

*The Historical Reach of Lonergan's Meaning*  
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“More than any other modern man he shared the fresh and fearless vitality of medieval inquisitiveness. His questions go to the root of things. The answers he demands must be right on the nail. He combined a whole-hearted contempt for the irrelevant with an ability to appreciate enormously, one might say inordinately, what really was relevant.”

The author is Lonergan, in a short article on “Chesterton the Theologian” published in *The Canadian Register* in 1943, but what Lonergan says of Chesterton is surely more profoundly true of Lonergan himself. Furthermore, the degree more of profundity is precisely the key issue in seeking to specify the historical reach of Lonergan’s meaning. I have on occasion compared Lonergan’s achievement to the achievements of Galileo, Mendeleev, Joyce, Rembrandt, Beethoven. But in fact such comparisons fall radically short of the point of profundity. For, the profundity of Lonergan’s life preoccupation was that of the “root or key from which results intelligibility in the ordinary sense” (*Insight*, p. 647) and meaning in the ordinary sense, and “the intelligible in the profounder sense cannot be understood without understanding what understanding is.” *Ibid.*

So, one must reach towards larger comparisons to touch the sense of the man’s reach into meaning towards the generative principle of genetic and dialectic sequences of meanings. One thinks then, for example, not just of the genius of Beethoven, but of the plumbing of sonata-meanings from before Bach, through Beethoven, to Bruckner and beyond.

Or one might think of the massive transposition of the history of logic made possible, if at present improbable, by Lonergan’s location of the foundations of all logics in the self-illuminated incarnate spirit. That history may be suitably symbolized by Kneale and Kneale’s classic, *The Development of Logic*, where the authors conclude by noting the necessity in our time “to strive for greater precision in the characterization of logic.” That characterization can come only through a subjective vortex-spinning into an elucidation of sequences of limited coherencies sparked by Lonergan’s generalized empirical method.

Or one may move from such seeding of new meanings in music and logic to the larger canvas of total history that concerns men like Arnold Toynbee and Eric Voegelin in their later years. Then one can take note of a larger shift in history that may be named the self-discovery of mind, a ferment in a few Greek minds that faded with Aristotle’s death, reborn in a Christian medieval drive that briefly blossomed in Aquinas’s searches into the minds of Aquinas and God, rescued in this century from Scotist-Thomism by the medieval inquisitiveness of a man who could take the revelations of the scientific revolution of these past centuries as serious data on the meaning of history.

But while Toynbee, Voegelin, Jaspers, Butterfield, or Snell can point here to some axial shift and there to a relevant differentiation of consciousness, Lonergan over decades

delved into the hiddenness of the hierarchically dynamic subject in history to distinguish genera and species of differentiations of meaning possible and probable in the adventure of history into the noösphere. So, for example, the vague description of a movement of consciousness in these recent centuries contained under the blanket name “historical consciousness” becomes from the root perspective an explanatory heuristic of varieties of scholarly consciousness correlated with cultures through space and time. Again, Christian issues pivoting on unclear meanings of “development of doctrines” bring forth from Lonergan a discontinuity of heuristics that draws on precisions regarding plant and animal development to provide a natural analogue that, as Chesterton might multiply mean, goes to the root of the issues.

Perhaps such far-reaching heuristic shifts might be somewhat elucidated by recalling a basic strategy of science associated with Galileo. Modern physics is called, not Galilean, but experimental. Stillman Drake notes that before Galileo there was no dearth of mathematical reasoning, but “the systematic appeal to experience in support of mathematical laws seems to have been lacking. ... The design of experiments to discover new mathematical laws comes after Galileo’s time.” *Galileo Studies: Personality, Tradition, and Revolution* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1970), p. 44. Drake notes the difficulty of believing this, and so goes on to describe the inadequate strategies of Tartaglia (1546), Cardano (1570), and Ubaldo (1577) in seeking out laws of force for bodies on inclined planes.

Returning now to Lonergan we may note that his lasting achievement is the identification of generalized empirical method and its basic strategy: “It 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.” Lonergan, “Religious Knowledge,” The Donald Mathers Memorial Lectures at Queen’s University 1976. The strategy is precise, empirical, and profoundly novel, and I would suggest that the successful implementation of that strategy in the next centuries pivots on an honest admission into consciousness of the tandemness of its demands. The central data of the new science are insights: for philosophers and theologians the discomfort is that the relevant insights include those of centuries of advancing science and aesthetics: for those involved in the arts and sciences there are the painful challenges of the reaching towards a luminous authentic subjectivity.

In that light the verdict of history on Tartaglia, Cardano, and Ubaldo of the 16th century will be paralleled by a like verdict on some of the best efforts of the 20th century. So, the solid drive towards a more sophisticated and empirical methodology of science associated with men like Bertalanffy, Kuhn, and Lakatos will eventually be revealed as having a central opaqueness in regard to subjectivity. Again, there are occasional brilliant aesthetic insights such as that of Henry Moore when he remarked that the sculptor “gets the solid shape, as it were, inside his head—he thinks of it, whatever its size, as if he were holding it completely enclosed in the hollow of his hand. ... He identifies himself with its centre of gravity, its mass, its weight.” Henry Moore, “Notes on Sculpture,” in *The Creative Process: A Symposium*, ed. Brewster Ghiselin (Los Angeles: University of California Press,

1964), p. 69. Yet such insights cry out for a later stage of meaning where lucidity regarding the art object will deliver aesthetics from descriptively synaesthetic and metaphorical obscurity. And in the broad field of Christian theology, there will slowly emerge the profundity that will bring to light the deep cultural exclusion of the illuminating realities of both subject and object that frustrated the courageous searchings for a post-medieval theology of such a thinker as Karl Rahner.

Less remote is Lonergan's own transposition of previous achievements in areas of aesthetics, science, and theology. His brief foray into Susanne Langer's aesthetics, during lectures on education in 1959, shifts that field massively into a context foreign to present debate: the lucid context of confinement to subjectivity's position in being. *Insight*, pp. 484, 521, 571. Later we will note the deeper strategy of functional specialization needed to lift such fields as musicology and poetics out of their present cumulous confusion of specialties. In the sciences, Lonergan's innovative contributions are not only methodological—as in his structuring of canons of empirical procedure—but at times proximate to content. Present theorizing in relativistic quantum physics and chemistry is subtly bedeviled by the extroversion of an euclidean imagination: what is lacking is Lonergan's leap to the abstract and concrete intelligibility of space and time. The middle sciences are bogged down in reductionist imaginings and Darwinian obscurities regarding units and patterns of evolution: Lonergan's relevant focus is on a thematic of schemes of recurrence at all levels, within an explanatory perspective on emergent probability, underpinned by a precise heuristic analysis of genera and species, grounding uniquely a needed clarity.

One may gather that the shift initiated by Lonergan is a deep cultural shift transformative of the mediation of meaning in human life reaching into areas as diverse as genetic chemistry, the psychology of management, the philosophy of law, the theology of play. It is a pivotal contribution to an axial shift in history initiated primarily in the Greek and Hebrew traditions. Before turning to Lonergan's contribution to theology, however, something should be said in particular of his still-unpublished advancement of foundational economic dynamics. It is, I suspect, this contribution that will primarily lead to the wider recognition of his genius in the next few decades.

Lonergan's economics moves more in the perspective of Cantillon and Quesnay than that of Adam Smith or Walras. But again we must note a transposed perspective that can focus on the good of a standard of living that is concrete yet contextualized by transvalued values. There is here no labour theory of value but value as specified by a good of order within an emergent universe that measures success in strange ways. Moreover, as against abstract and centralist economic dynamics, Lonergan's analysis, mediated by procedural lucidity, focuses relentlessly on concrete possibilities and fosters individual creativity.

Causing in the human group the horizon-shift necessary to reach such a dynamic economic creativity is the massive century-long task of education of which Lonergan has written in one of his economic manuscripts: "coming to grasp what serious education really is, and, nonetheless, coming to accept that challenge constitutes the greatest task of

the modern economy.” That grasp is the root grasp which has been our topic throughout, a grasp deeply beyond present educational efforts of theory and practise, ranging from kindergarten through Harry Stottlemeier’s *Discovery* to the cultured truncation of graduate life.

Turning, finally, to theology, I may be brief: other contributors point to Lonergan’s enrichment of the theology of churches and states. I am content to note two giant steps. First, there is the slow, thorough, creative recovery of Aquinas grounding a profound yet preachable coherence of Trinity and Incarnation, mind and grace and liberty. It is a recovery that, sadly, remains to be shared, as Lonergan noted occasionally in his later years. But the second giant step is a seeding of such sharing. Secondly, then, there is the startling differentiation of theological tasks that crowns Lonergan’s long search for an integral empirical transposition of the methods of theologians. His discovery is equivalent to the sudden appearance of Mendeleev among pre-Lavoisier chemists. No longer can theology be a broad sweep that might appear to be a latter-day contribution in continuity with the commonsense contribution of a Newman or a Pascal. Theology moves beyond public discourse, and its tasks become reaches within history as revelation in the enlarging confines of the differentiated empiricity of functional specialization. The beginnings of the implementation are tasks for centuries to come.

Nor is that strategic differentiation of tasks restricted to theologians: it will range into the confused fragmentations and specializations of the cultures of human meanings, to provide a cyclic reaching for an ever more adequate founding of human collaboration in the making of history. In its vortex movement it invites an ever-broadening recollection of past achievement so that, for instance, the recovery of Aquinas is not the solitary chance achievement of an eccentric but a recurrence caught up by schemes of recurrence of differentiations within generalized empirical method. Further, that vortex movement of functional specialization spins forward and upward to a crowning ever-fresh mediation of everyday meaning, opening up ministry and management to a new lucid gentleness with the mysteries and creativities of multicultural subjectivities.

Lonergan concludes his essay on Chesterton by noting that Chesterton’s “medieval insistence on the relevant is to be found in anything but medieval dress. Perhaps his deepest theological intuition is to be found in the most bizarre of mystery yarns. *The Man Who Was Thursday* is a labyrinth of double roles, of plots and counter-plots, of aimless, painful quests, of buffoonery and high seriousness, that lures the unsuspecting reader face to face with God and the problem of evil.” For Lonergan himself there is the central bizarre yarn of *Insight* with its painful quests bred of the revelations in modernity both of science and of human inadequacy, luring the unsuspecting reader face to face with God and the problem of evil. Generations of thinkers, no doubt, will dodge the post-medieval labyrinth of that yarn. But the Man who was Sunday has the patience of emergent probability.