

SOME CONTEXTS OF THE INTERPRETATION SERIES

The elementary start of [Interpretation 1](#), “A Fresh Start,” was very deliberate. I wished to impose no heavy context. I had in mind, literally, the notion of a fresh start¹ in the concern of “the present section.”² The first footnote there invites you to not be concerned about the six footnotes of this paragraph, but depending on where you are at, so to speak, with regard to Lonergan, you can read them later and fly round them and in them differently on each return.³ Indeed, you may have little clue about the book *Insight*, or the fact that this series is about the meaning⁴ of the third section of its 17th chapter which

¹ This could well be a first start for you, a start that allows you to dodge venturing at all into *Insight* or *Method in Theology*. Then venture forward, after this note, without reading any further notes, and certainly not these first six notes. Observe that the title of the third essay in the series is “A Dramatic Instance,” a title taken from the first page of *Insight*. Are you now a dramatic instance: poised? I end this little essay with the quotation which started me startlingly on the track of a genetic perspective on interpretation (see the final note 10, below). It is an abrupt ending and perhaps on the wrong track for you. You have to find a comfortable entry point, perhaps taking a lead from comments in note 4, regarding biography and history.

² At a much later stage you may find new leads to reading and self-reading from the long footnote on “the present section” on page 239 of my book, *The Allure of the Compelling Genius of History*. The phrase “the present section” occurs eleven times in *Insight*, and I invite you to read the phrase as referring to yourself as a section of being. I introduced this exercise in chapter 19, where I invited such a reading of “the present section, accordingly is concerned exclusively with the formulation of the notion of God.” (*Insight*, 680). This little essay may nudge you to be a present concern about the ordering of the geohistorical sequencing of formulations of God.

³ I have perhaps too often pointed to a normative adult acceleration of growth in meaning: see, for example, the final pages of my *Lack in the Beingstalk*. Here, however, it seems good for me to refer to a more introductory earlier book of mine that is relevant to our struggle: [Wealth of Self and Wealth of Nations: Self-Axis of the Great Ascent](#), written in the early 1970s. I used it successfully, for 20 years, as an introduction to philosophy. From it I have taken creatively, at the end of the *Disputing Quest* series, the image of “mibox” which eventually is, in some reincarnation, to dominate the heuristics of culture. But here I refer in particular to the comments of Bachelard on reading at note 29 of page 98. No need to repeat them here: the book is available online.

⁴ It seems worthwhile, even while beginning, to make a handy relevant distinction here between two types of meaning. There is Lonergan’s meaning of, say, the canons of hermeneutics; there is the meaning that is to occur when they are implemented in humanity’s struggle for progress. Of course, there is the curious fact that the former meaning includes the intention of the latter. Useful here is to soak in, in the early stages of this venture of a positive *haute vulgarization* of interpretation, pp. 182–85 of *Method in Theology* on pre-critical biography and history.

seems to have eluded almost the entirety of his followers.⁵ Paradoxically, such a cluelessness is my starting presupposition in this venture.⁶

I think back now to my first weeks of teaching in 1959. One of my classes was an honors first-year class of mathematical physics. With a little juggling, that first essay could be directed to them and their ilk. They were innocent of the subject, though I assumed that they had a decent grip on the differential calculus from high school. That course is the only one of which I have notes left of the year's classes.⁷

I shall refer, here and there, to parts of them as neat parallels to problems of interpretation. So, for example, thinking of 'beginnings' led me to think, and suggest that you think, of yourself as a taking up *Insight* for the first time, and reading its first page. It poses a problem in the first paragraph—one that is usual in introductory physics—and confronts you with such a problem, a problem of interpretation, in the last six lines of the page. It is the problem of understanding the principle of Archimedes.⁸

⁵ I mentioned pre-critical and *haute vulgarization* in the previous note. A problem I am dealing with here is the nature of the eluding. Might we arrive slowly at the view that this perspective is not really elusive? That some sort of genetic line-up is pretty obvious when one is dealing with the story of opinions? That the usual refined work on this opinion and that—the stock in trade of “academic disciplines” (*Method in Theology*, 3: final words)—is a pre-critical mess that can be pre-critically detected by a fresh-eyed initiate, so that we get a new generation turning to page 4 of that book willing to assent and ascend to the “difficult and laborious” (line 9 of page 4) way suggested in part two of the book?

⁶ There are many ways of pausing over the cluelessness given in a range of Lonergan's works, but best not distract thus with the appearance of learned scholarship. Better to just pause seriously over the flow of present political and cultural living and ask ourselves, what have present Lonergan studies done in their regard?

⁷ The notes, my scribbles in preparation for classes (they were neither used by me in teaching—I preferred off the cuff lecturing with diagrams—nor distributed) are posted on the website under [Website Articles](#), numbers 7 and 8. Not very legible but worth looking at. They give a decent impression of the character of exercises and ‘readings’ required in serious scientific work. I would note that they also nudge towards discomfiting insights about the general ethos of silly assumptions regarding difficulty. Physics is the easiest of inquiries: one climbs in difficulty through the other sciences to arrive at that most difficult inquiry, theology. But the entire culture of the negative Anthropocene is settled in the opposite sick erroneous view: we all know what we are talking about when we talk about God. Lonergan was battered by the culture throughout his entire lecturing career.

⁸ This is the first problem of interpretation in *Insight*. It is regularly passed over. One of the leading first-generation Lonergan scholars admitted to me that he did not attempt it: how about you? See [Cantower 27](#), 5–10, “Plunging in with Archimedes.” The second, clearly identified, problem of “interpretation” (a recurrent word in *Insight* 186–88, but not indexed) relates to the famous rods and

But let me compactly point to contexts that we may be able to weave in as we progress through these essays, which aim to emerge as not much more than three pages each. There is a sense in which my effort is to parallel the effort of *Introducing Critical Thinking*, written for high school use, and used by John Benton during his years of teaching. The book is both a simpler and a more difficult version of my earlier *Wealth of Self*. This series is to be both a simpler and a more difficult version of the seventeenth chapter of *Insight*. Or might it be a version of the beginning of the book *Insight* itself? Think of it, in that way, in terms of the first three chapters of *Insight*. Might we climb to a version of chapter three, “The Canons of Empirical Method”? But the canons in question here are to be the canons of hermeneutics. The canons we want to reach for are those canons transposed in the fullest expression of the context of functional collaboration: the pointer given by Lonergan.

Let’s see how it goes. I would hope for creative reactions and questions from younger people, but the hope is slim. The younger generations are brain-washed into the old ways by my elder colleagues, and I really, and sadly, don’t expect those colleagues to leap into my series. They are a minor resistance, as comfortable in their non-science of “academic disciplines” approach as the economic professors are in their non-science of present economics. Still, my present effort may cause some cracks in the cloisters in this century.

Meantime, back to what I said about my class of 1959. They were tuned into the task of mastering a certain slice of the story of mathematical physics, one associated with Isaac Newton.⁹ They knew that the story accelerated on and that I was talking of that story’s climb in my graduate classes, talking to those graduates way beyond the first year horizon. But there was a sense—a growing sense from my guidance of their own climb—in which they could resonate, *haute vulgarization* style, with that key quotation from Lonergan that set me first on my way, at the end of the 1970s, to sorting out the full context of the effective interpretation of history, of futurology. So why not add that quotation here, perhaps now freshly glimpsed? We’ll get back to it, forward into it, in the next few essays.

clocks paradox. Now there’s a challenge on the “natural bridge over which we may advance from our examination of empirical science to an examination of common sense” (*Insight*, 162), such a common sense as holds quite firmly that chapter 6 or chapter 19 of *Insight* is much easier than chapter 5.

⁹ See note 7. My prep-notes, page 19 of no. 8, give my strategy and one-page derivation of Newton’s law, “starting with Kepler’s laws, find the force.”

The history of any particular discipline is in fact the history of its development. But this development, which would be a theme of history, is not something simple and straightforward but something which occurs in a long series of various steps, errors, detours, and corrections. Now as one studies this movement he learns about this developmental process and so now possesses within himself an instance of that development which took place perhaps over several centuries. This can happen only if the person understands both his subject and the way he learned about it. Only then will he understand which elements in the historical developmental process had to be understood before the others, which one made for progress in understanding and which held back, which elements really belonged to the particular science and which did not, and which elements contained errors. Only then will he be able to tell at what point in the history of his subject there emerged new visions of the whole and when the first true system occurred, and when the transition took place from an earlier to a later systematic ordering, which systematization was simply an expansion of the former and which was radically new; what progressive transformation the whole subject underwent; how everything that was explained by the old systematization is now explained by the new, along with many other things that the old one did not explain – the advances in physics, for example, by Einstein and Max Planck. Then and then alone will he be able to understand to understand what factors favoured progress, what hindered it, and why, and so forth.

Clearly, therefore, the historian of any discipline has to have a thorough knowledge and understanding of whole subject. And it is not enough that he understand it in any way at all, but he must have a systematic understanding of it. For the precept, when applied to history, means that successive systems which have developed over a period of time have to be understood. The systematic understanding of a development ought to make use of an analogy with the development that takes place in the mind of the investigator who learns the subject, and this interior development within the mind of the investigator ought to parallel the historical process by which the science itself developed.¹⁰

¹⁰ Lonergan, *Understanding and Method*, (1959), in *Early Works on Theological Method 2*, CWL 23, 175–7. Michael G. Shield's translation. As I mentioned in note 1, this was a massive nudge for me in my search of the late 1970s for the nature of a future systematics in theology. It blossomed, thirty years later, into a solution to Lonergan's problem regarding the treatise on the mystical body (*Insight*, 763–4) and a dense dominant genetic meaning for the word *Comparison* on page 250 of *Method in Theology*. Getting there, for the normal student, is like starting with Archimedes and heading slowly for a grip on the hydrodynamics of lava flowing in a rough uneven channel.