

Selections from a lecture followed by an interview at the Thomas More Institute
with Bernard Lonergan on February 25, 1969.

I will answer the question "What have I learned about knowing since writing Insight?" by telling what I have been doing since that time.

The book Insight; apart from minor revisions, was finished when I went to Rome in the fall of 1953. Since then I have been working on theology. I gave courses in Rome on the Trinity and the Incarnate Word. I have in print a two-volume work in Latin on The Trinity, a short treatise on The Constitution of Christ and, in mimeograph form, a 600-page work on The Incarnation and The Redemption.

My main interest has been, however, what I was concerned with in writing Insight. That work was a preliminary study of methods generally, methods in different subjects, prior to tackling the problems of method in theology. In Insight there are recognized four levels of conscious and intentional operation. There is a level of experiencing and of bodily operation; there is a second level of inquiry, insight, formulation; there is a third level of reflection, weighing the evidence, judging; there is a fourth level of deliberating, making value judgments, deciding.

Each of these levels introduces something quite new: inquiry, something quite different from sensitive experience; reflection — asking "is that right?" —, asking something quite different from inquiry that seeks understanding, that wants to understand. Deliberation — "is it truly good?" "is it really worth while?" — is something quite different from any thing on the three previous levels.

So each level introduces something quite new. Each takes precedence over the previous levels. Intelligence is more than sense experience. Judgment is more than just understanding. Deciding is more than just judging. Each preserves and perfects the previous level. It follows that the fourth level is the most fundamental, the most decisive, the highest. It is the level on which we exist, become ourselves, become authentic or inauthentic persons.

Now the fundamental difference between my book Insight and my next book on Method in Theology is this. In the main, Insight concentrates on the first three levels, on experiencing, understanding, judging, on knowing. Method in Theology uses the first three, but principally is concerned with the fourth, with the level on which the grace of God, and faith, hope and charity are exercised. Since the fourth level is the most fundamental, the decisive, the highest level, it follows that Method in Theology will put the whole of Insight into a fuller context, into a more basic context.

On this subject of method I taught graduate courses in Rome from 1958 to 1964. In the last four years my main efforts have been concentrated on writing the book Method in Theology. Things have now advanced sufficiently for me to be able to anticipate publication in a few years.

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The Interview-discussion with Bernard Lonergan (BL) included the participants Colin Haworth (CH), Eric O'Connor (REOC), Charlotte Tansey (CT).

. . . (CT) How profound is your shift from Insight into your two words "benevolence and beneficence"?

(BL) It's the fourth level. The emphasis in Insight is on knowledge -- with its three levels: experiencing, understanding and judging. And just as understanding takes you out beyond the world of experience, and judgment takes you beyond understanding -- it is simply bright ideas unless you can put in the judgment -- so decision takes you beyond these. The existential subject and his world -- what he's doing about it, what can be done, what is to be done.

(CT) You call this the level of love?

(BL) Well, the existential level. In which you become yourself; in which you have personal relations; in which you have hopes and fears, achievement, failures.

(CT) So you don't see it as a shift very much, but just a step up on the spiral?

(BL) Yes, but -- it sets up a new basis.

(CT) Yes, that's what I am wondering, how much of a new basis it is.

(BL) Well it's from cognitional self-transcendence, which is achieved in judgment, to real self-transcendence.

(CT) Which is achieved by?

(BL) It's achieved by becoming a moral person and a religious person.

(CT) And a consciously loving person?

(BL) Yes. But consciously? Well, reflecting back on your life, you can see it, can't you?

(REOC) You mean it comes out within your choices, the choices you have made? And how do you use the words "benevolence and beneficence"?

(BL) Your judgment of value is a principle of benevolence and beneficence.

(REOC) But it's not necessarily conscious in the ordinary sense of self-conscious?

(BL) You have to objectify yourself to know what's going on. There is a pejorative meaning to self-consciousness. That meaning is that a person is too concerned with himself, over concerned with himself. He betrays a certain amount of egoism. But as a technical term in cognitional theory, its meaning is different. It's when the self emerges.

(CT) In a lecture last night (to another class) you used the word ecstasy. It was as if, at this level, the word is ecstasy rather than insight?

(BL) I used the word ecstatic. If one takes it as ecstasies, raptures, and so forth it can be quite misleading. What I meant by it was: You are pulled out of your previous views, your previous assumptions, by the insight you're getting into the data. And you move in to (as if exclaiming): "Oh no! This is the way they thought about it, this is the way they did it."

Becker says that a person hears about Caesar's being killed by fourteen members of the Roman senate in the senate house and probably thinks of the senate house as like the Capitol in Washington, with them dressed in black frock coats as the senators are there. It's by getting to know more about Roman buildings and Roman dress that these ideas are corrected.

What's true about dress and buildings, and so on, is also true of the way they thought, of what they could say. I remember when I started reading Homer as a boy, I was disgusted with Achilles, he was crying so much.

(CT) Where, in so much of modern writing, they are talking of "being creative", is this, at the fourth level, the step like insight, the ecstatic?

(BL) No. The ecstatic is the accumulation of insights, it's on the second level. It is catching on to the way other people understood something. Among the six effects of accumulations of insights is the heuristic effect: they change data into evidence on a historical issue; ecstatic; they pull you out of your assumptions, your presuppositions of what was going on. If my idea of the Germans was formed by the newspapers in the second World War, that idea gets corrected if you know some Germans.

(CT) So it's an objective correction, from further knowledge?

(REOC) But basically on the insight level, you say?

(BL) You're able to conceive it. Whether you're right or wrong is not the question yet. But at least you have the idea: it needn't be what I was assuming.

(REOC) You mean, without having it as an insight, no matter how much you were told it wouldn't make that change, it wouldn't bring you out (of the assumption)?

(BL) Well, without the insights, things are not perceived. They're there, and they may cause a certain amount of disturbance. But until you have the operation for handling that object, you don't notice it.

(REOC) I've said that a vivid philosophic experience of my life was getting caught up, briefly, into the sweep of Hegel's thought; and I've thought that without some experience like that one might never know what Hegel was about.

(BL) Well, understanding, getting an idea or an inkling into what Hegel meant, and seeing the possibility of totally different perspectives; yes, that's what I meant by the ecstatic.

(CH) Where does reflection fit into this pattern?

(BL) When you're moving on a question and your flow of further questions dries up on the topic. If there are no further questions there's no possibility of any further insight. If there's no possibility of any further insight, one has reached an understanding that's going to be permanent; and the possibility of judging arises.

Reflection on the fact that further questions are not arising, reveals that the type of evidence we have for the fullness, the adequacy of our insights has been achieved. And that gives you the grasp of the unconditioned, with regard to the truth of an act of understanding. It's chapter X of Insight.

(REOC) And it's this reflection that can't occur in a first course in history?

(BL) Well, not as regards "doing history". Take my seminar last term. I supplied them with copies of my doctoral thesis on operative grace. I had assigned to three people, for each hour-and-a-half period (we met once a week) a set of clues:

Compare this article in the Sentences (of Aquinas) with this article in his de Veritate. What is St. Thomas saying in the first one? What is he saying in the second?

Do they differ? In what do they differ?

Can you find a quotation from Augustine to explain the difference, in the second, that wasn't in the first?

(REOC) This was the clue?

(BL) Yes, the clue was in that.

There was a contradiction, really, in the two positions.

Well, after this was done, after about three weeks, they've done nine comparisons. They're beginning to build up a context of the way Thomas' thought was moving. And they have evidence right there on what was occurring. Then to move along, during the course of term, they were beginning to get the terrific sweep there was.

(REOC) They can have valid reflection on that difference?

(BL) Yes. I'd been over that ground before and could tell them where to look. But if they were just on their own, doing that on their own, to do that would have taken them at least the two years it took me, who was doing nothing else!

(REOC) That's very like what you try to do in mathematics; you try to point people. But it's more easily possible there.

(BL) Yes, it's already mapped out in a more systematic fashion. But this (in history) is just a matter of luck to hit upon. I had a good thesis because Charles Boyer said to me:

"There's this article in the Summa and I don't think the Molinists interpret it correctly; and I don't think the Banerians interpret it correctly. Find out what it means."

So the first thing I did was get all the places in Thomas — the more obvious places — where he was talking right on that topic. Then questions would arise and you would branch out, branch out, branch out.

The doctrine of grace, Thomas was developing on the doctrine of grace.

At the start, he thought of grace solely in terms of habitual grace -- no actual grace at all, there was divine providence but no actual grace. And he gradually developed his idea of actual grace, a little bit at a time, over a period of about fourteen years.

Now, at the same time, he was developing his ideas on operation, on different levels at which operation occurs.

(REOC) Human operation, you mean?

(BL) Metaphysical, physical, biological, human, divine, operation.

Also he was developing his ideas on the will, and his ideas on freedom. Now what is meant by operating in freedom? Freedom has to be in something that is limited, for grace to be able "to liberate freedom"? He worked that out beautifully. In terms of habit. When you have a habit, you're already willing, you have willingness. You're not performing the act of will yet; but you will perform it as soon as the occasion arises. A man in the state of grace has charity, and spontaneously he will withdraw from something he sees to be a grave sin. But a person who isn't in the state of grace has to argue himself -- and while he can argue with himself at any time, he can't keep arguing all day long. Eventually you say: "to hell with it." And that's what moral impotence is.

Well, there are whole series of things. You deal with your fundamental topic, then all the allied topics. It's like throwing a stone into a pond. Circles spread and spread and spread. But the further out you get, the less difference it is going to make to your central issue.

(CT) Could you say something about communications?

(BL) Cor ad cor loquitur.

(CT) Yes, but that does not carry the . . . "Communications" sounds a bit patronizing.

(BL) I don't see why.

(CT) You feel it's some thing being done to you.

(BL) There are people who conceive it that way. That's true.

Communications is a function of community. Community exists in the measure in which people share a common field of experience. They have common ways of understanding things, or complementary ways of understanding things. They feel one another out, in so far as their judgments are similar, or they are willing to disagree without breaking the community, or it's irrelevant to the community that they disagree. Also in the measure that they have common goals, common objectives, common commitments, or interlocking commitments.

Community breaks down in the measure that people get out of touch, they're not sharing the same field of experience; in so far as they understand the same things in different ways, and that generates misunderstanding, and suspicion, fear, hate, and so on, — hostility. In so far as they have opposed judgments, and in so far as their commitments, their goals, are conflicting.

Communication occurs on the basis of common sense and common sense is not one thing. There are many different types of common sense as there are communities. And it's very easy to communicate on the basis of common sense. A wink is as good as a nod, and common sense language is very elliptical. You don't have to tell the whole story; people in fact would be bored if you told the whole story; you hint, you let things be known, and so on.

In so far as people are different, belong to different cultures or different departments of the same culture — the different European nations, and so on —, you have different brands of common sense, different ways of going about things, different ways of meeting and handling situations. When I was teaching in Rome, there were some attacks on the Biblical Institute there. The Rector answered them. He was of German origin from Brazil. Voght was his name. I met an Italian I knew quite well — a fellow student of mine thirty years before — and asked him how he had liked Voght's answer. He shrugged. He didn't want to say anything. And I said "At least, it was clear." He said, "It was too clear."

The Italians have their own way in which you let it be known that you disagree and all the rest of it. An Italian is very reticent, a Sicilian will correct your mistakes in Italian, but ordinarily an Italian won't. It would be discourteous. You're speaking his language. On the other hand a Frenchman, of course, will bite your head off. And the German temperament is something entirely different again. All these differences are built up into the culture and are the possibility of it.

Communications? You have more or less to acquire an understanding of a type of common sense different from your own.

Similarly, scholarship. It is acquiring a common sense understanding of the common sense of another period. It's not walking, talking and acting like an Athenian of the fifth century, or a Christian of the first century. But it's knowing the way in which the Athenian would speak and act, understanding the way a first century Christian would. That's the ideal that came out of philologie — especially Freidrich Wolf at the end of the 18th, beginning of the 19th, century.

What is the goal of philologie? It is, on the basis of the full knowledge of the language, the grammar, the literature, the remains of a civilization, to have a total reconstruction of that culture. And it was a matter of what we call insight; Verstehen, understanding, development of understanding. Dilthey — perhaps it was Droysen — introduced the distinction between Verstehen and Erklären. Erklären refers to the systematic stuff you can write down in a law, formulate in a system. But what was a historian doing? He just understands.

(REOC) And he can place himself into the understanding of that period? And see a presentation that fits the total mass of data with which he is familiar?

(BL) It is said of Carl Becker that -- the phrase was explained in a footnote referring to the psychoanalyst Theodore Reik -- in reading everything he could on a person, if he found the person coming to life out of the documents, he'd "listen with the inner ear." And if he didn't, if he didn't have that experience, he didn't have much to say about that person.

(REOC) He knew he couldn't handle it?

(BL) Well. He said it wasn't the thing for him to do.

(REOC) Judgment, eh?

(CH) You started discussing communications in answer to Miss Tansey's question. You seem to be dealing with it as a completely two-way operation. Is that what you have in mind?

(BL) Well, that's the general case, isn't it. You are communicating. It's not just a one-way operation. But it does happen that most of the communicating runs in one direction.

(CH) But does it expect some sort of feedback?

(BL) Yes, like teaching a class. You know when you have them and when you haven't. Or giving a lecture. You know just the moment when everyone is still and so on.

(CH) But that's a receptivity on your part rather than a conscious attempt to communicate. The class is not trying to tell you.

(BL) They don't know they're doing it. But as with explaining things -- you can see the faces light up. A man doing catechesis at Catholic University was leading a catechism class in Texas. He said that some kids in that class, the minute he said something new were all alive. But as soon as he started diluting it for the average child, these two just disdained to listen.

(CT) You weren't saying -- although it certainly sounded as though you were -- that the layman can't participate in the reflection at any level? You were saying that in building up a body that is a systematic, reflective unity of some kind, the layman can't expect to participate in that?

(BL) He can participate in the religion, eh? But you don't participate in the writing of history unless you're a historian, and you don't participate in the creation of mathematics unless you're a mathematician; and you don't participate in the creation of music unless you compose music.

(CT) Yes, but I take it, from reading Insight, that one does participate in some way, to make one's own sense for oneself, in something which — in mathematics — could honestly be called a participation. And certainly in an area where you're involved in ultimate understanding?

(BL) Yes, yes. In other words, you can learn it.

(CT) No, But you're also creating something?

(BL) You're changing yourself, you're improving yourself. In that sense you're creating. But you're not doing something new.

(REOC) You're not doing something that hasn't been done by other human beings before. Is that your meaning?

(CT) But that's not quite true, either.

(BL) It hasn't been done before by you. That's true.

(CT) No, and it hasn't been done in a concrete way in just this way.

(BL) Oh, well. Yes.

(REOC) Yes, and suppose that person, after it, wrote a novel. That could come out in the novel in a way that was theirs uniquely.

(BL) Yes. Yes.

(CT) It seems terribly important, thinking of awareness today, that one doesn't get cut off into thinking one is being passive. And I took it that that is what Insight was an invitation to. (not being passive, but active)

(BL) Hm. Hm. Also.

(REOC) The "it" that you're talking about is another problem, isn't it? Because the "it" even of mathematics may have been had by other persons. But it isn't in books. It is only in minds.

(BL) Yes.

(REOC) And as soon as one says one can learn it, one somehow has the image that one can learn it because it's there in a book. But as it is possessed by a person it is possessed newly.

(BL) Oh, yes.

(REOC) And with certain nuances too, that probably have never been. I mean there were certain nuances of the proof for the infinity of primes that I got new from our first conversation years ago in Toronto.

(BL) I don't remember the example. But what you're saying about it being done in a new way by each person is very interestingly insisted upon by Marrou in The Meaning of History. Why no two historians are going to write the same history in the same way. Because the whole way in which he's conceiving, apprehending the data, and building the thing up depends upon what Becker calls the apperceptive mass. The whole apperceptive mass is working.

(REOC) "Apperceptive mass"--- meaning?

(BL) That's Becker's phrase.

(REOC) For what?

(BL) For interpreting the data. It is all, his all of his experiences, all of his understanding, all of his judgments and evaluations. All of these are coming to the point, as he works his way, from datum to datum, putting things together and so on.

He says: "They say, stick to the facts. But unless you have a few ideas, the facts aren't going to stick to anything at all."

Marrou develops that point well. There is such an infinity of operations involved in studying any reasonable hunk of history and writing about it, that the likelihood of any people doing it in exactly the same way is negligible. But that doesn't mean that this fellow isn't giving you an authentic account of what is going on. They both can be perfectly authentic.

(CH) But before you read him you are going to have to go and learn about his type of common sense?

(BL) No. In so far as he is strange -- yes. Like an interpretation, there is understanding the object. You won't get much out of Insight unless you've had experience of insight of your own.

Secondly, there is understanding the words. Just as in conversation, so in reading, the author can be meaning "p" and you think he is talking about "q". After a bit, since the predicates of "q" are not the same as those of "p", you'll find the author is saying things that are absurd. If you're a controversialist, well, you'll prove he's absurd. If you're an interpreter, you keep going on trying to find something other than "q" that would make sense. And this problem occurs "n" times. It's all on the level of understanding the words.

There's a third level, understanding the author. When? It is not that you have a puzzle now and then. You read the thing and get very little understanding and endless puzzles. You read it again and get a tiny bit more understanding and

a lot more puzzles. Then what you have to do is become a scholar (in the sense of scholarship as used earlier) and move into a different climate, a different mentality, a different way of living and thinking of things, and so on.

Then the fourth level is understanding yourself. Because the classics, the really big works in any field, can represent the transformed subject; and his horizon is something beyond your horizon; and you're not going to understand him until you've transformed your own horizon; you're being pulled up into a new horizon. And that's understanding yourself, your own deficiencies.

- (CT) Wouldn't you think, though, in regard to this pulling up into different horizons, that there is a resentment that an established church can do this any more?

So there has to be a different kind of motivation to allow that kind of pulling up to happen. And one must feel one is in some way responsible for allowing it to happen and for putting oneself in a line of transformation — and not just developing as a Lutheran, say, might, because he finds himself in the envelop of Luther, or as one might become a Jew by taking on the total experience of Judaism through the cycles and festivals and growing understanding of it. But now, somehow, one has to learn to be open or to control (no! that's not quite what I mean, anyway one says it, it seems wrong). But there is much more individual need and individual interest in being some kind of a hybrid, and in some way responsible for one's own development, in a way that in other generations was not attractive or wasn't looked for.

- (BL) I might tie in what you are saying with Godamer's critique of the effects of the Enlightenment. His book is on interpretation, and to interpret you have to have a tradition. Unless you're in a tradition, you have to do the whole development of the civilization.

If you want to start from zero, you have to go back four hundred or six hundred thousand years to be a human being on that level. They were quite good human beings, but they're not going to be able to understand Plato. There are terrific developments involved there, and we know something about them.

Now what did the Enlightenment do? The Enlightenment believed in clear ideas and logic. The sort of thing that is behind prohibition; it's bad, so we will prevent it. And their principal target was to get rid of the church. But their principles were such that they were destructive to all tradition. Just deny all pre-suppositions, and you can defend nothing. Now, that destruction of tradition has been by education in the present generation. If you destroy the tradition, well, you haven't got a tradition — and you'll have to be creative in some way or other. How they are going to do it, I don't know.

- (CT) Would it help, though, to have a more intense interest on one's own part, or almost an insistence that it is my role in life to put myself, somehow, in the way of the kind of transformation I want?

(BL) But in so far as they are not yet transformed, they have no notion of it.

(CT) True.

(BL) And they don't want it, do they? Except in terms of what I call the transcendental notions?

(REOC) You mean simply one can't want sharply what one has no understanding of?

(BL) Yes. One can't do it in any practical way.

(CT) Are you saying it's impossible — or very hard?

(BL) Well, I say that for me 98% or 99% of what a genius knows is but belief. The additions that anybody makes to human knowledge, without there being belief involved in it, are very, very slight. It's the accumulations of centuries. And it results in a primitive culture.

(REOC) You mean the beliefs of scientists, etc., not just religious beliefs?

(BL) Yes. Belief that the map is correct. You can say: the map; that's the way property is bought and sold, the way people go by car from one place to another, and planes from one place to another; there's endless verification. Yes, but you haven't done the verifying. You believe this verifying occurs. You believe, because no one is complaining about the map being wrong. It's a good reason for believing, but it's not your knowledge. And that doesn't seem to be known by our contemporary educational system. Least of all by our reformers. They tell the six-year-old to be creative and demand reasons.

(REOC) Of course they do that because of what they were asked to swallow in their time. It's partly reaction, isn't it?

(BL) Yes.

The relevant story is from Chesterton. He spoke about the man who looked at a wall and saw a gate in it. "I don't see any reason why this gate should be here, let us tear it down" he said. And Chesterton remarked, if he did understand why it was there, there would be more likelihood that his judgment about tearing it down would be well founded.

People want to destroy things because they don't understand them. And they want to put something else in their place, because they don't understand them. And it's better if they did understand them; not go simply by their emotional resentment.

(CT) Still with this kind of nuanced understanding, right up to the fourth level, the style of my being is under my own control in a way that was hardly possible in any other period.

(BL) But you have to find that out too. The existential crisis is when you discover that you have to discover for yourself — not only find out for yourself but decide for yourself — what you are going to make of yourself. And it doesn't occur at the age of three.

(REOC) At least we haven't seen many clear examples.

(BL) Let me tell you a story. A professor in Rome said to me he was sent to school at the age of three, but he didn't take things seriously until he was four. And that fact, that he started taking things seriously at four, was revealed in everything he said and everything he did. There was a precocious seriousness to everything.

(CH) He hadn't amended any judgments since he was four?

(BL) No, it was just that he'd never had a childhood.

(CH) Well, from $3\frac{1}{2}$ to 4. An instant childhood.