

# Lonergan and Hume II

## Epistemology (2)

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### I

What binds together the three steps or stages in Lonergan's theory of knowledge – experience, understanding, judging – and makes them into one dynamic activity, is the pressure in the inquirer to discover the truth, what Lonergan has called 'the eros of the mind', the free, unrestricted desire to know. Knowing is a conscious, intending activity and what is intended is the truth. It is this *intention* to know, this psychic drive or thrust and not sensory extroversion to what is presumed (as in Hume) to be 'already out there now' that is the overarching criterion of truth. What is known is related immediately to this self-transcending *nisus*; understanding and judgment are simply answers to the questions generated by the desire to know. Put another way, the questions leading to understanding and judgment are an unfolding of this basic intentionality. The desire to know is something that arises spontaneously and irresistibly in human beings and is present in the reader who is attending to what is being said in this article, striving to understand it and asking if this understanding is true. But while this striving for the truth is the overarching criterion of objectivity, each level of cognition has its own peculiar function to perform and so its own criterion of objectivity; or we might say that the quest for objective knowledge is manifested in different ways at the different stages of knowing.

What is peculiar to the data of experience is their *givenness* – they are there – and hence the criterion of objectivity at the level of seeing, hearing etc, is to see or hear what is there and not to see or hear what is not there. At the level of sensation the subject must be submissive to the givenness of the data (and not, for example, fabricate his own evidence or grounds). At the level of understanding the criterion of objectivity is coherence allied to the logical ideals of clarity and rigour. The need for coherence in a concept, theory or factual account is widely accepted. Lawyers, for example,

insist that their client's account of events 'hangs together', while opposing lawyers spend much of their time trying to 'punch holes' in this account. The mind, it would appear, has great difficulty in holding on to what is incoherent, what does not hold together, what is intellectually unharmonious. As Kai Nielsen says a propos of the notion of God, 'But if a concept is incoherent, one ought not, even as an article of faith, to take it on trust that the concept in question has application. If the concept of God is incoherent ... we have decisive grounds for not believing in God'.<sup>1</sup> But if the need for coherence receives almost universal recognition, the asymmetry of its application for or against a theory's validity is something of a puzzle. On the one hand, if a theory lacks coherence it is considered to be to that extent defective; on the other, the fact that a theory is coherent does not prove that it is true. Polanyi, who considers coherence a mark of rationality, nevertheless points out that 'Coherence as the criterion of truth is only a criterion of *stability*. It may equally stabilize an erroneous or a true view of the Universe'.<sup>2</sup> Lonergan's treatment of coherence helps to solve this puzzle.

The three basic principles of formal logic are (1) the principle of identity – a thing is what it is; (2) the principle of non-contradiction – a thing is not what it is not; (3) the principle of excluded middle – there is no alternative to affirmation or negation. The reason why logical coherence is ruled by these three principles, according to Lonergan, is that thinking, conceptualizing, defining, supposing, are all preparatory to the act of judgment and anticipate that act. In judgment we can either affirm – it is so – or deny – it is not so – but cannot both affirm and deny the same thing in relation to the same – there is no third way. (We can, of course, and commonly do, decide that we do not know enough to judge and postpone our judgment; but then judgment does not take place). It is because knowing is a unified structure consisting of understanding and judgment that, at the level of understanding which is preparatory to judgment, the same three principles obtain. In other words, understanding is, under the pressure of the desire to know, heading for judgment and anticipatorily submits to its laws. Lonergan's theory, therefore, throws light on the universally acknowledged sway of logical coherence at the level of understanding. It also has the effect of placing logic within the movement from ignorance to answer and refuses to consider philosophy to be 'a department of logic', the view put forward, for

example, by A J Ayer in *Language, Truth and Logic*.<sup>3</sup> It also explains why coherence has a strong negative value, since at the level of understanding a proposition or concept is simply *en route* to judgment and what is found incoherent at this level will be rejected on purely logical grounds. But since beyond understanding there remains judgment, the positive value of coherence is reduced, since mere logical coherence does not prove that a situation obtains in the real world. Coherence is a necessary but not a sufficient condition of truth.

Beyond coherence there remains the question, 'Is it so?' Attached to every prospective judgment of fact are certain conditions; verification or validation consists precisely in ascertaining whether these conditions are satisfied. Before the inquiring subject can be legitimately promoted from the level of understanding to the level of judgment, the hypothesis, concept, supposition supplied at the level of understanding has to be put to the test. And this is done by the subject reverting to the givenness of the data. It is precisely the givenness of the data that will test the bright idea put forward to explain the data. This is a further rational demand before anything can be affirmed as fact; it is, if you like, a further demand for coherence though the coherence in question at this stage is not logical coherence but the coherence involved in the suggested explanation or interpretation *fitting* the data, cohering with the data. And so it is that to test an explanation or idea we go back to inspect the data to see if the data confirm or weaken the explanation or idea. In the case of the prisoner who believed he had discovered an escape route, a number of 'givens' have to be taken into account. There is the plank of wood, but is it strong enough, propped against the wall, to support the prisoner's weight? Are the loose bricks removable and at the right height to allow the prisoner to scale within a few feet of the top? Finally, is the piece of rope long enough and strong enough for the prisoner to loop it round the spikes surmounting the wall and haul himself to the top? These are the conditions that have to be fulfilled before a secure judgment, 'There *is* an escape route', can be made. In the case of science it is frequently the case that a hypothesis has the power to predict the behaviour of phenomena in certain circumstances; the circumstances are made available; if the phenomena behave in the manner predicted the hypothesis is to that extent confirmed. We spontaneously seek out relevant *given* or *established* qualities, attributes or happenings in order to test a

supposition or hypothesis.

Knowledge when it is achieved is the affirmation of the subject's coherent interpretation combined with the givenness of the data; it is a synthesis of the givenness of the data and the subject's cognitional processes. When the conditions attached to a judgment of fact are fulfilled it becomes an unconditioned. The criterion of objectivity at the level of judgment is the unconditioned. The value of this analysis is that it shows that reality, in Lonergan's critical realism, exists independently of the knower. The fact that conditions which are independent of the subject have to be met before judgment can validly be made indicates that there is an impersonal, detachable quality about what is affirmed in judgment—it *is* independent of the subject who affirms it. Since what is known is not relative to the subject, is not something that simply *appears* to him or *seems* to him or that he *would like*, knowing is a self-transcending activity and what is known is potentially public and can become a shared possession. In denying that reality is 'already out there now' Lonergan is simply denying that reality is, as the naive realist believes, a non-interpreted fact we bump up against with our senses; he is not denying that facts exist independently of the subject or his knowledge of them. To recapitulate briefly, Lonergan repudiates the notion of a pre-existent ego standing over against reality 'out there'. For him the true is the real; in true judgments we affirm facts in the world. As an object of judgment, fact is rational; the notion of reality unmediated by meaning, of a non-interpreted fact, is considered absurd. As an object of understanding, fact is intelligible, it is coherent and unified; the notion of a self-contradictory fact is also repudiated. Finally as an object of experience, fact shares the givenness of the data in all its concrete particularity; it is not the subjective creation of the knower. Subjectivity and objectivity are both retained since the real is isomorphic with the structure of cognitional activity.

Philosophy, as here presented, is concerned with three questions: What am I doing when I am knowing? To answer this question is to provide a cognitional theory. Why is doing that knowing? The answer to that question is an epistemology. What do I know when I do that? The answer to this third question is an ontology or metaphysics, a general theory of what constitutes reality. A cognitional theory is descriptive, it describes the processes of cognition. An epistemology is prescriptive, it pres-

cribes the conditions necessary for valid knowledge, it discriminates between valid and invalid knowledge. An ontology is implied in an epistemology since valid knowledge is knowledge of the real. Lonergan has taken up Kant's demand that all metaphysical terms be accounted for in terms of an intellectual or cognitional programme. And like Kant's, Lonergan's philosophy is critical since any alleged element of the real not grounded on cognitional activity is to be eliminated. But unlike Kant Lonergan maintains that what is affirmed in judgment is the real and unlike Hume there is no question of an unbridgeable gulf between the known and the real since the real is isomorphic with cognition.

## II

So far I have spoken of three steps or stages in coming to know, experience, understanding and judging. But even within the process of coming to know there is a moral requirement, a demand for authenticity. The subject has to commit himself to the desire to know the truth against the pressures of laziness, bias and self-interest; he has to submit willingly to the givenness of the data and the normative demands of his rationality. He must resist the temptation to overlook unwelcome data, to spin theories without regard to the data, to affirm judgments that exceed the scope of the data. Even in the process of coming to know, then, the subject is under the sway of the fourth level of consciousness, a level of freedom and responsibility. Beyond knowledge there is the question of what is to be done on the basis of this knowledge, involving deliberation, evaluation, decision and action. As the subject formally moves into the sphere of evaluation and action his commitment moves up a notch; he is not simply taking a stand, as in judgment, on what is or is not the case, but is determining what he stands for. At this stage consciousness is heightened and becomes self-conscious: it is not simply a state of affairs that is affirmed or denied but the subject's very personality is at stake. The notion of a fourth level of consciousness that presupposes the previous three but is quite distinct from them overcomes the Humean *is/ought* poser that has exerted enormous influence in modern Anglo-Saxon moral philosophy. Hume's much quoted remarks deserve to be quoted here once more.

I cannot forbear adding to these reasonings an observation which may perhaps, be found of some importance. In every system of morality, which I have hitherto met with, I have

always remark'd, that the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary way of reasoning, and establishes the being of a God, or makes observations concerning human affairs; when of a sudden I am surpriz'd to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, *is* and *is not*, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an *ought*, or an *ought not*. This change is imperceptible; but is, however, of the last consequence. For as this *ought*, or *ought not*, expresses some new relation or affirmation 'tis necessary that it shou'd be observ'd and explain'd; and at the same time that a reason should be given for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it. But as authors do not commonly use this precaution, I shall presume to recommend it to the readers; and am persuaded, that this small attention wou'd subvert all the vulgar system of morality, and let us see, that the distinction of vice and virtue is not founded on the relations of objects, nor is perceived by reason.<sup>4</sup>

It was the impossibility of deriving a value judgment from a matter of fact, an *ought* from an *is*, as well as the impossibility of our ever observing vice or virtue attached to a deed that led Hume to conclude that moral judgments are merely the result of feelings. Moral approbation or disapprobation are totally separated from empirical reasoning, the logical status of moral statements becomes problematic and the way is opened for subjectivism, emotivism and prescriptivism. Since moral judgments cannot be considered rational, objectivity in matters of morality is illusory.

Lonergan would agree with Hume that value judgments and moral judgments are not deductions from judgments of fact. But since he does not agree that knowing is a kind of looking and observing, he is not driven to the conclusion that moral judgments are thereby irrational. Just as understanding presupposes experience but cannot be reduced to constructs out of sense data, so valuing and acting presuppose judgments of fact but at the same time are of a different, and in terms of human personality, of a more interior order. Human experiencing, understanding, judging, valuing, deciding, acting form a unified structure in which the later operations presuppose and build upon (Lonergan's term is 'sublate') the former. This explains how the logical principles of identity, contradiction and excluded middle also operate

at the level of evaluative and moral reasoning. The level of evaluative judgment is linked with the level of knowledge. For example, if I were given a tennis racket with a fractured handle and a number of broken strings I would have no hesitation in assessing it as 'a lousy racket'. In offering this evaluation I am, of course, taking account of the factual state of the racket but I am moving beyond this to offer an evaluation of the racket in relation to the activity of playing tennis. Two points should be noted. First, it is undeniable that my evaluation builds on my factual knowledge; indeed were I to make an evaluation without regard for the facts my evaluation would be worthless. Second, I am nevertheless moving beyond factual judgment to evaluative judgment and Hume is right in insisting that a distinct shift occurs as I move from one to the other. But he is wrong to suppose that this shift is intended as a *deduction* of evaluation from mere fact. What grounds the evaluation, what makes it permissible for the *facts* established at the third level—the level of factual judgment—to become the *criteria* operative at the fourth—the level of evaluation—is that a new question, a value question is now being asked. I am no longer offering a factual judgment ('This racket has a fractured handle and some broken strings') but I am offering a value judgment in the context of human action—in this case with reference to the game of tennis. Evaluation occurs with a view to action either actual or potential, when we ask not merely for information but what we can *do* with an object or situation. Someone who held opposed views on the merits of the tennis racket in question, claiming that it was a perfectly good racket, would be not merely expressing an emotional preference but *contradicting* my judgment. The difference between us would not be an arbitrary matter, since the validity of our evaluations could be checked by reverting to the data. The example of the tennis racket is a trivial one—deliberately trivial to help us investigate the structure of evaluation dispassionately. But the implications for both moral philosophy and moral choice can be seen to be 'of the last consequence'.

### III

The method by which we come to know and act is, according to Lonergan, a normative pattern of recurrent and related operations that yield cumulative and progressive results. It is a transcendental method because it provides the conditions that



make possible the determinate operations in any field of human inquiry whether that be science or history or mathematics or literary criticism or philosophy or whatever. The methodologies of each of these intellectual disciplines is different but underpinning each is the need to attend to the data, to understand them, to reflect critically on that understanding and judge its probability, and the need to proportion judgment to the evidence coupled with the belief that to do so is worthwhile. Even the hypocrite pays tribute to this method by his efforts to suggest that he has performed each of these operations with exactitude, in the knowledge that detection of the omission of any one of them would incur condemnation. The method, therefore, is transcendental in the sense that any denial of it is susceptible to a kind of 'reductio ad absurdum' in the form of a contradiction between the content of the denial and the intellectual performance which alone could make such a denial valid. For any denial would claim that certain data had been overlooked or misunderstood, or that a better explanation of the data was possible, or that the task of explaining was not worthwhile. The method is transcendental in that, while it is open to improvement and refinement, it is not open to radical revision since any such revision would entail the employment of the method that is to be revised. We cannot, with consistency, revise the reviser.

There is a sense in which we are all born to practise transcendental method and another sense in which we most certainly are not. In so far as we are attentive, intelligent, reasonable and responsible we are each of us practitioners of transcendental method. But the objectification and intellectual appropriation of the method is not something that we are born with but rather something that is achieved only with very considerable effort and after prolonged and subtle analysis. But once achieved transcendental method will prove to be a piece of intellectual bedrock on which all further intellectual exploration can be grounded. It will not only sustain and guide positions consistent with its precepts but will also provide a vantage-point from which other contrary positions can be viewed and assessed. Its fruitfulness in both capacities will, perhaps, be seen to best advantage in the context of particular questions in the philosophy of religion. But before moving the discussion to the philosophy of religion, it may be helpful to pause at this point and review the two versions of human rationality represented respectively by Hume and Lonergan. For as I said



before, the philosophical debate about religion is not at heart about this or that doctrine or belief but is in fact about what constitutes human rationality.

Looking back on Hume's theory of knowledge (and the Enlightenment notion of rationality which Hume epitomises) one cannot fail to be struck by its colossal dependence on an apparently hidden but operative (and talked-about) mechanical apparatus. Thus the formation of simple ideas into complex ideas is attributed to mechanical association, the origin of beliefs (in, for example, the permanent existence of objects) is put down to unfathomable but irresistible operations of the mind, moral actions are deemed to follow from feelings of pleasure and pain. Mechanical beliefs and habits perform a *compensatory role* in Hume's theory of knowledge. For Hume is aware that in our practical living we assume, for example, the relative permanence of material objects, we operate on the principle of cause and effect and we understand similars similarly, but he could provide no rational justification for any of these activities. Hence he ascribes them to mechanistic beliefs and habits which a beneficent Nature has provided us with. In offering these explanations of human action he, of course, goes far beyond what his declared methodology – experience and observation – could possibly yield, but it was *in the spirit* of his methodology in so far as this was an attempt to bring philosophy into line with science. The predilection of Hume and the *philosophes* of the Enlightenment for mechanical explanations, which result in a mechanistic view of man, can be attributed to the enormous appeal of Newton, which it would be difficult to exaggerate and to whom Hume always refers with great deference, and the explanatory power of Newton's mechanical laws.

Perhaps the difference between Lonergan's philosophy and Humean Empiricism can be made clearer if we refer to Karl Popper's 'three world' distinction. The three worlds comprise everything that exists in the concrete universe. World One is the world of matter and energy including everything from subatomic particles to galaxies, from chemicals to human brains, from pens to skyscrapers.<sup>5</sup> World Two is the world of consciousness embracing all our conscious activities from dreaming to evaluating. World Three is the world of objective knowledge, the world of language, culture, civilization, including all the expressions of human creativity and perversity that have been preserved and encoded in W1 objects such as books, paintings, films, buildings etc. Lonergan, who considers the data of philosophy to be the data of consciousness, offers

an analysis and objectification of W2. Since all knowledge proceeds from W2 his analysis of W2 is presented as grounding all W3, including the physical sciences and technologies which explain our relations with W1. Advancement in knowledge in the physical sciences is by way of the empirical verification of W3 in W1. The enormous gains in knowledge which this method achieves are all the more impressive when set beside the method of medieval science under the influence of Aristotle. There the canonized structures of W3, in the form of Aristotelian metaphysical categories, determined the composition and movements of W1. When this form of reasoning was broken – and the overthrow of Aristotle was a major factor in the Enlightenment denigration of the medieval intellectual achievement – and W3 became dependent on verification in W1, the success of the new method led to its importation from the physical sciences into the human sciences. When this happened in philosophy the activities of W2 were reduced to processes in W1. Lonergan's analysis of W2 does not attempt to reduce either W2 to W1 or W3 to W2. Rather, by outlining the processes of cognition he offers a clear basis from which the reduction of W2 to W1 can be recognized for what it is and seen to be at variance with the factual processes going on in W2.

Let us look at an example that is central to many discussions in the philosophy of religion. Hume, as we have seen, analyses causality as being, objectively, conjunction in space and time and, subjectively, a psychological expectation of a similar conjunction in the future. Lonergan's critical realism, on the other hand, considers causality to be a relationship of intelligible dependence. Since W3 is grounded on W2, the notion of causality is grounded on the mind's demand for intelligibility and the reduction of causality to a purely contingent relationship is unacceptable. So whereas the Humean notion of causality is methodologically restricted to operations in W1 (which is the object of experience and observation), there is no such methodological restriction imposed on causality within critical realism. Consequently we can legitimately ask the question, 'What is the cause of the universe?' where cause is understood as lying outside the processes of W1.

1 *Contemporary Critiques of Religion* by Kai Nielsen, Macmillan, 1971, p 115

2 *Personal Knowledge* by Michael Polanyi, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958, p 294

3 *Language, Truth and Logic* by A J Ayer, Gollancz, 1946 edition, p 57

4 Hume, *Treatise*, pp 467-470

5 I am indebted in this paragraph not only for the idea but for much of the language and the examples to Matthew L Lamb's very fine article, 'The Production Process and Exponential Growth' in *Lonergan Workshop 1* ed. by Fred Lawrence, Scholars Press, Montana, 1978.