

## CONTEXTS AND SITUATIONS

I move on now, sadly in a context and a situation of non-collaboration with my colleagues and their followers. I intend to circle round, in a very pedagogical fashion, Lonergan's thirty two pages (*Insight*, 585–617) on “The Truth of Interpretation.” The circling will eventually vortex round and up so that we can deal, in slow learning fashion, with note 1 of the chapter on interpretation in *Method in Theology*.<sup>1</sup> And that dealing will push us to a futuristic perspective on the full meaning of *situation*.<sup>2</sup>

So, here we are, not rushed like Lonergan in 1953, poised over the question of how “the problem of interpretation can best be introduced.”<sup>3</sup> In his situation, yes, pressured to write densely and—as *Interpretation 5*, “Simple Leads from *The Incarnate Word*,” illustrated with regard to “pure formulations”—without illustrations. In *Interpretation 2*, “Some Contexts of the Interpretation Series,” I pointed to some illustrations on page 3, at notes 7 and 8: interpreting Newton to my class of 1959; interpreting Archimedes. I shall point to other illustrations as we move along in these essays, but in my first fresh effort it seems best to write of that teaching of physics in what, for me, was my best year of teaching: a fact that you may find curious yet, thus, relevant to our challenge. Did I not enjoy my twenty years of teaching young ladies in Mt. St. Vincent University in Nova Scotia? Was not my year teaching professors in Concordia a wondrous adventure? Well, we'll return later to these homes and hums of curiosity.

So on we go to re-read Lonergan's first page: the two end paragraphs of page 585 and the next three on the turn of the page. I have previously written and talked, regarding the fifth paragraph, of what I think of as a sort of joke of Lonergan. Is it not slightly comic to think of

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<sup>1</sup> Just think for the moment of the tricky invitation to “observe” in the fourth last line of the note: “See my own discussion of the truth of interpretation and observe how ideas presented there recur in quite different functional specialties.” The effort to observe my well carry me, and what few readers I have at present, through these next couple of years. I am not ‘up against the clock’ as Lonergan was in the summer of 1953.

<sup>2</sup> There is a start on this in Chapter 12 of my [Profit: The Stupid View of President Donald Trump](#) (Vancouver: Axial Publishing, 2016): “The Situation Room. The Stupid View of Wolf Blitzer.”

<sup>3</sup> *Insight*, 585.

B"?: “a grasp of the audience’s habitual grasp C” of its own intellectual development.” But now I would like you to follow along, a quite different no-joking track, with my musings about two of my audiences of 1959-60. The first was the introductory honours class in mathematical physics, a group eventually of about ten students.<sup>4</sup> The second was a group of four very bright students in a master’s degree course on special relativity. There was a sense in which both groups had, in fact, a grip on their own intellectual development: and it was that commonsense grip that enabled me to move successfully from the “expression” of Newton—in the first group—and the “expression” of Einstein—in the second group—to successful interpretations in both classrooms. This, I hope, reminds you of Lonergan’s reliance on physics in *Insight*. “Modern science has made it possible to distinguish sharply between preliminary description and scientific explanation.”<sup>5</sup>

My two audience lived – with reasonably clear different grips—in a classroom culture of enlightenment regarding *haute vulgarization*. I describe that culture here as a sufficient operative grip—different and accelerating in each class—of mibox.<sup>6</sup>

It seems to me important at this early stage to point to a drive in my effort that differs from Lonergan’s drive regarding positioning, a drive that is given too much narrow attention in much Lonerganesque writing. My push is towards getting your attention to mibox focused on what-content. My classes of 1959–60 were totally innocent of positional contexts, though they had spontaneous realism, morality, and religion on their side. I would further note—for it is a relevant point in the broader issues of interpretation—that my push in dealing recently with biblical interpretation was likewise focused on context rather than on various aspects of positioning.

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<sup>4</sup> There is a story to tell here about the eventual class size and indeed, about odd high standards. The Chair of the department met me during the first week as we passed in the hall. He inquired about the class. I told him that I had a good group of stowards twenty students. His immediate suggestion was that I talk over their heads for a week or so, clear out the class, and that I would thus have a great year. High standards were maintained. See also note 12 below.

<sup>5</sup> *Insight*, 511: concluding chapter 15. The significance of the point is made discomfortingly early in chapter 17, as Lonergan writes of adequate self-knowledge. “Such a study would not be possible without the prior development of the sciences.” *Insight*, 558–9.

<sup>6</sup> Mibox was introduced in [Disputing Quests 14](#), “Doran Versus Wilkins.” We’ll tackle its character again in the following essay, but for now just take it to mean “my view,” where *my* means yours!

As it happens, my morning included a venturing into those other aspects, conveyed immediately by the title of one of the readings in question: “Has Jonathan Bernier Rescued Critical Realism?” by Andrew W. Pitts and Stanley E. Porter.<sup>7</sup> I am not steering you towards following up the topic, but merely in getting the mood. The issue is around various forms of realism, including the Lonergan perspective that flowed from Ben Meyer to N.T. Wright and J. Bernier.<sup>8</sup> I am, frankly, not interested in that debate as it is at present contextualized. My interest is in mibox content “apart from that”<sup>9</sup> and in its defective contexts in the relevant range of global situations.<sup>10</sup> And my central point in this short essay nine is that my two illustrations from my 1959–60 teaching illustrate the presence of adequate audience contextualization.

Jump, thus, with me, once again, to *The Sketch* on *Insight* 602, and think of my two classes, one first year university the other graduate level, “in either case,” as you read the following comment of Lonergan on presenting pure formulations: “In either case they are pure formulations if they proceed from an interpreter that grasps the universal viewpoint and if they are addressed to an audience that similarly grasps the universal viewpoint.” Re-read the quotation now with a replacing of *universal viewpoint* by *genetic perspective*. Do you begin to get a better glimpse of my key point, a point floating through all the previous 8 essays?

Of course, the grip is all the better for you tackling details, and tackling those details in the best possible horizon. But without those details or field-searchings, the point is surely

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<sup>7</sup> *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 14 (2016) 1-7. I have not followed up this recent controversy. See the following notes.

<sup>8</sup> [Lonergan Gatherings 14](#), “Refining our Quest for the Historical Jesus” gives a context, both from an article by Bernier and from his doctorate work, *Aposynagogos and the Historical Jesus in John: Re-thinking the Historicity of the Johannine Expulsion Narrative*, Biblical Interpretation Series, (Leiden: Brill, 2013). N.T. Wright’s work has been a central interest for me in the past decade. The context of the next two notes adds a key perspective on all this work.

<sup>9</sup> There is a very important point to be developed here, a later task. Perhaps it is easiest to make a simple contrast for the moment between a focus on positioning—like the view on realism—and a focus on explanation in a usual sense, explanations that give contexts of situations. On, then, to the next note.

<sup>10</sup> So, we follow up with a distinction regarding the meaning of “defective.” There is the meaning that has its focus on basic positioning, say, with regard to what is real and what is moral. Then there is the meaning that connects with the “straight” question—think of the *House* team—what might this be? The *House* team are not into explicit positioning, but they are all quite tuned to sniffing out defective diagnoses and prognoses.

plausible. In the introductory class we are all tuned, however vaguely, to the “good history” of physics from Galileo through Kepler to Newton and beyond. We worked in that context in our daily climbing.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, but so magnificently different,<sup>12</sup> the graduate class are geared up to step forward towards a grip on “The Elementary Paradox.”<sup>13</sup> Indeed, they have the thrill of leaving Einstein behind.<sup>14</sup>

What, I ask myself, am I to do now, with what for most of your audience-group are inadequate pointers? You are neither a beginners’ class in physics nor a graduate class with, in either case, an identifiable mibox. Nor are we in the pedagogical exchange that would nudge us all to humbly tackle “apparently trivial problems”<sup>15</sup>: I sadly gave up on that in the previous essay. But there is the long-term optimism of the “has to”: “The antecedent willingness of

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<sup>11</sup> If you can pick up on this from your own experience, you will find that it opens further doors. Or you can appeal, for the case of Newton and planetary motion, to some work like Koestler’s *The Sleepwalkers*. Good teaching of math or physics is not an axiomatic straightjacket. “Besides living in a straightjacket,, as the axiomatic method would imply, and on the other hand mere sprawling, where things tend to take on almost any meaning at all, I think there is a middle road between the two” (*Phenomenology and Logic*, CWL 18, 352–53). Might one not look forward, in the positive Anthropocene age, to a culture of genetic contextualization operating in genetic contextualization in genetic-illumination from kindergarten to grad school?

<sup>12</sup> See note 4 above. The magnificent difference is quite obvious in physics: imagine the first year students having a shot at the graduate exam? The magnificence fades, in the contemporary corruption of minding, as one moves up from that simple science to the more difficult zones of zoology, psychology, sociology. I would note that the difference is, normatively, an accelerating business. I think of the usual pace of mathematical physics in my own background and as taught in the University of Dublin in my time. One did not get side-tracked into other fields or courses. The second year launched the students into such flights as electromagnetics and hydrodynamics. And so on: the viewing of this particular climb helped me to envisage normative adult growth: see the concluding pages of my *Lack in the Beingstalk*.

<sup>13</sup> *Insight* 185–88. This is the first problem explicitly mentioned in the book as a problem of interpretation. It should find its place in a later index.

<sup>14</sup> Cornelius Lanczos, in *The Variational Principles of Mechanics* (University of Toronto Press, 1949, 1970), remarks: “One of the ‘paradoxes’ of relativity, which released a flood of literature in half-learned magazines (from the pens of less than half-learned authors) is the so-called ‘clock paradox,’ which was first posed around 1918 and analyzed and elucidated by Einstein.” (299) The footnote 2, there, references thus: “Cf. *Die Naturwissenschaften* 6, 697 (1918).” At an earlier stage of my career I had the newspaper article in my possession and detected the flaws in Einstein’s take on the matter. Some interested interpreter might like to bring Lonergan’s analysis to bear on those few pages of Einstein, even produce a suitable hypothetical express. I would note that Lanczos, brilliant as he was (I knew him from Dublin’s *Institute of Theoretical Physics*), is part of the problem, not part of the solution.

<sup>15</sup> *Insight*, 27.

hope has to advance from a generic reinforcement of the pure desire to an adapted and specialized auxiliary ever ready to offset every interference either with intellect's unrestricted finality or with its essential detachment and disinterestedness."<sup>16</sup>

So, hints from an American TV show, *House*, can spread eventually to correct the solid stupidity and hidden malice of Donald Trump's backing-off today from the Paris Accord regarding climate change. That and the many other instances of sick government, including the governing stand of present Lonergan studies and its cloudy academic context, will wilt before simple demands of intelligent progress: by 2020 or perhaps 2120, there will be more than a few for whom "clearly enough these approaches to the problem of method do little to advance"<sup>17</sup> a battered arms-racing humanity. Situations such as my writing of this or your stumbling reading of it will be among fading memories of a range of shocking mis-directions of human loneliness.

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<sup>16</sup> *Insight*, 747: a piece of "the thirty-first place" (*ibid*). The "has to" is clearly tied to an affirmative answer to my regular question posed as *Amendment A* on page 85 of the book referenced at note 2: "Do you view humanity as somehow maturing—in some serious way—or just messing along between good and evil, whatever you think they are?"

<sup>17</sup> *Method in Theology*, 4: the top-line comment on "academic disciplines."