

THE “CONCEPTION”¹ OF METAPHYSICS

Here you might think of us as glimpsing Cloud Nine.² Or better, think of the context I introduced previously, of the nun in my first year honors class of Mathematical Physics in 1959–60, and my venturing into the sub-atomic in, e.g., a fulsome way that would include the Higgs particle.³ We—I less than you—are haunted by the same madness of common sense that grows in harmfulness as it moves forward in these centuries of industrious decay of commerce and politics, theology, and, indeed, religion.

I think, and suggest you too think in some Interior Lighthouse corner of your house or mind or mibox, of the joke Lonergan told in his first Easter week lecture in Dublin of 1961. It was about a person who approached Einstein, indeed had him out for tea, and in the comfort of a cuppa, remarked, “I am so delighted that you agreed to dine with me. I am intrigued by all this relativity business. But you know, I was never much good at mathematics.

¹ *Insight*, 416, 4th last line, 2nd last word.

² The direction to take in these Vignettes has been a puzzle for me, one that is not solved easily. The problem all the time is the horizon problem raised in *Phenomenology and Logic*, chapter 14, the “limited mentality” (*ibid.*, 304, line 3) of various groups. On my mind at the moment is the limiting that is discussed later in Vignette 19, “The Cargo Pants”. But that is only one context in a plethora of geohistorical contexts. What to do? For the moment my notion is to set up a context for a shot, in Vignette 23 and those following (how many? Oh me! ? Free: free: by two hundred and three?), at a simple persuasive presentation of the canons of hermeneutics that might get “a perhaps not numerous center” (*Collection*, CWL 4, 245) self-identifying themselves as pushing for an effective grip on Lonergan’s meaning of “*Comparison*” and “*compared*” (*Method*, 250). What, then, of the intervening Vignettes? It seems best to first point to my own present position, which I do so in this and the following Vignette 10. Sweat a little over them and move on. The twelve Vignettes to follow, 11–22, aim, in a rambling fashion—I am not in the world of deduction or science or paragraph 2 of *Method*—at raising interest in some facets of the mess and the climb needed to get out of the mess. Is there a mess? Both inside the academy and in the grim ‘outside world’ there is the abuse of humanity sweetly established by centuries of idiocy and malice and greed (See CWL 10, *Topics in Education*, 232). The mess in the academy is nicely disguised in ways I shall touch on in Vignettes 16–18. I have some optimism about Vignette ‘twenty three’ as a ‘setting free.’ How long need I plead for the “Lonerganites” to break with the dishonesty—till now perhaps just invincible ignorance—of dodging his plea of sixty years about interpretation? Perhaps it will take the rest—194—of my Vignettes? But there is a chance that my efforts of, say, 2018–2020, will seed a sapling shift, a 2020 vision that is a sliver of a glimpse of what is to be done in the next seven millennia.

³ See the lengthy note 73 on page 33 of my *The Road to Religious Reality* (Axial Publishing, 2012).

So I would really like you to tell me about relativity, but with no equations: just in simple words.”

You get, at some level of lighthouse struggling with me, the pointing? Are you getting it with a pressure towards openness that goes with our venture here of weaving round *Lonergan’s 1833 Overture*? My pressure here is gentle: in the reality of advanced dialectic work it will also be gentle. A parallel here would be Wiles first brilliant lecturing on Fermat’s Last Theorem. The serious listeners were alert, admiring, excited about the push, not even knowing were Andrew was going with the stuff.⁴ It reminds me of the opposite in the industrious decay of theology. An article of mine was rejected by a very respected journal because—I quote—“it was above the heads of the audience.” In mathematics and physics it just is not published if it is not above the heads of the audience. Oh la la.

So we find ourselves in the beginning stages of a shift in theological poise, and the old guard cannot be gently persuaded to listen to my shot at popularizing, in positive *haute vulgarization* style, Lonergan’s Last Theorem. The popularizing, as we are going to see increasingly better in the next 20 or 200 Vignettes, is a matter of cutting back to two specialties, the first and the last: Research and Communications. You might think of us focusing on two words in the original definition—or is it a description? Or something like $E=mc^2$?—of metaphysics given by Lonergan: and I include here his comment as a hint towards the answer to the two questions marked in this sentence.

Now let us say that explicit metaphysics is the conception, affirmation, and implementation of the integral heuristic structure of proportionate being. The meaning and implications of this statement have now to be explored.⁵

We are heading towards an exploration of the tenth and the unlucky thirteenth words of the definition: *conception* and *implementation*. The previous Vignette talks of the unluckiness of that word implementation.⁶ There is a way in which it is the crisis word both of the single

⁴ See Amir D. Aczel, *Fermat’s Last Theorem. Unlocking the Secret of an Ancient Mathematical Problem*, Four Walls Eight Windows, New York, 1996, pp. 1–4, 127.

⁵ *Insight*, 416, last lines.

⁶ The topic deserves an essay. You might think of the shift in the index of *Insight* on *implementation* from the first to the *CWL* edition, still so far short of the more than thirty references, not counting the entire mood of the book. Fred Crowe and I joked about this deep cultural fault. It still guts us. At a high-level gathering a few years ago I talked, during it, to the organizer, about the need for getting to implementation: his reply: “Oh I thought that was what we were at here!”

first page of *Method* and of the entire movement of philosophy, theology, and science in these past millennia. But let us not get into that. Here I simply wish to help you a little forward in thinking about the conception⁷ that results from and grows into a subject which is called philosophy or metaphysics. It is the zone that I now call *futurology* and is best chased after, at this stage, through my little book, *Futurology Express*.

I am writing here about my view, in the poise of the challenge of *Lonergan's 1833 Overture*. It is the poise I wish you to share and, obviously, to lead you to splash into the troubled waters of the “final objectification” (line 28 of *Method* 250), even if your own position is slim, undeveloped. A diversion here should help us along.

When I began this little essay I was tempted to use, not the above title, but a piece of the text of *Method* page 287, “what I mean by metaphysics” (lines 7–8). I quickly dropped the idea. That title would have moved us into subtle problems of interpretation. Let us pause over that in an anecdotal way that is a little venture in positive *haute vulgarization*.

You recall my musing over conversations with Lonergan in 1966, about his problem of getting *Insight* into *Method*. He had John Todd, in London, send me the final galleys late in 1971, in order to have the book indexed. My shabby hurried penned index was delivered by me to Todd in his office just before Christmas, but that December index-work and journey were haunted by my curiosity regarding how Lonergan had solved his problem. I won't go into the way in which he nudges the turn to *Insight's* challenge but those two pages 286–7 delighted me. About two decades later I sensed a gap: no mention of functional collaboration in those (9) pointers. So I regularly talked of adding a (10) at the end of the list. Some years later it dawned on me that I was wrong, that functional collaboration was a piece of (6). And this can be claimed as a valid view. But is it a valid interpretation of the writer at the time, writing “what I mean by metaphysics”?

At all events I dodge that issue here. Functional collaboration is clearly a solid component in his “third way, ... difficult and laborious” (*Method*, 4). But do you see, sense,

⁷ A distraction here that may help beginners in this venture. In my undergraduate teaching I talked often about the two spellings of what means in Gaelic “descendent” [literally, “son”], MAC and McA [for McAlister, McA-lister]. The first neatly presents the mind with Ah? Ah! bringing forth the joyfully created comprehension: the second sums up Oxford philosophy. Reality splatters concepts on the mind, concepts that need Analysis. Latter day Oxford prefers to talk of linguistic analysis: a more modest idiocy.

seize, the messy climb I had? It is worthwhile sometime pausing over this question in a style towards which this little essay points, but here we focus on a preliminary and simpler task: the task of finding a poise in reading “conception” in *Insight* on that line of page 416.

If you had the time and energy to struggle with me down through *Method* 250 on the question “What is metaphysics?” you would find, with a beginner’s degree of luminosity, that I arrive at pitching a strange and new suggestion at the group that comes out of the usual task in dialectic of *Assembly* etc. The *Assembly* is largely an assembly of my own work, my own struggle, and it ends up with a conception of metaphysics that is strangely genetic and expressed—but only roughly⁸ at this early stage of metaphysics (futurology, the new name for it, is skipped here as muddying the water)—in a dense symbolism, which I print large, thus adding importance, and perhaps terror:

$$M(W_3)^{0\Phi T}$$

This is certainly a bit of a shock. First, recall previous comments on the need for symbols when a scientist is trying to hold things together. Next think of yourself as on a par with the nun I have used as a fallgal here, asking “what is metaphysics really, what is it as a future business, as futurology?” She and you are keen but she, more than you, tuned to a culture of climbing: open, then to positive *haute vulgarization*. But I can usefully and encouragingly⁹ throw the book or hook at you.

Connect this with Lonergan’s shrewd point regarding the first requirement of interpretation: “knowing the object.”¹⁰ When the object is not difficult to know, then it is not too problematic. A teacher correcting students’ interpretations of Euclid’s presentation of Pythagoras’ Theorem or of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* is happy in the usual ballpark of interpretations. But suppose it is a larger issue like What is history? or What is fibromyalgia?, then the best you can do is line up in a coherent way the various incomplete answers. What

⁸ Vignettes 10 and 22 will point beyond the roughness.

⁹ In this context there is my general view, lurking in these essays, of a positive *Haute Vulgarization*. “Moral education is impossible without the constant vision of greatness.” *Topics in Education*, CWL 10, 102.

¹⁰ See *Method in Theology*, 156. My website series [Interpretation](#) is an effort to bring out the connection between this and the genetic perspective of the paragraph *Insight* 609–10.

coherent way? Now that is a heavy topic dealt with elsewhere.¹¹ But you might accept, in your innocence, that the line-up would be a line-up that works through the story of efforts to answer the question. Can you see that the full line-up would be geohistorical? An early Chinese answer to the nature of history or of fibromyalgia might wander round the globe, over the centuries get improving twists in India and Italy, and end up in the 21st century as a position held in Yale University.

So, here we are with the question, What is metaphysics? Can you envisage the same sort of tidy-up effort? But let us not go there. Back to reading Lonergan at the end of page 416, and pausing over the word “conception.” He conceives of metaphysics as, well, as what he goes on to talk about. His talk is decently loose, using phrases like “integral heuristic structure.” It is, indeed, loose enough to pick up on his discovery of more than a decade later of a structure named “functional specialties”: an integral cyclic structure of minding. “Loose enough”: in more refined terms, we can say that it is in genetic continuity. So we can glimpse, in our *haute vulgarization* way, that we are reading the word “conception” in *Insight* well, indeed, “better than was the reality”¹² for Lonergan, when we read it, yes, in its fresh precision of a genetic context, even if we are only focusing on the genetic context of his minding over the relevant decades of his efforts. In that focus people might climb, or be taught, or be given a *haute vulgarization* initial meaning, and that meaning can be held adequately in some partial version of the symbolic meaning of W_3 .

But there is the larger context that would parallel the context we were sniffing out when we mused over Chinese answers and other area-efforts. And that is what the heavy large symbol above is about.

The M in the symbol serves a double purpose. Yes, it is O.K. to read it as Metaphysics, but it also refers to a symbolism associated with a chap call Markov, a handy way of trying to hold together an evolutionary viewpoint.¹³ It is pretty obvious that a sphere representing the globe, the world, would be useful. Then there are the three superscripts at the end: θ , Φ , and T. They are in common use as a way of pinning down any point in space around the

¹¹ My intention is to tackle it in a very very elementary way in the Vignettes following Vignette 22, “Mibox.”

¹² *Method in Theology*, 251.

¹³ See my *Randomness, Statistics and Emergence*, Gill McMillan and Notre Dame, 1970, 237.

centre of the sphere. T is the time-line from the center. Theta and Phi, as they are named from Greek, are merely normal geometric names for latitude and longitude. What, then, does the formula say? It says the Metaphysics is a function of a variable, W_3 , over the space and time of history. That is the best I offer at present¹⁴ regarding “knowing the object.” That is my “card on the table” in participating in *Lonergan’s 1833 Overture*.

I do not wish to elaborate further here on this. Think of it as paralleling my first year physics hints about symbolisms relating to the Higgs particle. My point is the raising of the question, a quite vague request, What do you think of it? Chat regarding Higgs, though cloudy, encourages the young physicists who are finding their way through Newton. What is your reaction to my chat regarding Metaphysics?

A large discomfoting question, a question complexifying and linking chapters 5, 13, and 14 of *CWL 18, Phenomenology and Logic*. It discomfots both the beginners and the old hands. But there it is: a neat fundamental illustration of the dynamics of that shocking page 250 of *Method*. No wonder the page has been avoided for forty years!

As a first exercise around it, I would ask you to muse about the many meanings of word *implementation* in this new context. And as a second exercise I would ask you to shift into that elementary implementation that I usually call C_9 : it refers to what W_3 mentions as “ongoing matrices of cultures etc: M48.”¹⁵ But I ask that exercise only in the simple sense of you having a shot at discomfoting the Lonergan elders and teachers. What, you may ask your professor or guide, is your take on this strange answer to the question, What is metaphysics? I would note here that I am shifting now from my standard advice, given to me by Lonergan in 1968 when I was in trouble in Oxford: “give the guy what he wants. It’s only a union card.” My shift is an invitation to your living dangerously. Is it worth your risking your exam result or trouble with your thesis? Only you can judge. Certainly, it is less risky if it becomes a group

¹⁴ There is a pedagogy here, as will become more evident when you climb through the next Vignette, and Vignette 22, climbing further in them through your repeated weaving through the strange weaving of the Vignettes in between.

¹⁵ The W_3 diagram is available in many places, but most immediately and in the context of other W_i in [Prehumous 2](#), “Metagrams and Metaphysics.” I would add two comments here. First, I have not modified W_3 since its invention in the late 1970s. Others will do so as we advance. One needed shift would be to place GS in prominence rather than UV. My second point is to note that there is a misprint in the version that occurs in Pierrot Lambert and Philip McShane, *Bernard Lonergan. His Life and Leading Ideas*, 161. The end of the bottom line should read “Explicit hope and P_1 Silence.”

quest. Fifty years ago, 1968, there was a general academic student push that fizzled. I recall getting into it in Dublin. Might we have a particular academic push in θ , Φ , and 2018 about the avoidance of the clear challenge of *Loneragan's 1833 Overture*?