

Metaphysical Questions: On Knowing and the Known¹

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Q. 1, a. 1: Cognitive potencies

All human knowing can be reduced to three elements, namely, judgment, understanding, and experience. These three differ irreducibly from one another.

Judgment is reasonable determination to affirm, or to deny, or to do neither. It is not the articulated and expressed affirmation itself, whether this is made internally or externally, but a determination ordered to affirming; and similarly in the case of negation or positive doubt. The potency of judging is rational consciousness, that is, the ability to determine oneself because of the reasons presented to one. Be sure to distinguish between rational consciousness and internal empirical consciousness, which we shall treat later.

¹ This item appears in the fourth of the files that Lonergan left with Frederick Crowe in 1953. It was written in Latin: ‘*Quaestiones metaphysicae. Quaestio prima: De cognition et cognito.*’ The translation is by Michael G. Shields and has been edited by Robert M. Doran.

Understanding is knowing ‘why,’ inasmuch as ‘why’ is known. Hence essentially understanding abstracts both from the knowledge of that whose ‘why’ is known and from the judgment that follows knowing ‘why.’ Another and less general way of putting this is to say that understanding is the apperception² of unity in multiplicity.

Acts of understanding are divided into first-intention and second-intention acts. Second-intention understanding knows why we affirm or deny or have a positive doubt. First-intention understanding is of three kinds, accidental, substantial, and essential.³

In understanding an accident, we know why a certain phenomenon is as it is – for example, why a circle is circular, why light is luminous, etc.

In understanding a substance, we know that such phenomena belong to one thing – for example, that certain appearances or actions all belong to a particular man or dog, and so on.

2 ‘Apperceptio/Apperception’ are not terms that Lonergan uses in more developed expositions of his cognitional theory. The Latin ‘apperceptio’ is translated ‘apperception’ here (rather than, for instance, ‘grasp,’ a much more frequent term in Lonergan’s later talk about understanding), in order to suggest that this is a relatively early presentation of his views and that he is concerned to relate his position to common understandings of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*. See below, p. xx, for his use of the terms ‘phenomenon’ and ‘noumenon.’

3 ‘First-intention understanding,’ then, is at least somewhat in line with what Lonergan later calls direct understanding, while second-intention is at least somewhat in line with what he would come to call reflective understanding.

In understanding an essence, we explain accidents through substance: that is to say, the unity (which is called ‘substance’) is the reason that appearances and actions are as they are – for example, because man is a rational animal, the appearances and actions of a human being are as they are.

Hence, understanding an accident is to know why such and such a phenomenon is as it is, while understanding a substance is to know that these phenomena belong to one particular thing, and understanding an essence is to know why these phenomena are such.

Note that understanding is knowledge of a connection, but not of the things that are connected, except inasmuch as the intelligible elements themselves are connected. Consider that understanding is not a knowledge of the phenomena, but the apperception of their unity; but knowing why such and such a phenomenon is as it is and why all these phenomena belong to one and the same thing does not prevent what is known through the second understanding (that of unity) from being connected intelligibly with what is known in the first (the nature of a phenomenon); and this connection is understanding an essence.

Experience can be taken in a broad sense or in a strict sense.

In the broad sense, experience is whatever happens in a person who is conscious; thus, it includes understanding and judgment.

In the strict sense, experience is knowledge that is preliminary to understanding and judgment and directed towards them.

Note that it is one thing to understand why a circle is round, but quite another thing to understand this act of understanding itself. It is quite possible for one to understand a circle without understanding one’s understanding; in which case, one knows that one understands, but one knows that one understands the circle, not the understanding.

But that knowledge by which one knows that one understands a circle acts as a means for understanding not only a circle but also understanding. For once one knows that a circle is round because all the points are equidistant from a center, one can know that understanding is the apprehension of unity in multiplicity. And this knowledge is an understanding of understanding, for it discovers unity in a multiplicity of acts of understanding.

In the strict sense, therefore, experience is that prior knowledge that provides a means to understanding.

In similar fashion, an experience of judging is different from an understanding of judgment: to know that one is judging is not the same as understanding what judgment is. Nor is the experience of judging another judgment: while it does provide the means whereby we may judge that we are judging, this means does not always end in an act of judging, for otherwise there would actually be an infinite series in which we judge that we are judging that we are judging ...

In general terms, therefore, experience in the strict sense is knowledge preliminary to understanding and judgment and ordered to them.

Experience is divided into external and internal. External experience is the experience of the senses; internal experience is empirical consciousness.

Further, this empirical consciousness is different from rational consciousness. For it is one thing to know that we are going to make a judgment or are making a judgment or have made a judgment, but quite another to be in such a state that we are moved by reasons to judge; the former is empirical consciousness, the latter rational consciousness.

Accordingly, note well that it is not the eye that sees nor the hand that feels nor the tongue that tastes. It is possible that we see with our eyes, feel with our hand, taste with our tongue: a possibility that we certainly do not deny – indeed,

we are certain that it is a fact. For me to see with my eyes is one thing, and for the eyes to see is another. Indeed, the eyes do not see, but rather it is one and the same person who sees and understands and judges and is conscious.

If one wishes to call the intellect the faculty by which I see and understand and judge, then he is using the word 'intellect' in a rather broad sense. But there is no point in disputing about terminology, so long as one recognizes the difference between merely empirical knowledge, intellectual knowledge, and the knowledge obtained in a judgment.

These three are totally different. Through experience I know, without knowing 'why' and without judging. So, for example, one may see a shadow at night without understanding that it is a mere shadow or that it is perhaps a human being, and without judging that it is a mere shadow or a human being.

By my intellect I know a unity in an already known multiplicity; yet the knowledge of this unity is not another experience, but is formally the opposite of experience: for 'why' is not known through experience, while the intellect is that by which 'why' is known. Besides, all experience is of something particular, while all understanding is of that which can be verified in many instances. So, for example, the understanding of a circle is the same whether it is this or that circle that is understood.

Finally, through judgment I know one understanding to be correct and another to be false. Understanding tells us only that a certain experience can be understood in such a way, while judgment determines whether that experience is actually to be understood in that way.

Thus, we have three irreducible realities: experience, which is knowledge ordered to understanding and judgment; understanding, which is knowledge about what has been empirically known and which is ordered to judgment; and judgment, which is knowledge about one's understanding.

Not only are these three irreducible to one another, but all other kinds of knowledge are reducible to them, as will be clear from the following list.

Imagination is simply a manipulating of experiences ordered to understanding, whether that understanding be one's own, as in learning the sciences, or that of someone else, as in teaching the sciences or in practicing the arts.

Conception is intellection itself.⁴ It is called a direct universal by reason of itself; that is, once I have understood one circle, I can understand any circle. It is called a reflex universal by reason of an added understanding; if I *understand* that having understood one circle I can understand any circle, the direct universal becomes a reflex universal.

A science is the collecting, understanding, and judging of a set of experiences. When a science is not yet complete, it proceeds along the way of discovery, occupied in gathering, manipulating, and understanding experiences. When it is reaching completion, it starts to proceed along the way of teaching: starting from the most general principles, it progresses through added differences to a particular instance as understood.

Take care to avoid the error that has recently arisen, to the effect that some sciences are deductive while others are inductive, as if there were two methods for acquiring a science. It is quite easy to show that geometry is inductive: otherwise, you could say that from whatever axiom you please Euclid demonstrates that there are four cases in a particular theorem. It is also quite easy to show that physics follows a deductive pattern: it seeks the most general principles, as, for example,

⁴ Here 'intellectio' is rendered 'intellection,' which includes both understanding and conception, which are distinct elements on this 'level' of knowledge.

Whether Lonergan grasped the distinction when he wrote this item is not clear.

the theory of motion, or mechanics, and aims at explaining all phenomena through added differences – that light is a wave-motion, that heat is a wave-motion of a lower frequency, and so forth.

Finally, syllogism is simply an analysis of judgment: every judgment is posited on account of reasons, and its form is, ‘Because A is B, therefore C is D.’ Accordingly, such a proposition consists of two elements: (1) ‘A is B,’ and (2) ‘if A is B, then C is D.’ The first element is drawn from experience, while the second is established by understanding.

Q. 1, a. 2: The validity of these cognitive potencies

Since every judgment is made because of reasons, a general question can emerge concerning the nature of judging. This question is usually whether the cognitive potencies are valid in themselves; or, to put it another way, whether a cognitive potency as such can be a reason for doubting.

There are three ways to answer this question: by showing that a cognitive potency in itself cannot be a cause of doubt; by explaining why human potencies are as they are; by explaining why human potencies can be valid. We shall deal later with the second and third of these ways; now we shall expound the first way, which is negative but fundamental.

To begin with, the potency of judging cannot be rejected: for it would not be rejected except by a judgment. But if judgment is rejected by means of a judgment, then this rejecting judgment is either valid or invalid; if it is valid, then judgment is valid in itself and nothing is rejected; and if it is invalid, since nothing has happened except an invalid judgment, nothing at all has happened, and so judgment is not rejected.

Now if judgment survives, so does understanding. For there is no judging without a reason, since judgment is a reasonable determination. But no reason is known without understanding, and so without understanding there is no judgment.

Again, if judgment and understanding survive, experience must also survive. We cannot simply understand, period; if we understand, we understand something. In order for understanding to occur, there must be a prior knowledge of that which is to be understood. Without valid experience, therefore, neither understanding nor judgment is possible. Therefore, since judgment cannot be rejected and cannot occur without understanding and experience, it follows that these three are valid in themselves.

Arguing thus from the impossibility of the contradictory proposition, however, does not explain why our cognitive potency is as it is, nor why it can be valid. But it imposes upon us a blind necessity to which we must either submit or else cease to be human.

Q. 1, a. 3: The objects of the potencies

The object of experience, whether internal or external, is called a phenomenon, a datum, empirical. The object of understanding is called a noumenon, an intelligible, an objective intelligible reason, form, essence, principle, law, and so forth. The object of judgment is called true, real, truth, reality, being, existence.

The question is sometimes asked whether the known (the object of any potency) is the same thing as the knowing (the activity of the potency). We shall speak of this later. For the time being, it is important to note that nobody denies that there is a difference between the object of knowledge in general and the object of internal experience by which we are cognizant of the activity of the potencies.

Before this question can be answered, truth, or reality, or being, must be defined critically – that is to say, without any prejudgment for either side. We define the true as that to which the reasonable determination to affirm or deny or positively doubt leads us. This definition follows from other definitions: judgment is reasonable self-determination, while the true or real or being or existence is the object of a judgment.

The object proportionate to human knowing is whatever can be experienced, understood, and true. For human knowing is made up of these three elements; hence the object proportionate to such knowledge is whatever provides the possibility for these three elements. Another definition of the proportionate object is ‘the intelligible in the sensible.’ This amounts to the same thing, for the possibility of truth lies in intelligibility, since judgment is a reasonable determination.

The adequate object of human knowing is any truth or intelligibility that can be constructed from human knowledge. Examples would be an infinite series, differential coefficient (0/0), pure spirit, unlimited being, etc.

Q. 1, a. 4: Identity and difference

In general, judgment is a determination concerning the true; specifically, it is a determination concerning identity or difference. Here we must briefly indicate what these are and of how many kinds.

The first difference is phenomenal, that which is bound up with phenomena and is designated by the collective term ‘space-time.’ Over a very small distance, diverse parts can be distinguished indefinitely; in one dimension an infinity of infinities is distinguishable; in four dimensions there is distinguished an infinity of infinities to the eighth power (∞^8).

The first identity is substantial, which is founded upon the apperception of the unity of phenomena. For example, this part of space-time (∞^4) is a man, or a horse.

Numerical difference is the difference between things that are understood in the same act of understanding. Thus, this circle is understood in the same act of understanding as that one, yet they are two different circles.

Numerical identity is the same as substantial identity. Thus, Peter's whiteness yesterday and over there is the same as his whiteness today and here.

Specific difference is the difference between things that are understood differently. Thus, a circle is not a parabola, because their intelligibilities are different.

Specific identity is the identity of things that are understood in the same way, whether that act of understanding is substantial, accidental, or essential.

On the basis of the foregoing, distinctions can be distinguished as follows:

A major distinction is between substances, whether they are specifically or only numerically different.

A minor distinction is between the parts of one and the same substance, whether they are specifically or numerically different.

A distinction of reason [notional or conceptual distinction] applies to names and concepts without its truth going beyond the second intention.⁵

⁵ Lonergan had written 'quin eius veritas non extendatur ultra secundam intentionem,' 'without its truth not going beyond the second intention.' His point seems to be that notional distinctions do not provide material for what would later be called reflective acts of understanding. The negative connotation is expressed in 'quin,' but would be negated by adding 'non.' The change, eliminating 'non,' is editorial.

Q. 1, a. 5: The knowable

The knowable is that which can be true; that can be true which can be the object of a positive judgment; that can be the object of a positive judgment which is at least in some way intelligible: for if it is in some way intelligible, it presents some reason for our being led to affirming it; whereas if it is in no way intelligible, it presents no reason for our being led to affirming it.

The intelligible is intelligible either in itself or in something else.

Essence, for example, is intelligible in itself; for it is what is known by understanding.

Numerical difference, on the other hand, is not intelligible in itself; for it is that by which those things which are understood in the same understanding insofar as they are intelligible are different from one another. Numerical difference can be intelligible in something else. Suppose there is some intelligibility which cannot completely fulfill its essential nature unless it is in several things simultaneously or successively: from its very nature, such an intelligibility requires two things: first, that the same intelligibility be present in several things, and second, that those several things be several. Now for there to be the same intelligibility in several things, those several things must not be specifically different, for if they were, the intelligibility would not be the same in them. Again, in order that those several things be truly several without being specifically different, they must be different only numerically; and this numerical difference, although not understood in itself, is nevertheless understood in the exigence of that intelligibility whose existence requires that it be the same in several things.

So far, we have been considering the possibility of the intelligibility-in-another of numerical difference; now we go on to consider its actuality.

Thus, it is obvious that ‘man’ is a social being; that is, for our proper perfection it is necessary that there be several human beings simultaneously and successively. The nature, or intelligibility, of ‘man’ demands, therefore, that it be present as the same in a plurality of persons. Hence the numerical difference among human beings is explained not in itself, for it is unintelligible in itself, but in something else, namely, an exigence of human nature.

A similar line of reasoning can be applied to electrons, etc.

From the foregoing it appears that there is an analogy between our knowing and what is knowable to us; for just as some of the objects of our knowledge are intelligible in themselves, as with essences, and some are unintelligible in themselves, such as numerical difference, so our knowing is partly empirical or experiential and partly intellectual.

This analogy is also an explanation. The object of our knowing, insofar as it is unintelligible in itself, requires knowledge that is purely empirical, that is, without understanding; for the unintelligible cannot be known by understanding. But insofar as this same object is intelligible in itself, it requires intellectual knowledge; for the intelligible insofar as it is intelligible is not known without understanding.

This explanation derived from the foregoing analogy is readily applicable to experience and understanding, the former being naturally fitted to know the unintelligible, and the latter naturally fitted to know the intelligible-in-itself. But it is also applicable to judgment.

The true or being that we know, insofar as it is true, is not intelligible in itself. It can be intelligible in itself, for judgment, whose object is the true, is a reasonable determination prompted by reasons. In one case it is intelligible in itself, namely, in the case of the very first principle of all things, unlimited being, as we shall see. But in fact and speaking generally, it is not intelligible in itself. For

the intelligible which we generally know is indifferent to truth or falsity, to being or non-being: insofar as it is intelligible, it is a mere hypothesis; but insofar as it is true, it is shown to be so not by simple understanding but by verification or experience.

What is knowable to us, therefore, is of this sort: an intelligible nature, numerically individuated, and existing contingently; in its individuation and existence, it is knowable only by experience; in its form or essence, it is knowable only by understanding.

Q. 1, a. 6: Berkeleyan idealism

The question is asked whether our knowing is the same as the known, and Berkeley's solution is examined, namely, that the true and the perception of the true are the same: 'esse est percipi' ['to be is to be perceived'].

We readily admit that neither our knowing nor any other knowing can be explained if knowing and the known are not radically identical. For if the known and knowing are said to be two different realities, this affirmation is made either without qualification or with a distinction.

If it is made without qualification, then our knowing is declared to be non-existent: for if knowing is simply different from the known, then the known is not known.

Some identity, therefore, must be stated to exist between knowing and the known; and unless this identity is radical and extends to all instances of knowing, there will be some instances of knowing that are not knowing of something known.

We shall have to consider later the nature of this radical identity between knowing and the known.

On the basis of the foregoing, our view is that we must utterly deny that our knowing is simply and without qualification identical with the known. For such a hypothesis leaves unexplained what have to be explained.

There is a twofold series in our knowing. The first is that series in which we know what are not identical with knowing; the second series is that in which we know our knowing of what are not identical with knowing. For we have both external experience and internal experience.

Moreover, this twofold series would not exist, or at least would not be explained, if knowing and the known were the same.

Q. 1, a. 7: Hegelian idealism

We continue the question whether knowing and the known are the same, and we examine Hegel's opinion.

His position does not at all deny the difference of phenomena, such as the difference between this time and that time, between one part of space and another part, between one act of knowing and another. Nor does it deny the understanding of phenomena as such, like the understanding of circularity as such, or of light, or the mathematical analysis of motion. Nor does it deny a cosmic synthesis of phenomena; in fact, it most strongly insists upon a universal dialectical law, a law governing all development.

But it does deny those unities that are called substantial unities; that is, it denies that external phenomena are to be brought together into the unity of a substantial object, and that internal phenomena are to be brought together into the unity of a substantial subject.

A denial of these unities abolishes all major distinction. Appearances, acts of understanding, and judgments unfold in an absolute process, and this process is but

a law, a dialectic, where there is nothing that appears to be and no one who understands or judges.

In this opinion there are two elements of truth: namely, that there is something cosmic that is infinitely truer and more real than all other substances; and again, that the notion of substance that many have propounded cannot be defended. As for the rest of this opinion, however, it must be rejected.

For, I ask, do these phenomena belong to some one thing that is called, say, a man, or a horse? Surely some unity must be admitted which is neither a universal law nor an understanding of this phenomenon itself as such. The unity to which I give the name 'horse' is grounded upon its difference from the surrounding air, the earth, the stable, the cart; it goes beyond a cosmic law, and beyond the intelligibility of individual phenomena such as the movement and color and heat, etc., of the horse.

Again, this unity considered in itself is not something empirical, and in fact no experience is knowable in itself; this unity is intelligible in itself and is apprehended only by the intellect. Hence there is not some other hidden phenomenon standing under and supporting the other phenomena; for it is not in that genus: it is intelligible, not empirical.

In his argument against those who conceive substance as some sort of hidden phenomenon, Hegel was quite right. And yet this argument does not negate the true notion of substance, namely, a purely intelligible unity which unifies these particular phenomena as these.

Still, there is a difficulty that arises from human consciousness, for consciousness of the self, of the 'I,' seems to be both an experience and an experience of substance. On this premise it follows that substance is not intelligible but empirical, and therefore the substance of other things is like a hidden phenomenon; and Hegel's position is easily deduced from this last contradiction.

The process from the Kantian *Ding-an-sich* through Fichte's absolute 'I' to Hegel's absolute idealism is quite well known.

What, then, is our consciousness?

First, the consciousness in question here is that rational self-determination which with respect to the true is judgment and with respect to the good is will. The rest of consciousness is simply the experience of either experiencing or understanding or judging. This experience is not the 'I' itself but is about it and belongs to it; nor is it a substantial unity, but is rather that which is brought together into such a unity through understanding. But rational consciousness itself seems to be that 'I' who judges, wills, understands, and senses; hence it seems to be that substance itself.

Second, such consciousness is not substance but an accident: the proof of this will have to come later.

Objection: Therefore, I am not I; that is, I who am a man and a substance am not the I who judge and will.

Response: A horse, which is an animal and a substance, is not whiteness, which is a color and an accident. And yet a horse is white. Similarly, that activity by which I judge and will is mine, but it is not me.

We shall have to investigate later how an accident can be predicated of a substance. See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, q. 87, a. 1 c.

Q. 1, a. 8: Platonic idealism

We continue the question whether knowing is the same as the known by examining the opinion of Plato.

Plato's distinction is well known: *noēsis*, understanding, and *aisthēsis*, sensation, are distinct; indeed, the intelligibles are true and real, while sense objects are false and non-real (*ta mē onta*).

This position has its merits and is quite deserving of approval, since human beings generally are so absorbed in the life of the senses that they consider sense objects real and objects of the intellect non-real. This error is the constant source of such doctrines as materialism, positivism, pragmatism, sensism, empiricism, utilitarianism, atomism, evolutionism, etc.

Plato's opinion is also deserving of approbation because the intelligible is far more true and real than the sensible.

However, the denial of all reality to sensible things must itself be denied. As we have already explained, numerically distinct contingent realities as such cannot be known directly except through that non-rational knowledge known as experience. Only forms and essences are intelligible in themselves: they alone can be understood in themselves. All other things, which can be understood only in something else, insofar as they are known are necessarily known only through experience.

Hence, although that which is contingent and numerically distinct lacks intrinsic intelligibility, it does not totally lack intelligibility, inasmuch as it is understood in something else. Numerically distinct contingent beings are less real, but still they are real in some way, and the error in Plato's system is to deny this.

It is obvious, therefore, that this error is a defect of the highest order; for the whole of *philosophia perennis* is based upon the distinction between the intelligible and the sensible and the overriding importance of this distinction.

Q. 1, a. 9: Moderate realism

From a critical standpoint, that is true which we are reasonably led to affirm.

Now, we are reasonably led to affirm the following: (a) the validity of our cognitive potencies, for we cannot do otherwise; (b) numerical and specific differences among phenomena, and numerical and specific identity among substances; otherwise our potencies would have to be said to be lacking validity in themselves; (c) that the knowable that is proportionate to our knowing is an intelligible nature, numerically individuated and existing contingently; for if it were not an intelligible nature, understanding would be superfluous; if it were not numerically individuated, wholly similar phenomena could not exist; and if it did not exist contingently, judgment would be superfluous; besides, without contingency and numerical individuation, there would be no explaining that non-rational knowledge that consists in pure experience; (d) again, that this intelligible nature, numerically individuated and existing contingently, is not to be identified with our knowing, so that being and being perceived would be the same; (e) nor is this intelligible nature only accidental, as in explaining circularity, nor only cosmic, as in explaining history; it is also substantial, not, of course, in the sense that there is some hidden phenomenon 'standing under' and supporting, but in the sense that there is a noumenon or intelligibility that is the unity of the various phenomena; (f) nor is this intelligible nature, whether accidental or substantial, alone true and real; what is experienced is also real, albeit to a lesser degree; (g) with the result that the knowable proportionate to our human knowing is an intelligible substantial nature, which is the reason that certain phenomena are as they are and all point to one thing which is numerically distinct and exists contingently.

Thus, having established the knowable that is the proportionate object of our knowledge, it remains that the critical definition of truth should yield to the definition proper to the doctrine that has now been substantiated.

We hold, therefore, that the true is either subjective or objective: objective truth is the intelligibility of an object; subjective truth is the adequation of judgment and object.