

THE INNER DYNAMISM

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This essay describes my (Rev.Bull's) best answer to the question, "How do we come to know things, including what is the right thing to do in any particular case? How do we know the different between truth and falsity? How do we know which path to follow on the map?" You should always check what I am proposing here against your own experience: Is what I describe here really the way your own ethical decision-making works? If not, please speak up and propose revisions to what I say here. After all, you are the expert on your own inner life!

Much of this material comes from my adaptation of the work of Bernard Lonergan, a contemporary philosopher who died only a few years ago, and whose major text is a hefty tome entitled *Insight*.¹ *Time* magazine writes of Lonergan that he "is considered by many intellectuals to be the finest philosophic thinker of the 20th century." Other sources include the philosophers Plato, Aristotle, Kenneth Melchin, Tad Dunne, Joseph Flanagan, and many others.

Lonergan's ideas about how our mind works when trying to understand and decide can be visualized in a simple diagram that compares the human thought process to the movement of a waterwheel (see page 4). In his major works, *Insight* and *Method in Theology*², Lonergan grounds his philosophy and theology by highlighting and interrelating several familiar operations of our thinking, beginning with

(1) *questions*.

The fact that we ask questions is, for Lonergan, the logical place to start when trying to understand understanding, precisely because our search for understanding always begins with questions. Good students dig below facts to raise central questions in their fields. More mundane, everyday thoughts also ground themselves in questions: "Is it time to wake up, or can I sleep more?" "What clothes should I wear – what will the weather be today?" "Am I imagining things, or is he giving me the cold shoulder?" Because we desire meaning, understanding, and connectedness, and because our current levels of understanding constantly show themselves to be inadequate, questions arise. We don't

¹ *Insight*, Bernard Lonergan (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), 785 pp.

² *Method in Theology* (Toronto: U. of Toronto, 1971), 405pp.

generally make questions up – they arise on their own under the exigency of an inner drive or desire to know – but we can and often do suppress the questions and doubts and wonderings, simply because we want to feel secure in our current view of things rather than insecure in the face of change. We can also ask questions about our questions, wondering in any particular situation, “What am I really after in this moment?” “What does it say about human beings that we ask so many questions?” is itself a good question!

Karl Jaspers, whose work Lonergan held in high regard,³ said of Socrates that his whole life was based on a trust that “the truth will disclose itself if one perseveres in questioning.”⁴ Would that we could better nurture such a faith in our schools! Lonergan seeks provide an account of how truth emerges from questioning. “I have no doubt, I never did,” he said in a lecture in 1968, “that the old answers were defective. But to reject the questions as well is to refuse to know what one is doing when one is knowing; it is to refuse to know why doing that is knowing; it is to refuse to set up a basic semantics by concluding what one knows when one does it.”⁵

As we allow the questions to surface and percolate, we naturally play with

(2) *images*, or *acts of imagination* using all the senses

that help us picture and peruse the questions. Thomas Kuhn⁶ and others have made clear the role that images play in promoting – or hindering – innovative approaches to questions in science, mathematics, and philosophy. Imagination plays an obvious central role in the arts, and indeed in daily living, where it is “the playground of our desires and fears,”⁷ as the poet and critic Robert Hass describes in this passage from his book *Twentieth Century Pleasures*:

We all live our lives in the light of primary acts of imagination, images or sets of images that get us up in the morning and move us about our days. I do not think anybody can live without one, for very long, without suffering intensely from deadness and futility. And I think that, for most of us, those images are not only essential but dangerous because no one of them feels like the whole truth and they do not last.⁸

³ Mark and Elizabeth Morelli, eds., *The Lonergan Reader* (Toronto: U. of Toronto, 1997), 8.

⁴ Karl Jaspers, *Socrates, Buddha, Confucius, Jesus* (New York: Harvest/HBJ, 1985 [1957]), 7.

⁵ Morelli, 397.

⁶ Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (U. of Chicago, 1996 [1962]).

⁷ *Insight*, 8.

⁸ Robert Hass, *Twentieth Century Pleasures* (New York: Ecco Press, 1984), 303.

Images never tell the whole truth, and in fact Lonergan describes a crucial stage in intellectual development that follows upon the insight that reality is ultimately *unimaginable*, and “knowing” is not the same as “taking a look at” something.⁹ Nevertheless, images are still indispensable to daily living, higher order culture, and the intelligent movement of questions of all kinds towards answers.

And if they are helpful images – what Lonergan calls “useful heuristic images”¹⁰ – they may facilitate an

(3) *insight*,

or epiphany. Lonergan defines the very familiar experience of insight as a flash of understanding that “(1) comes as a release to the tension of inquiry, [and] (2) comes suddenly and unexpectedly.”¹¹ There are many famous insights in history, such as those of Archimedes, Newton, and Einstein, but Lonergan emphasizes that all of us have insights all the time, most of which are fairly routine. One will be pondering a certain question, picturing the problem in various ways, and all of a sudden an answer comes of its own accord. Insights even make a distinctive noise, heard often in lively classrooms: “Ahahhhhhhh....!” Lonergan honors insight in the title of his major philosophical tome because “its function in cognitional activity is so central that to grasp it in its conditions, its working, and its results, is to confer a basic yet startling unity on the whole field of human inquiry and human opinion.”¹²

So, Lonergan highlights *questions*, attendant *images*, and issuing *insights* as the first three operations as he goes about describing how our inner lives of thinking and feeling issue intelligently into concrete action. His descriptive work is that of a good scientist, a naturalist of the mind, as it were, beginning by paying close attention to what actually occurs in consciousness before theorizing about it. When one does begin to wonder about it more deeply, these very familiar operations of thought become in fact quite strange. Insights come from nowhere. We presume that images picture an outside world, yet that world can appear completely differently depending on the mood, interests, and beliefs of the viewer. Any possible answer, as young children discover to their

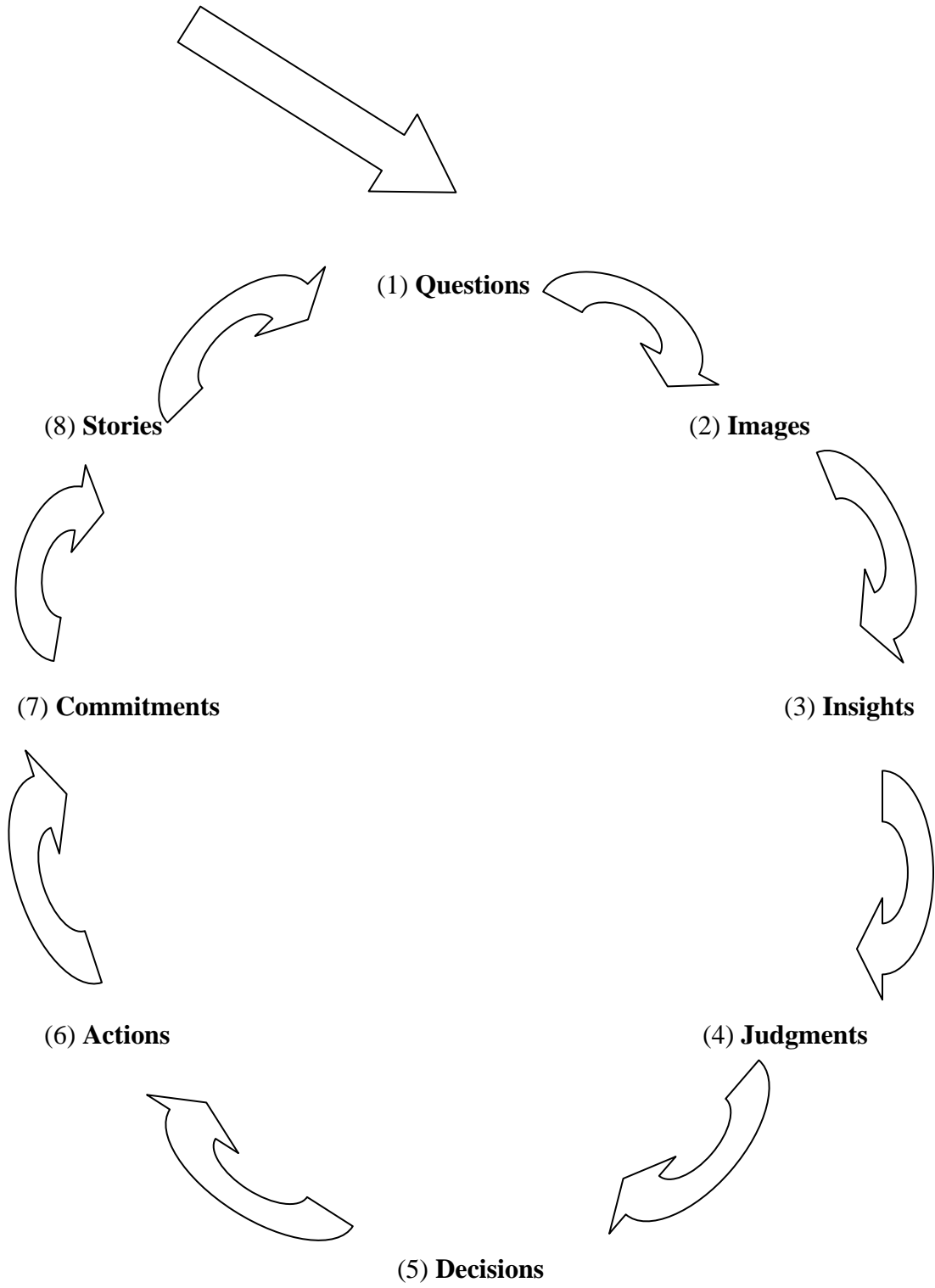
⁹ *Insight*, 253.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 439-40.

¹¹ *Insight*, 3-4.

¹² *Ibid.*, ix.

(0) Inner Dynamism



delight, can be met with a further question, a fact that leads Lonergan ultimately to name our desire to know and understand things as “the immanent source of transcendence.”¹³

Following Lonergan scholar Kenneth Melchin, I call our innate sense of wonder and desire to understand an

(0) inner dynamism

that moves the water wheel of human consciousness towards insight and judgment.¹⁴

We recognize people as intelligent and intellectually lively when they are full of questions, full of wonder, full of a creative inventiveness that transcends what is simply given through the senses. We lament their dullness when their cognition lacks such dynamism. Yet every great teacher knows that, whatever natural intellectual gifts a student possesses, they will be that much more engaged in their school work when it capitalizes on the student’s natural sense of curiosity and wonder.

The inner dynamism generates questions of many types, and insights of many types follow. For example, questions of fact wonder simply, “What is this something?” or “What causes this?” After imagining various alternatives, we come up with an idea that proposes to answer that question. “Why do apples on Earth fall, but the moon floats?” wonders Newton. “Oh, the moon is falling too, but in such a way that it stays in orbit.” Or, “Does Peggy Sue like me? I think she does, from the way she drools when she’s around me.”

Questions for reflection seek to verify or reject insights – a stage of cognitional activity well known as *critical thinking*. “Is there really one force, gravity, acting on apples *and* the moon in the same way?” Experiments and observations verified that, “yes, there is indeed such a force.” “Is the length of the hypotenuse *really* 13? Let’s check: 5 (squared) + 12 (squared) = 13 (squared). Yep!” Or, “Well, Peggy Sue also drools when she’s around Billy Bob. In fact, she drools all the time. So I can’t be sure whether or not she likes me from the fact that she drools.”

It is this extra round of reflective questioning and verification – even if it happens nearly automatically, with lightening speed, as is often the case in our daily routine – that transforms an insight into a

¹³ *Ibid.*, 636.

¹⁴ Kenneth Melchin, *Living with Other People* (Collegeville, Minn.:Novalis/Liturgical Press, 1998), 18-19.

(4) judgment.

That doesn't mean that verification renders an insight into an infallible truth; it just means that we naturally subject insights, as *candidates* for truth, to a verification process that runs something like this: "This insight can be considered correct if such-and-such conditions are met; in fact, the necessary conditions are met; therefore, the insight is correct." Judgments are always provisional to certain conditions; if the conditions change, the "answer" may well need to be reassessed, and indeed further relevant questions will naturally arise in the consciousness of an open-minded person.

There is, of course, much philosophical debate on how and whether correct judgments occur at all. Lonergan takes dozens of pages to clarify his notion of judgment, but as always, he grounds his work in observations of what actually occurs in our minds all the time, in "the structures immanent and operative within cognitional process."¹⁵ When "we perform acts of reflective understanding," we are returning to the beginning of the water wheel and subjecting our insight, our *candidate* for truth, to the reflective question, "Is it really so?" If an insight is "vulnerable," there will be further relevant questions concerning the situation that the insight does not address. If there are, however, no further relevant questions concerning the matter, then we naturally give the inner assent, "It is so," and move on, because it would be foolish and irresponsible not to do so.

More complex judgments of fact require more complex procedures, though the principle is the same. If a particular issue in my daily life is complex, I will (if I am smart) seek the advice of trusted advisers before arriving at a conclusion. Scientists expose their hypotheses and assumptions to the rigorous scrutiny of communities of their peers, in order to establish peer-reviewed dominant theories. For example, critics of evolutionary science who decry the fact that evolution is "just a theory" miss this point: a theory that dominates the professional scientific community over decades is, for the moment, a "virtually unconditioned" fact (until, per Thomas Kuhn, a better theory emerges through the same method of peer-reviewed scientific discourse).

Arenas of human activity that involve only questions of fact, such as purely theoretical science and mathematics, end with judgments of fact. For the most part,

¹⁵ *Insight*, 282.

though, in human living, facts lead to the further question, “So what?” Questions of value wonder, given a particular set of facts, what alternative courses of action are implied, and among the choices, what are good and truly valuable. Questions of responsibility seek to verify choices in the light of all available evidence; they seek ethical answers; they wonder, “Is this path worth my commitment?” In every case, whether concerning facts or values, the cognitional path is the same: one asks questions, has insights, and then tests whether those insights are vulnerable to further relevant questions, through the reflective questions, “Is it so?” or “Is that really the best course of action?”

We are heirs, whether we acknowledge it or not, to a logical positivist tradition that firmly separates facts from values and banishes the latter from rational inquiry. Lonergan contributes hugely to moral theory by convincingly bridging the gulf separating fact and value. Judgments of value rely on judgments of fact, as Lonergan scholar Joseph Flanagan makes clear: “To evaluate a project assumes that you already know what the project is.”¹⁶ If you don’t, you need to gain factual knowledge before you can evaluate. Then, following “certain phenomenologists” of this century,¹⁷ and also Pascal’s remark that the heart has reasons which reason does not know,¹⁸ Lonergan theorizes that in order to “evaluate [a] proposal, you must understand the feelings that are evoked in considering the project, since it is through understanding the feelings that you will judge the value of the project.”¹⁹ Understanding feelings is a highly complex process, but one commonly undertaken through practices such as therapy, talking to supportive friends, and prayer: “feelings mediate the values or disvalues of what you will decide.”²⁰

Questions of responsibility force a

(5) *decision*

among competing values:

In judging, we are dealing with fact that is so, or probably is so. In deciding to buy a home or to get married, however, the deliberating can go

¹⁶ Flanagan, 199.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Morelli 1997, p. 477.

¹⁹ Flanagan, 199.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

on indefinitely because you are dealing not with a fact, but with a possible course of actions that will not be actualized unless you decide to do so.... Deliberating raises the whole new question of values.²¹

One needs to decide for oneself whether or not some proposed course of action is truly worthwhile. One does so, however, either in accordance with or in avoidance of norms inherent in consciousness itself. We appeal to such norms when we communicate our perceptions of fact and value to other people.

Finally, one must follow through on a moral decision by

(6) *acting*.

Until one finally executes the decision, one is not fully moral, and inauthenticity is still a possibility. A person may know what to do, may even decide to do that right thing, but remain “sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought.”²² By acting in alignment with one’s rational and moral self-transcendence, one has finally fully committed “to decide for oneself what one is to make of oneself.”²³ Through action alone do we fully incarnate meaning.

When one acts, not just because it seems like the right thing to do, but out of a deep sense of ultimate concern, the experience is similar to – is actually an example of – falling in love. One needs to fall in love – with actual people, with projects, with ideas, or in some ultimate way with God, the ground of being – in order to be fully free to become who we deeply want to be. The most profound actions we can undertake, then, are

(7) *acts of love*,

including the act of allowing oneself to fall in love. “Just as all our knowing takes place only in moral contexts, so all our moral decisions take place only in this larger context of love.”²⁴ There are, of course, many different kinds of love in human experience, some of which don’t deserve the name since they are actually characterized by selfishness or dysfunction. Going back to the Greeks, we name as the highest form of love that *agape* that intelligently seeks the greater good. Beyond loving our family or our immediate neighbors, *agape* is a “transcendent love...., a force and a process which,

²¹ Ibid., 198.

²² Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act III Scene 1.

²³ *Method*, 121.

²⁴ Tad Dunne, *Loneragan and Spirituality: Towards a Spiritual Integration* (Chicago: Loyola, 1985), 106.

although it may center on this or that person, still is [always] on the lookout for more goodness, more beauty, other persons, fuller community.”²⁵

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*“What we have here is technically impressive, Jason,
but regrettably lacking in passion.”*

You may have seen your friends – or maybe you have yourself – fallen in love with subjects, disciplines, ways of being, in a way that change their lives (or your life) forever. In fact, one of our jobs as teachers is to open students’ imaginations that way. When my two children (who attend elementary school at Campbell Hall) think about what to do for the science fair each year, they brainstorm dozens of potential projects effortlessly and with enthusiasm; I can tell that they have learned to *love* thinking and experimenting in that way. Several years ago we were privileged to listen to a senior in chapel describe what she was taking away from her experience of acting in *The Laramie Project* at

²⁵ Dunne, p. 107.

school. She was completely overcome by emotion, and many of us teared up, as she described an image from the play that gave her entire life a deep sense of purpose and meaning.

Of course, falling in love with ideas is the beginning, not the end, of higher learning. Alfred North Whitehead talks about the importance of a stage of romance before the stages of precision and discipline, lest the student find the subject mere drudgery and lose the will to engage self-discipline. Look at the student athlete who didn't really come to life until she encountered that coach who taught her to love the sport – and inspired her to engage the disciplines to truly master the sport. Look at the artist who first just wants to express himself without constraints, then learns from the patient instructor the importance of working with limits. With love, all things are possible. Ultimately we all need to fall in love with an image of our own future.

And then we learn to tell

(8) *stories*

about our lives, about the life of the community, about the life of the world as a whole (which is history). Once a person has fallen in love, abstract conceptual understandings, or ordinary common-sense understandings, are simply inadequate to carry the emotion-laden meaning, the yearning, in one's heart. Furthermore, the truly wise person ends where she began, by acknowledging the incompleteness of human knowledge and the unavoidability of living surrounded by a penumbra of mystery.²⁶ Our prehistoric ancestors were terrified by the vast, mysterious world beyond their campfires; early twentieth-century humanity thought it had dispelled mystery as superstition through the power of science and logic. Twenty-first century humanity has once again been humbled, but may open its heart to the mysterious ground of being in love rather than appeasing it out of fear.

Lonergan asks his readers to try to become aware of themselves going through all of the above operations: wondering, imagining, having insights, coming up with answers, taking action based (one would hope) on forethought. He doesn't ask readers to try to go

²⁶ See Glenn Hughes, *Transcendence and History* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri, 2003), pp. 160-161.

through the operations, but to try to become aware of the fact that they do already go through them, all the time. One can hardly avoid going through them – otherwise one would be acting entirely on impulse, and thereby denying an essential aspect of one’s humanity.

Lonergan also asks his readers to become aware of the ways in which the above operations cumulate (if all goes well) in constructions of ever more sophisticated understanding. A teacher’s task is to help students construct their own knowledge, not shovel ready-digested truth into their minds.²⁷ Even the simplest truth must be questioned and verified through one’s own reflective insight. Lonergan agrees that human knowing is self-assembling and self-constituting, and

puts itself together, one part summoning forth the next, till the whole is reached. And this occurs, not with the blindness of natural process, but consciously, intelligently, rationally. Experience stimulates inquiry, and inquiry is intelligence bringing itself to act; it leads from experience through imagination to insight, and from insight to the concepts that combine in single objects both what has been grasped by insight and what in experience or imagination is relevant to the insight. In turn, concepts stimulate reflection, and reflection is the conscious exigence of rationality; it marshals the evidence and weighs it either to judge or else to doubt and so renew inquiry.²⁸

Despite the technical complexity of Lonergan’s account as he goes into greater depth, we can all be thrilled by the liberating potential of this account. Lonergan’s work is a different kind of liberation theology!

Now one might well ask, after considering my diagram with its barest outline of Lonergan’s cognitional theory: so what? Well, it would take further reading to grasp all the implications, to grasp that from those humble beginnings, Lonergan is offering a thoroughgoing account of the most important critical thinking skill of all, what philosophers sometimes call “reason.” Lonergan prefers to use the term “method,” which he summarizes as follows:

First, we shall appeal to the successful sciences to form a preliminary notion of method. Secondly, we shall go behind the procedures of the natural sciences to something both more general and more fundamental, namely, the procedures of the human mind. Thirdly, in the procedures of

²⁷ See, for example, <http://www.stemnet.nf.ca/~elmurphy/emurphy/cle.html>.

²⁸ Morelli, 382.

the human mind we shall discern a transcendental method, that is, a basic pattern of operations employed in every cognitional enterprise. Fourthly, we shall indicate the relevance of transcendental method in the formulation of other, more special methods appropriate to particular fields.²⁹

Lonergan's project, then, is to clarify the operations of reason in every human enterprise – a project grounded in cognitional theory, but with implications for a vast range of issues in philosophy, theology, and indeed for everyday life.

²⁹ Quoted in R.J. Grace, "The Transcendental Method of Bernard Lonergan" (1995). Available online @ <http://home.sprynet.com/sprynet/rjeffrey/lonergan.htm>.