

CULTURAL HERMENEUTICS

BERNARD LONERGAN

AUTHOR'S PROOF

MERGING HORIZONS:
SYSTEM, COMMON SENSE, SCHOLARSHIP*

13

The study of logic, of mathematics, of the natural sciences, of the generalizing human sciences such as economics, psychology, sociology, all have accustomed us to a style and mode of thought in which controls are constantly and explicitly applied. Terms are defined, assumptions are expressed and acknowledged, hypotheses are formulated and verified, conclusions are drawn in accord with logical paradigms. Such constant and explicit control has made this type of thought quite well known, quite easily objectified, quite readily spoken about. Let us name it the systematic type, and let us go on to consider two further types of intellectual development that exist and function but are easily overlooked; I refer to the commonsense type and the scholarly.

Commonsense intelligence is marked by spontaneity. There is spontaneous inquiry: the cascade of questions from the child, the alert wonder of the boy, the sharp-eyed attention of the adult. There is the spontaneous accumulation of insights: an answer to one question only generates more questions; to speak or act on the basis of what we have understood reveals the inadequacy of our insights, and that revelation leads to further inquiry and fuller insight. There is the spontaneous process of teaching and learning. Not only are we born with a natural desire to inquire and understand, but also we are born into a community with an accumulated common fund of tested answers. So we watch others do things, try to do as much ourselves, fail, watch again and try again, until practice makes perfect.

But if one asks what is the content of that common accumulation and common store, one must not expect an answer in terms of definitions, postulates, and inferences. The Athenians depicted in Plato's early dialogues knew quite well what they meant by courage, sobriety, justice, knowledge. But neither they nor Socrates were able to arrive at universally valid definitions. And when definitions were eventually achieved, as in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, thought had shifted from the commonsense into the systematic mode. Again, common sense does not express itself in universally valid propositions. Its accumulated wisdom is set forth in proverbs,

Cultural Hermeneutics 1 (1972) 00-00. All Rights Reserved
Copyright © 1972 by ~~D. Reidel Publishing Company, Dordrecht-Holland~~
57-1

003

It is not possible for me to grant D. Reidel copyright on this essay.

Assign it to either "Bernard Lonergan" Or to

and proverbs are not universal rules but rather pieces of advice that, commonly, it is well to bear in mind. Like the rules of grammar, proverbs admit exceptions and, often enough, the existence of exceptions is marked by a contrary proverb. "Strike the iron while it is hot" and "He who hesitates is lost" are completed rather than opposed by "Look before you leap." Again, it has been thought that common sense proceeds by analogy. But its analogies resemble, not the logician's argument from analogy, but rather Jean Piaget's adaptation, which consists of two parts, first, assimilation that brings into play operations that were successful in a somewhat similar case and, secondly, an adjustment that takes into account the differences between the earlier and the present task.

Indeed, Piaget's conception of learning as the accumulation and grouping of adaptations brings to light a basic characteristic of common sense. It is open-ended, on-going, ever adding further adjustments. For it is the specialization of human intelligence in the realm of the particular and the concrete. The particular and the concrete are almost endlessly variable. The man of common sense is the man that sizes up each new situation and, if it differs significantly, adds the insight that will guide the right adjustment to acquired routines.

Further, it is this open-ended, on-going character of commonsense intelligence that differentiates it from systematic intelligence. Knowledge that can be packaged in definitions, postulates, and deductions is knowledge that is rounded-off, complete, finished. To insert further insights in a system really is to scrap it and replace it by a new systematization. But commonsense intelligence is a habitual accumulation of insights that provides only a nucleus or core to which further insights must be added before one speaks or acts. And that nucleus is not some system of general truths. Rather it is like some multiple-purpose and multipli-adjustable tool that can be employed in all sorts of ways but never is actually to be employed without the appropriate adjustment being made.

Finally, common sense is not some one thing common to all mankind. It is endlessly variable. Each region, each locality, each language, each class, each occupation, each generation tends to develop its own brand. The man of common sense is ready to speak and act appropriately in any of the situations that commonly arise in his milieu. But he also knows that others do not share all his ideas, and he comes to know how they will speak and act in the situations in which they find themselves. If into

his circle of acquaintances there comes a stranger, then the stranger is strange because his ways of speaking and acting are governed by another, unfamiliar brand of common sense. Inversely, when one migrates from one's original milieu, moves to another city, takes a new job, enters a new circle of acquaintances, then one must be ready to do in Rome what the the Romans do. One has to remodel one's common sense and, to do so, one must move slowly, be ever on the alert, discover what has to be done to remove the strangeness others sense, the surprise they feel, the impression they have that this is odd, that out of place, and the other inept.

Let us now turn from the commonsense to the scholarly type of intellectual development, the development characteristic of the man of letters, the linguist, the exegete, the historian. Like the systematic thinker, the scholar moves out of his immediate environment and is concerned with matters that ostensibly are of no practical interest. But unlike the systematic thinker and like the man of common sense, the scholar does not aim at knowledge that can be packaged in definitions, postulates, and inferences. Rather he is concerned to enter the milieu and to understand the ways of thinking, speaking, acting of another real or fictitious place and time. To use the language of Prof. Gadamer in his great work, *Wahrheit und Methode*, scholarship is a matter of *Horizontverschmelzung*, of merging or fusing horizons. It is a matter of retaining the common sense that guides one's own speaking and acting and that interprets the words and deeds of other people in one's milieu and, none the less, acquiring the ability of interpreting the words and deeds of other people, real or fictitious, of another, often remote, place and time. For the scholar, as it were, lives in two worlds, possesses two horizons. He is not an anachronist reading contemporary common sense into the past; and he is not an archaist employing an ancient common sense in contemporary speech and action. To be neither, neither an anachronist nor an archaist, he must both retain the common sense of his own place and time and, as well, develop the common sense of another place and time.

Now the merging or fusing of a commonsense and a scholarly horizon is not the only case of such merging. Commonsense and scientific understanding can merge to give us technicians. Scholarly and scientific understanding can merge to apply modern economics to the understanding of ancient empires. But it is the merging of commonsense and scholarly horizons that, I think, stands most in need of elucidation. So I propose

to select one of the scholar's tasks, that of interpretation, of exegesis, of correctly understanding an author's meaning. On the general character of documents to be interpreted I shall be brief. I shall speak more fully on the process of coming to understand what the author was treating, what precisely his works meant, what his cast of mind and outlook were, what finally in the interpreter himself may have been blocking his understanding. I shall close with some account of the proximate and the remote criteria that guide one's judgement on the accuracy of one's interpretation.

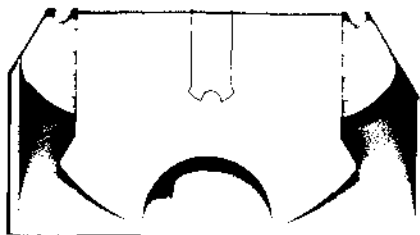
me to
none on

First, then, the documents to be interpreted are, in general, not expressions of systematic thought. There is an abundant exegetical literature on the simple gospels but, as Prof. Castelli has pointed out, there is little or none on Euclid's *Elements*. The reason for this is not hard to fathom. A systematic work defines its terms, sets forth explicitly its assumptions, and draws its conclusions in accord with logical rules. In so far as the systematic ideal is realized, there can be problems of learning, of coming to understand what the system propounds; but there are not the problems of interpretation, problems that spring from obscure passages, in which little meaning is apparent, and from ambiguous passages for which more than one meaning comes to mind.

Next, there are four ways in which the interpreter has to develop his understanding: he has to understand the thing with which the document deals; he has to understand the words that the document employs; he has to understand the author that composed the document; and finally he has to understand himself.

The interpreter, then, has to understand the thing treated in the text. Commonly he will possess such an understanding before considering the text, for he presumably will know the language in which the text is written and the things to which the words of that language refer. Still such knowledge is only general and potential. It will become particular and actual only through a study of the text. But the point to be stressed here is that the greater the interpreter's experience, the more cultivated his understanding, the better balanced his judgment, and the more delicate his conscience, the greater will be the likelihood that he will hit upon the meaning intended by the author.

In saying this I am, of course, rejecting a well-known and frequently repeated principle – the principle of the empty head. According to this principle if one is to practise not eisegesis but exegesis, if one is not to



x read into the text what is not there, if one is not to settle in a *a priori* fashion what the text must mean no matter what it says, then one must just drop all preconceptions of every kind, attend simply to the text, see all that is there and nothing that is not there, allow the author to speak for himself, allow him to be his own interpreter.

Now such contentions are both right and wrong. They are right in so far as they impugn a well-known evil: interpreters very easily impute to authors opinions that the authors never entertained. But they are wrong in the remedy they propose, for they take it for granted that the interpreter has only to take a good look at a text and he will see what is there. That is quite mistaken. It rests on a naive intuitionism. So far from tackling the complex task of coming to understand the thing, the words, the author, and oneself, the principle of the empty head bids interpreters to forget their own views and attend to what is out there. But all that is out there is a series of black marks on a white background. Anything over and above a reissue of the same marks in the same order will be mediated by the experience, the understanding, the judgment, and the responsibility of the interpreter. The narrower his experience, the less cultivated his understanding, the poorer his judgment, the more careless he is about his responsibilities, then the greater the likelihood that he will impute to the author an opinion the author never entertained. On the other hand, the broader his experience, the more developed his understanding, the better balanced his judgment, the keener his sense of responsibility, then the greater the likelihood that he will envisage all possible interpretations and assign to each its appropriate degree of probability.

Interpretation, then, is not just a matter of looking at signs. It is a matter of being guided by the signs in a process that moves from one's antecedent general and potential knowledge to the consequent actual knowledge of what a particular author meant in a given sentence, paragraph, chapter, or book. The greater one's initial resources, the greater the likelihood that one will have the requisite general and potential knowledge.

Besides understanding the thing, the interpreter must understand the words. Now it does happen that, when the writer meant *P*, the reader thinks of *Q*. But in that case, sooner or later, difficulty will arise. Not all that is true of *P* is also true of *Q*, and so the author will appear to be saying what is false or even absurd.

At this point there comes to light the difference between the interpreter

and the controversialist. The latter will assume that his misunderstanding yields a correct interpretation and he will proceed to demonstrate the author's numerous errors and absurdities. But the interpreter will consider the possibility that he himself is at fault. He reads further. He rereads. Eventually he stumbles on the possibility that the writer was thinking not of *Q* but of *P*, and with that correction the meaning of the text becomes plain.

Now this process can occur any number of times. It is the self-correcting process of learning. Data give rise to questions. Insights suggest answers. Answers give rise to still further questions. Gradually there is built up an accumulation of insights that correct and complement one another and that together fit the data like a glove fits a hand. Such insights constitute one's understanding of the text, one's *Verstehen*. They are distinct from the expression of that understanding, which is one's interpretation of the text, one's *Auslegen*. Finally, both the understanding and the interpretation are distinct from the judgment that one's understanding and interpretation are correct.

Now it is understanding that surmounts the hermeneutic circle. The meaning of a text is an intentional entity. It is a unity that is unfolded through parts, sections, chapters, paragraphs, words. We can grasp the unity, the whole, only through grasping the parts. At the same time the parts are determined in their meaning by the whole which each part partially reveals. Such is the hermeneutic circle. Logically this reciprocal dependence would constitute a vicious circle. But logic has to do with concepts and propositions, words and sentences. Understanding is prelogical, preconceptual, prepropositional. One comes to understand not by deducing but by a self-correcting process of learning that spirals into the meaning of the whole by using each new part to fill out and qualify and correct the understanding reached in reading the earlier parts.

Rules of hermeneutics or exegesis list the points worth considering in one's effort to arrive at an understanding of a text. Such are an analysis of the composition of the text, the determination of the author's purpose in writing, knowledge of the people for whom he wrote, of the occasion on which he wrote, of the nature of the linguistic, grammatical, stylistic means he employed. However, the main point about all such rules is that one does not understand the text because one has observed the rules, but one observes the rules to arrive at an understanding of the text. Observing the rules can be no more than the pedantry of the obtuse. The essential

observance is to note one's every failure to understand clearly and exactly and to sustain one's reading and rereading until one's inventiveness or good luck have eliminated all one's failures in comprehension.

Besides understanding the thing and the words, one may have the task of understanding the author. When the meaning of a text is plain, then *with* the author and *by* his words we understand the thing to which his words refer. When a simple misunderstanding occurs, as when the reader thinks of *Q* when the author meant *P*, then the correction is effected by sustained rereading and inventiveness. But there are more difficult cases. Then a first reading yields a little understanding and a host of puzzles. A second reading yields very little more understanding and a far greater number of puzzles. There has emerged the problem of understanding not only the thing and the words but also the author himself, his nation, language, time, culture, way of life, and cast of mind.

Now the self-correcting process of learning, the process of questions leading to insights and answers, and answers leading to still further questions, is the manner in which we acquire not only the understanding that informs our own speaking and acting but also the understanding that apprehends the different ways in which others speak and act. Even with our contemporaries with the same language, culture, and station in life, we not only understand things with them but also understand things in our own way and, at the same time, their different way of understanding the same things. We can remark that a phrase or an action is "Just like you." By that we mean that the phrase or action fits in, not with our own way of understanding things, but with our own way of understanding the way others understand. But just as we can come to an understanding of our fellows' understanding, a commonsense grasp of the ways we understand not with them but them, so too the same process can be pushed to a far fuller development, and then the self-correcting process takes us out of our milieu and brings us to some understanding of the common sense of another place and time, another culture and cast of mind. But in this case the process of questions leading to insights and answers, and of answers generating even more questions, is the almost life-long business of becoming a scholar, of becoming a person in whom two horizons merge, the horizon of contemporary common sense opened out and extended to include without confusion the horizon of the common sense of another place and time.

20
extended

Besides understanding the thing, the words, and the author, an interpreter may be challenged to an understanding of himself. For the major texts, the classics, in letters, in history, in philosophy, in religion, in theology, not only are beyond the initial horizon of their interpreters but also may demand of the interpreters an intellectual, or moral, or religious conversion.

X In such a case the interpreter's initial knowledge of the thing, the object, treated in the document, is just inadequate. He will come to know it only by pushing the self-correcting process of learning to a revolution in his own outlook. He can succeed in finding an author's wavelength and locking on to it only by effecting a radical change in himself. It is not so much that his previous understanding of himself was mistaken as that he has to give himself a new self to be understood.

This is the existential dimension in the hermeneutical problem. It lies at the very root of the perennial divisions of mankind in their views on reality, morality, religion. Moreover, in so far as conversion is only the basic step, in so far as there remains the labor of thinking our everything from the new and profounder viewpoint, there results the characteristic of the classic set forth by Friedrich Schlegel and quoted by Prof. Gadamer (p. 274, n. 2): "A classic is a writing that is never fully understood. But the educated that keep educating themselves always want to learn more from it."

From this existential dimension there results a further aspect of the problems centering in hermeneutics. The classics ground a tradition. They create the milieu in which they are studied and interpreted. They produce in the reader through the cultural tradition the mentality, the *Vorverständnis*, from which they will be read, studied, interpreted. Now such a tradition may be genuine, authentic, a long accumulation of insights, adjustments, re-interpretations, that repeats the original message afresh for each age. In that case the reader will exclaim, as did the disciples on the way to Emmaus in the gospel of Luke: "Did not our hearts burn within us, when he spoke on the way and opened to us the scriptures?" (Lk 24, 32). On the other hand, the tradition may be unauthentic. It may consist in a watering-down of the original message, in recasting it into terms and meanings that fit into the assumptions and convictions of those that have dodged the issue of radical conversion. In that case a genuine interpretation will be met with incredulity and ridicule, as was St. Paul when he

preached in Rome and was led to quote Isaiah: "Go to this people and say: you will hear and hear but never understand: you will look and look but never see" (Acts 28, 26).

I have presented my thought in terms of a sharp antithesis. Reality is more complex. A cultural tradition will contain very many things, and each of them may be authentic in some ways and unauthentic in others. Still this complexity is not the main issue. That lies in the fact that merging horizons are a matter not only of the present moving into the past but also of the past becoming alive in the present and challenging the assumptions both of the individual scholar and of the tradition that has nurtured him.

We have considered the work of interpretation as coming to understand the thing, the words, the author, and oneself. We now must ask how one can tell whether or not one's interpretation is correct. Here one must distinguish between the proximate and the remote criteria of truth, and we shall begin from the proximate.

The proximate criterion of the truth of an interpretation is that no further relevant questions arise. For if there are no further relevant questions, then there is no opportunity for further insights arising, and if there is no opportunity for further insights arising, then there is no opportunity for effecting a correction of the understanding already attained.

However, the relevant questions usually are not the questions that inspired the investigation. One begins from one's own viewpoint, from the interests, concerns, purposes one had prior to one's study of the text. But the study itself is a process of learning. As one learns, one discovers more and more the questions that concerned the author, the issues that confronted him, the problems he was trying to solve, the material and methodical resources at his disposal for solving them. So bit by bit one comes to set aside one's own initial interests and concerns, to share ever more fully the interests and concerns of the author, to reconstruct the context of his thought and speech.

But what precisely is meant by the word, ^Qcontext? There are two meanings. There is the heuristic meaning the word has at the beginning of an investigation, and it tells where to look to find the context. There is the actual meaning the word acquires as one moves out of one's initial horizon and into the fuller view that includes a significant part of the author's.

Initially, then, and heuristically the context of the word is the sentence.

The context of the sentence is the paragraph. The context of the paragraph is the chapter. The context of the chapter is the book. The context of the book is the author's *opera omnia*, his life and times, the state of the question in his day, his problems, prospective readers, scope and aim.

Actually, however, and eventually, context is the interweaving of questions and answers in limited groups. To answer any one question will give rise to further questions. To answer them will give rise to still more. But while this process can recur a number of times, while it would go on indefinitely if one kept changing the topic, still it does not go on indefinitely on one and the same topic. Context then is a nest of interlocked or interwoven questions and answers. It is limited inasmuch as all the questions and answers have a bearing, direct or indirect, upon a single topic. Finally, because the context is limited, there comes a point when no further relevant questions arise, and then there emerges the possibility of judgment. For when there are no further relevant questions, there is also no opportunity for further insights to occur and thereby correct, qualify, complement, the insights already attained.

Still, what is this single topic that limits the set of relevant questions and answers? As the distinction between the heuristic or initial and the actual or eventual context makes plain, this topic is something to be discovered in the course of the investigation. By persistence or good luck or both one hits upon some element in the interwoven set of questions and answers. One follows up one's discovery by further questions. Sooner or later one hits upon some other element, then several more. There is a period in which insights multiply at a great rate, when one's perspectives are constantly being reviewed, enlarged, qualified, refined. One reaches a point where the overall view emerges, when other components fit into the picture in a subordinate manner, when further questions yield ever diminishing returns, when one can say just what was going forward and back up one's statement with multitudinous evidence.

The single topic, then, is something that can be indicated generally in a phrase or two yet unfolded in an often enormously complex set of subordinate and interconnected questions and answers. One reaches that set by striving persistently to understand the object, to understand the words, to understand the author, and to understand oneself. The key to success is to keep advertent to what as yet has not been understood, for here lies the source of further questions, and to hit upon the questions

directs attention to the parts of the text where answers may be found. So R. G. Collingwood has praised "... the famous advice of Lord Acton, 'study problems not periods'." So Prof. Gadamer has praised Collingwood's insistence that knowledge consists, not just in propositions, but in answers to questions, so that to understand the answers one must know the questions as well. My own point, however, is not simply the interconnection of questions and answers but rather the fact that such interconnection comes in limited blocks, that one arrives at a margin where there are no further questions relevant to a given topic, that at that margin one can recognize one's task as completed and pronounce one's interpretation as probable, as highly probable, in some respects, perhaps, as certain.

In general, an interpreter's judgment will be nuanced. If really there were no further relevant questions on any aspect of the matter, then his judgment would be certain. But it can be that further relevant questions exist to which he does not advert, and this possibility counsels modesty. Again, it can happen that he does advert to further relevant questions but has failed to find answers to them and, in this case, the further questions may be few or many, of central interest or of peripheral concern. It is this range of possibilities that leads interpreters to speak with greater or less confidence and with many careful distinctions between the more probable and the less probable elements in their interpretation.

So much for the proximate criterion of the truth of an interpretation. There remains the remote criterion, a matter on which we have already touched when speaking of the existential component in the interpreter's understanding. But to treat the matter a little more fully, let us go back to our initial contrast between the systematic, the commonsense, and the scholarly development of understanding. Now the systematic type, precisely in the measure that it succeeds in getting all assumptions out in the open and all procedures under control, achieves a detached and impersonal character. What is supposed, does not depend on what so-and-so's teachers taught him or on what he thinks they taught him. What is done, is not subject to the bias that would be imposed by the past development, the values, the goals, the feelings of this or that individual. In brief, when a system errs, it does so not accidentally but systematically.

In contrast, the commonsense type of development is one's project in living, one's making oneself what one is to be. It is cognitive of one's world, in communication with one's fellows, practical. Through it one is

sharing and adapting a cultural tradition that was built up over the millennia. Of that tradition one has no full and precise inventory of its store. With respect to it one has no mode of control over and above the commonsense process of spontaneous inquiry, spontaneously accumulating insights, spontaneously teaching and learning. In that spontaneous development each new advance is a function, not of precise assumptions and procedures, but rather of the total apperceptive mass that has resulted from all previous acquisitions of insight. Since the errors of system are systematic, a case can be made for the use of Cartesian methodic doubt in the construction of a philosophic or scientific system. But the controls of common sense are not explicit but implicit; they are immanent and operative in our being attentive, intelligent, reasonable, responsible. If we have gone astray, if the tradition we have inherited has gone astray, doubting everything is no solution, for that would only reduce us to a second childhood. We have no choice but to follow the advice of John Henry Newman - to accept ourselves as we are and by dint of constant and persevering attention, intelligence, reasonableness, responsibility, strive to expand what is true and force out what is mistaken in views that we have inherited or spontaneously developed.

There remains the third development of human intelligence, the scholarly. In its essentials this development resembles not the systematic but the commonsense type. But if it is concerned with the words and deeds of individuals or groups, if it aims at an understanding of the particular and concrete, if it leaves to the systematizers to proclaim any universal truths for which scholarship provides the evidence, still it is withdrawn from the hurly-burly of everyday living, it can forget the passions of the present without entering into the passions of the past, and the results reached by any scholar will be checked not only by his peers but also, if the results survive, by their successors. Besides the systematic tradition and the commonsense tradition, there is also the scholarly. All three can suffer decadence and decay. But it is the scholarly that can migrate to earlier times, that can discern their truth and error, their values and aberrations, that can be challenged by the past to criticize the present and, through that criticism, provoke a renewal. It is through such renewals that is to be met the remote criterion of truth, the criterion that consists in the twofold authenticity - the authenticity of the tradition one has inherited and the authenticity of one's own assimilation of it.

NOTE

* A lecture given at University College of the University of Toronto on November 4, 1970, and repeated both at Campion College on the Regina Campus of the University of Saskatchewan and at St. Paul's College of the University of Manitoba on February 2 and 4, 1971.