

## A FRESH START

**M**y simple start is from the top of page 156 of *Method in Theology*, where Lonergan has the heading for his first basic exegetical operation: “Understanding the Object.” Let us not even fuss, for the moment, over the range of meanings of exegesis or of interpretation. Just think of the person involved as preparing to talk. Why not name him or her as Dr. Home? I am thinking here of a convenient parallel to Dr. House<sup>1</sup> and his team: the footnote locates the television program for you, but you need go no further in the matter to move on here. House and his team do medical detecting on strange cases of illness. The team—generally an international group with representatives from Asia, Africa, Australia—are pretty competent and House is the hot shot on the spot, but they are all highly qualified.

They are well read, and as they tackle the detecting of a strange illness and its possible cure, they have each a pretty coherent view of illnesses and their history, and on the texts written about them, each with an edge in their own culture. Think of the little Chinese lady who was a member of the team at one stage, bringing deeper expertise than others on the history of Chinese treatments like acupuncture. You get the picture, even if you have never seen the program—which however I recommend both for its entertainment and educational value and for its relevance to our present topic.

But now we are thinking of Dr. Home, where “home” might remind you of the challenge of being “at home in transcendental method.”<sup>2</sup> And it is good to remember, regarding the House group, that “in a sense everyone knows and observes transcendental method.”<sup>3</sup> We may assume here that Home and company—you and I—have that other level

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<sup>1</sup> The show titled *House*—the name of the lead character, Hugh Laurie—was created by David Shore and ran from 2004 to 2012. The Google blurb gives the following: “An antisocial maverick doctor who specializes in diagnostic medicine does whatever it takes to solve puzzling cases that come his way using his crack team of doctors and his wits.”

<sup>2</sup> *Method in Theology*, 14.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

of competence in some shabby fashion: “in another sense it is quite difficult to be at home in transcendental method.”<sup>4</sup>

Now we move into a comic faze of our beginning. I recall now, and have done so all too often for some, those times in Lonergan’s room in the old Regis College of Bayview Avenue when he worried out before me, pacing, what to do with his beginning of *Method*. “I can’t put all of *Insight* into chapter one!” Nor could he put all of *Insight* into chapter seven, *Interpretation*; nor could he put into the third section of *Insight* chapter seventeen its dependence on, and subtle additions to, the previous 600 pages.

What, then, to do, with regard to Interpretation, including the handling or dodging of the new functional divisions? Well, the dodging occurs neatly in his first footnote of the chapter, and we’ll get back to that later.<sup>5</sup> But now I want you to LOL about his dodging on page 156, from whose heading we took our heading here, “UNDERSTAND THE OBJECT.”

I suspect that you will have to shake up your conventional reading self to get the joke, to sense the grin on his typing face. The heading is pretty wild as a demand, and to that he adds some nice white lies. “The exegete may already know all about the objects treated in a text.”<sup>6</sup> Neither Dr. House nor Dr. Home knows all about the objects, and Lonergan is quite luminous on this matter. Their horizons just do not measure up to the field: will they ever?<sup>7</sup> But let’s stay away from high flying here and think of House pausing over the new patient with his team, each of them puzzled and puzzling in different ways against their common background. They are reading both contemporary texts and the contemporary object, a sick patient. “When the meaning of the text is not obvious because of this or that defect, still the greater the exegete’s resources, the greater the likelihood that he will be able to enumerate all possible interpretations and assign to each its proper measure of probability.”<sup>8</sup> And indeed

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> See note 1 of *Method in Theology*, 153.

<sup>6</sup> *Method in Theology*, 156, lines 8–9. See also line 24.

<sup>7</sup> A point true of the field of medicine as well as the field of being. “The field is *the* universe, but my horizon defines *my* universe.” *Phenomenology and Logic*, CWL 18, 199.

<sup>8</sup> *Method in Theology*, 156, the final lines.

House and the team are quite competent in distinguishing and not confusing the two quite different measures of probability.

What is that competence of House and his team? This is not too hard for each of us to detect descriptively. Indeed, we can talk comfortably of *a standard model*, pulling the name out of the realm of physics. House and company have a decent genetic grip on the geohistory of medicine and its applications. But perhaps best for us to think more simply of the genetics of views on this particular ailment or what resembles this strange ailment, and the strategies used in applications towards healing. House and company know that “there is the genetic sequence in which insights are accumulated by man”<sup>9</sup> and “the possibility of the differentiation and specialization of modes of expression”<sup>10</sup>: think of the sequence of ever-finer cranial mappings of neurochemical controls.

It is best to halt there: but you do, I hope, get the joke? Neither type of doctor knows the object. What House knows is that he needs to bring to bear his grip on the best genetic ordering of the growth of the prior interpretations of the object, the health and sickness of the human body. This is his real effective meaning of “understanding the object.” Dr. Lonergan knew this: it was his answer to the problem of understanding the object spelled out compactly in 1953. It is the answer shared by every serious scientist or healer who “knows and observes transcendental method.”<sup>11</sup> The serious reader of *Method in Theology* 156 finds herself or himself pitched forward, or back, to that wonderful paragraph in the book that I have regularly mentioned as *60910*.

Your interest from the start of page 156 was, I hope, in the more difficult control mentioned in line 14 of page 14: the reach for a broadened basis from which to tackle history’s ills, from which to become effective in the genesis of the health of the body of history. The broadened base is described pretty brutally in the nine points of pages 286–7. “From such a broadened basis one can go on”<sup>12</sup> but a central step on the road—the fuller joke of that marvelous paragraph—is to go on, as a community, to re-think and re-write the

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<sup>9</sup> *Insight*, 609: last paragraph.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 610.

<sup>11</sup> *Method in Theology*, 14, lines 11–12.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 287.

first four chapters of *Method*. That thinking and writing will slow-fox-trot forward to rewrite chapter seven of the book, *Interpretation*, and the following chapters on *History*, so that there is no doubt about the page-turning uplift from “academic disciplines”<sup>13</sup>—present voodoo medicines of global care.

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<sup>13</sup> The by-now surely famous end words of that first page of *Method in Theology*: page 3.