a contribution that goes beyond commonsense.¹³ As Lonergan himself notes, "The history of mathematics, natural science, and philosophy and as well, one's own personal reflective engagement in all three are needed if both common sense and theory are to construct the scaffolding for an entry into the world of interiority."¹⁴

McShane helped me to understand that there is no clear discontinuity between Lonergan and previous generations, because a rediscovery is not, so to speak, an independent discovery.¹⁵ Rediscoveries hardly ever amount to a major cultural shift, as the examples of Newton and Leibniz show. It seems to me that the reason why McShane wanted me to focus on GEM is because Lonergan's innovative contributions are not only methodological, but also involve transposition. Lonergan has an uncanny way of transposing achievements of the past in, for instance, the areas of logic, science, aesthetics, philosophy, and theology.

Helping Me Move to Greater Heights

With the benefit of hindsight, I now realize that I was a young and aspiring scholar, and what McShane was trying to do was guide me in the way of Lonergan, so I would not end up like many others who may have missed the "turning leading to an understanding of

¹¹ Phillip McShane, "The Contemporary Thomism of Bernard Lonergan," *Philosophical Studies* **11** (1962) 64.

¹² *Method in Theology*, CWL 14, 245.

¹³ Phillip McShane, "Undermined Macrodynamic Reading," *Journal of Macrodynamic Analysis* **1** (2001) 82.

¹⁴ *Method in Theology*, CWL 14, 245.

¹⁵ Philip McShane, "Implementation: The Ongoing Crisis of Method," *Journal of Macrodynamic Analysis* **3** (2003) 20.

understanding.” It seems to me that the “turning” McShane wanted me to embrace is a “turning” that is reached when one moves through personal acts of understanding to an appreciation of one’s own experience of understanding and understanding correctly.¹⁶ The “turning” stems from self-appropriation of the existential subject (on the fourth level of intentional consciousness) that Lonergan suggests is helpful in a person’s venturing out on their own.¹⁷ In an edited volume in which he raised the question regarding what Lonergan is getting at in *Insight*, McShane answers that “the uncomfortable answer is that Lonergan is getting at you and me.”¹⁸ It is part of McShane’s insistence that *Insight* is an aid in the exercise of self-appropriation. Frederick Crowe registers his full agreement with McShane that Lonergan’s *Insight* is more of an aid to self-appropriation than “a thesaurus of ideas.”¹⁹ McShane takes it even a step further—that *Insight* is “a doctrinal book” that can mistakenly be read as a treatise on understanding. This mistake, he argues, “has deep cultural grounds in the long tradition of encyclopaedic writing that began with Plato’s nephew.”²⁰ It has culminated in “the *haute vulgarization* that haunts our hearts and our academic circlings.”²¹

McShane sees the exercise of self-appropriation as an invitation that goes far deeper than any Zen exercise. “You must move back and forth, luminously, tranquilly, timelessly, between the seen felt spread of your selected surface and the retinal-cortical flow.”²² He likens self-appropriation to *imitation Christi*—the Christian call to have the same mind as Christ (Philippians 2:5). In other words, the Philippians text is a “Christian motivation both toward self-appropriation—reaching a mind ‘like to ours’ through ours—and toward the fruitful dark glimpse of the

¹⁶ See Phillip McShane, “The Foundations of Mathematics,” *Modern Schoolman* 40 (1963): 373–87, 374–75.

¹⁷ See Fred Lawrence, “Editor’s Note,” in *Lonergan Workshop 1*, edited by Fred Lawrence (Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press, 1978) v.

¹⁸ See Phillip McShane, “Introduction,” in *Introducing the Thought of Bernard Lonergan* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1973): 7–13, 7.

¹⁹ Frederick E. Crowe, “An Exploration of Lonergan’s New Notion of Value,” in *Lonergan Workshop 3* (Chico, California: Scholars Press, 1982): 1–24, 18.

²⁰ McShane, “Underminded Macrodynamical Reading,” 79.

²¹ McShane, “Underminded Macrodynamical Reading,” 80.

²² Phillip McShane, “General Method,” in *Method: Journal of Lonergan Studies* 13 (1995) 46.

content of that mind.”²³ Thus, McShane was inviting me, as he did others, to discover concretely Lonergan’s “call, its presence or absence, the shade of its nature, above all the slow rhythms of its reaching.”²⁴ McShane is convinced that this is precisely what Lonergan means when he says that the issue of our time

is not having people repeat with Augustine that “the real is not a body, it is what you know when you know something true.”[†] The problem is to get people to *mean* as much as Augustine meant when Augustine spoke about truth, and that is a transformation of the subject. It is bringing the subject up to the level of thought of a Plato, and an Aristotle and an Augustine and an Aquinas and that is a terrific development in the subject.²⁵

Conclusion

I still remember vividly McShane hitting me with the challenge of implementation. He gave me the impression that the inability to implement is a serious problem in Lonergan scholarship. He wrote that, “If one takes Lonergan’s methodological doctrine, as described in *Method in Theology*, seriously, then one has to attempt some contribution to its implementation.”²⁶ He also wants us to know that his often-repeated phrase about a Lonerganesque crisis should be understood as nothing but his “attitude of short-term pessimism and long-term optimism” regarding Lonergan scholarship.²⁷ I should add that McShane’s stress on implementation stems from the task of self-appropriation and that the problem of implementation is a problem that McShane himself struggled with for years before he finally made a breakthrough. Whenever he brings the matter up of this crisis, it is with the hope that talking about it will serve as a help and encouragement to others.²⁸ I invite the reader to do a dialectic exercise of thematizing their own position in the company of others who do the same.

²³ Phillip McShane, “Elevating *Insight*: Space-Time as Paradigm Problem,” *Method: Journal of Lonergan Studies* **19** (2001) 226; see footnote 83.

²⁴ McShane, “Towards a Luminous Darkness of Circumstances,” 9.

²⁵ Lonergan, *Phenomenology and Logic*, 132. The footnote † in the text cited reads: “See editorial note *a* to the Introduction to *Insight* 778–79.”

²⁶ Phillip McShane, “Implementation: The Ongoing Crisis of Method,” 11.

²⁷ McShane, “Our Journaling Loneliness,” 327; see footnote 6.

²⁸ See Phillip McShane, “Obstacles to Metaphysical Control,” *Method: Journal of Lonergan Studies* **23** (2005): 187–95.