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Dialectic and the Emergence of Explicit Metaphysics

I am going to sketch the personal role of dialectics in the emergence of explicit metaphysics. Of necessity, It is a sketch since a full account would require more than an essay. If we consider the full sweep of Lonergan's views on dialectic and your own personal appropriation of dialectic and metaphysics it is a sketch also because I account for, but do not provide an account of, either one of those. You are responsible for the latter. Other philosophers and theologians are responsible for the former. I will provide a very brief indication of the former which will help me situate the questions I am pursuing here.

One of the goals of Insight is to have the reader attain rational self-consciousness. There is an accurate, but incomplete, way of understanding this as appropriating the self-assembling structure of conscious operations of experience, understanding, judging, evaluation, decision and action. I could go further and understand this as recurrent and yielding progressive and cumulative results, or as methodical. These are commendable achievements but they fall short of rational self-consciousness as operating explicitly within a universe of being. That requires the emergence of explicit metaphysics, which, ideally, results in my horizon being coincident with the fully intended field, or the universe of being.

As is familiar to many readers of Insight, explicit metaphysics is “the implementation of the integral heuristic structure of proportionate being”.ⁱ I will not be discussing this in full but will concentrate on the normativity of dialectic in enabling this emergence and its general role of keeping the development of knowledge on track.

The boarder context of dialectic includes its role in ethics and special transcendent knowledge in Insight. In Method in Theology dialectic assumes a role in all the sciences as a functional specialization in each, though the emphasis, of course, is on theology. (That functional specialization applies also to the natural sciences is shown by Lonergan's example of research and interpretation in physics with the difference between the roles of experimental and theoretical physicists. This implies that it applies to the natural sciences. Few have disputed that it applies to the human sciences for they regard the world mediated by meaning for us.ⁱⁱ) There are important differences, mainly in terms of breadth and detail, but, again, a comparison of the two accounts is not my aim. Lonergan also has an account of the historical dialectic.ⁱⁱⁱ What all of these have in common is that the core of dialectic, which will be outlined below, pertains to all of them.

In Insight Lonergan introduces the notion of dialectic in a discussion of the dialectic of community.

For the sake of greater precision, let us say that a dialectic is a concrete unfolding of linked but opposed principles of change. Thus there will be a dialectic if (1) there is an aggregate of events of a determinate character, (2) the events may be traced to either or both of two principles, (3) the principles are opposed yet bound together, and (4) they are modified by the changes that successively result from them.^{iv}

As a method it plays a major role in the emergence of explicit metaphysics from problematic metaphysics in the second half of insight. Along with genetic method it also plays a key role in enabling the universal viewpoint which provides grounding for hermeneutics. But I will not delve into that area either.

The basic issue addressed by dialectic in metaphysics stems from two conflicting orientations to reality in each of us. It is these two orientations that are “the linked but opposed principles of change” addressed by dialectical method in metaphysics. The first is our extroverted approach to our situation, environment, world. The general case here is that to consider the real as what is already out there now. My biology is manifest in my sensitive, psychic orientation to develop my initial motor operations, and later meaningful and symbolic operations, in terms of mastering my dealings with a world “outside” of myself that I encounter as other than me. As animals we are similar to other animals, particularly mammals, in naturally and initially being oriented consciously to an external environment. This provides a palpable, embodied core for naive realism, where the basic criterion for affirming existence is that I can experience it. This underlies what Husserl terms the natural standpoint and virtually all empiricism. It also affects idealism and rationalism by providing the stubborn resistance of what has been “obvious to us” from the beginning. That it inhibits our understanding of being as intelligible is shown by the fact that neither idealism nor rationalism transcends this empiricism entirely by understanding the real as what is intelligently grasped and reasonably affirmed.

The second orientation is the intellectual pattern of experience dominated by the pure desire to know. In this context being is what can be known through intelligent grasp and reasonable affirmation. I can be in the intellectual pattern of experience without knowing what intelligence and reasonableness are. The task of grasping the basic operations of the intellectual pattern of experience while in the pattern is the work of the first half of Insight. It is when this work is completed that I can affirm myself as a knower. By appropriating my objectivity and notion of being I can know that being is what is intelligently grasped and reasonably affirmed. But Lonergan did not assume that the ideal reader who reached this point, even if understanding all that had come before, would be secure in this basic position and never return to the criterion of being of extroverted consciousness in answering philosophical questions. Hence, the dialectic assumes a key role in the method of metaphysics.

There are two key distinctions Lonergan makes. The first he claims can be found in any philosophy. There is a distinction between the basis and the expansion of a philosophy where the basis is the cognitional theory and the expansion is the range of views on metaphysics, ethics and theology. The second distinction is between positions and counter positions.

... the inevitable philosophic component immanent in the formulation of cognitional theory will be either a basic position or else a basic counterposition. It will be a basic position (1) if the real is the concrete

universe of being and not a subdivision of the ‘already out there now’; (2) if the subject becomes known when it affirms itself intelligently and reasonably and so is not known yet in any prior ‘existential’ state; and (3) if objectivity is conceived as a consequence of intelligent inquiry and critical reflection, and not as a property of vital anticipation, extroversion, and satisfaction. On the other hand, it will be a basic counterposition if it contradicts one or more of the basic positions.^v

That formulation of the distinction regards the basis. For the expansion he notes

... any philosophic pronouncement on any epistemological, metaphysical, ethical, or theological issue will be named a position if it is coherent with the basic positions on the real, on knowing, and on objectivity; and it will be named a counterposition if it is coherent with one or more of the basic counterpositions.^{vi}

I think it is important to understand that being positional or counter positional regards more than “pronouncements”. It ties back to the two basic orientations which can be operative preconceptually affecting my understanding of myself knowing and of the known. Either one or both can be completely or partially tacit, or not explicit. So while dialectic in many philosophies has to do with philosophical argumentation and/or concepts, critical realist dialectic can include that, but also has an element of self-transformation. The emergence of explicit metaphysics in me includes a series of self-transformations via dialectic. I will now turn to an outline of that task.

Lonergan notes that the method of metaphysics is pedagogical with two phases. The first phase is understanding the basis, or theory of knowledge, by appropriating my conscious operations of experiencing, understanding and judging. It terminates with the affirmation of the notion of being as what is intelligently grasped and reasonably affirmed. Though the first half of Insight is a series of “five finger exercises” designed to get critical insights into each of these operations, the difficulty of the effort, along with the fact that we usually approach it with a model of knowing (if we have one) that is predominantly extroverted, either tacitly or explicitly, means that the inquirer typically needs a teacher to help shift his or her attention, to be encouraged to attend to the more critical areas given their level of attainment and to raise the further questions most effective for them to pursue at the time.

The second phase is the attainment of explicit metaphysics. This phase also is pedagogical, but in this case the person is learning by him or herself.^{vii} Self-appropriation provides the structure of operations that must be followed to know anything so it also would guide the appropriation of metaphysics. However, Lonergan does not leave the person adrift to figure out only by themselves what metaphysics is. He provides an account of it, but it is up to the person to figure both it and themselves out in the process. Dialectic is a key tool in this process.

Dialectic lays out positions and counter positions with the further directive to develop positions and reverse counter positions. Positions develop because they are compatible with cognitional structure and the fact that being is what is intelligently grasped and reasonably affirmed. Counter positions are reversed when it is realized that being is what is intelligently grasped and reasonably affirmed and that the counter position denies that in some way. This set of processes, development and reversal, are intelligent and reasonable. So, the implicit third person account in the first part of the paragraph needs to be supplemented with an account of the conscious, personal context.

In general, the context is that positions spontaneously invite development and counter positions spontaneously tend towards reversal. The former is because the position in general is cognitional structure, and we head towards being as understood and rationally affirmed. When I know something I spontaneously follow up on further questions and develop my knowledge. In contrast, following up the implications of a counter position will ultimately end in a dead end where I will not be able to explain myself truly because the counter position is contrary to the source of correct explanations, which also is the source of itself, cognitional structure. Structurally they implicitly contradict themselves, and once this contradiction is brought to light they are reversed. For a very readable elaboration of this I refer the reader to Lonergan's account in Understanding and Being.^{viii}

At the core of that context is the fact that the attainment of explicit metaphysics is both a personal attainment and a personal transformation. Part of that transformation is recognizing and eliminating interference within the intellectual pattern of experience by our spontaneous extroverted orientation to the real. With each reversal of counter positions that we have, the intellectual pattern of experience becomes more explicit and it becomes easier to go from the extroverted orientation in our daily lives to the intellectual pattern and back again without losing the explicit orientation to being of the intellectual pattern.

I think Lonergan provides a set of exercises in dialectic in his chapters on metaphysics, which if engaged in and resolved, result in greater fidelity to the notion of being in practice as what is intelligently grasped and reasonably affirmed. (Examples include discussions of the dialectic of method in metaphysics^{ix}, of distinctions^x, of relations^{xi}, of intelligibility as intrinsic to being^{xii} and of mythic consciousness as counter positional.^{xiii}) That needs to be firmly established if I am to understand the isomorphism of knowing and being where potency, form and act correspond to experience, understanding, and judging and to understand this whole structure as conscious, and in that sense, myself. The emergence of explicit metaphysics is a self-transformation where this notion of myself becomes known and explicitly operative.

Lonergan notes that metaphysics is primarily explanatory and only regards description secondarily. The persistence of retaining description on a more or less equal footing with explanation is counter positional because description regards the world for us, taking the empirical world as the real world, at least in part. The primary issue was framed by Galileo in his distinction between primary and secondary qualities. His law of falling bodies and Kepler's laws of planetary motion showed that nature could be understood mathematically. The mathematical understanding was also explanatory, though that distinction did not come to the fore at the time.

Secondary qualities are sensed. Since sensing is the mediation of objects by the body, there is a subjective component. The primary qualities are not sensed but understood

mathematically. Hence, sensing does not give us the real object. This was subsequently framed as the distinction between the thing for us and the thing in itself. The issue was exacerbated by Descartes who distinguished between the thinking subject and res extensa. Extended things were of a different quality than the mind, yielding the mind-body problem. But they also were “out there”. Hence, the thing-in-itself has been conceived as “behind” appearances, as appearing via appearances and so on.

Considering the thing for us and the thing in itself we see that there are three options regarding the relations of the thing in itself to observation. The first case is where we can observe things in themselves, but we know they exist independently of our observing in particular and our experience in general. We can understand some of them independently of their relations to us or to any consciousness. Sensible objects are examples. In the second case, the thing in itself does not exist independently of consciousness, because it is experienced, or is conscious, in some sense. An example is the immanence of consciousness itself. The third is that the thing in itself is not observable. In this case we can have data regarding it, but we do not have any “direct” experience of it. Sub-atomic particles are an example.

Lonergan’s equivalent distinction is between things related to us and things related to one another. The former is descriptive and the latter is explanatory. As explanatory and not related to us, things which are not us are not imaginable and cannot be experienced as they are. They are not “out there” but can only be intelligently grasped and reasonably affirmed.

Consciousness, however, is related to us. As such, there are descriptive elements in our understanding of ourselves, but these are superseded by explanation.

Now, for Lonergan knowing is a compound of experience, understanding and judging. If things we cannot experience can only be understood and affirmed to be for us as they are in themselves what role does experience play? In these cases, experience is of data which typically is symbolic or meaningful. Thus, measurements are data. They have a mathematical meaning in relation to the measured which is understood via their correlations. Data as confirming instances also can be experienced. They too are symbolic with their meaning coming not from the immediate experience of them, but in their relationship to the confirmed. I can sum this up by stating that things in themselves are not present to us as they are in themselves, but they are for us as they are in themselves. They are for us as intelligently grasped and reasonably affirmed. They are for us consciously as the intelligibilities corresponding to intelligent and rational consciousness. Perhaps this clarifies why Lonergan notes that the development of the sciences, and natural science in particular, makes it easier to implement metaphysics. Understanding actual scientific explanations and not simply understanding “explanation in general” is necessary to getting a “clear and distinct” explanation of explanation as is understanding mathematics to getting a clear and distinct idea about clear and distinct ideas.

The emergence of explicit metaphysics requires recognizing the isomorphism between experience, understanding and judgment with potency, form and act. In turn this requires a breakthrough effected via the self-appropriation of my knowing. There is an appropriation of the notion of being as what is intelligently grasped and reasonably affirmed. Explicit adherence to this notion is effected via dialectic by which we realize when we are counter positional versus positional.

Associated with these are three areas of potential difficulty. The first is the polymorphism of human consciousness where different desires can interfere with the pure desire to know and different patterns of experience compete for our attention with the intellectual pattern. The second is the notion of being itself, which is protean. Since being is whatever is intelligently grasped and reasonably affirmed it can be conceived in many different ways yielding problematic metaphysics with its philosophical history of differing philosophies. This issue also is a personal one as I struggle to grasp just what being is within the welter of possible answers. There is a need for the searching to “recognize itself”. Thirdly there is the dialectical tension itself between the two orientations to reality, and it is through dialectic that the tension repeatedly is resolved as explicit metaphysics emerges.

I made a distinction above between problematic metaphysics as historical in the development of philosophy and as personal in our own philosophical development. There is a corresponding contrast in the emergence of explicit metaphysics. Dialectic plays a key role in making possible in a single lifetime what took generations to emerge. That is a function of the pedagogue.

ⁱ Lonergan, Bernard, Insight (Toronto, Canada, University of Toronto Press, 1992) p. 417

ⁱⁱ Lonergan, Bernard, Method in Theology (Toronto, Canada, University of Toronto Press, 1994) p. 126

ⁱⁱⁱ Lonergan, Bernard, Phenomenology and Logic: The Boston College Lectures on Mathematical Logic and Existentialism (Toronto, Canada, University of Toronto Press, 2001) p. 308-310

^{iv} Insight, p. 242

^v Insight, p. 413

^{vi} Insight, p. 413

^{vii} Insight, p. 423

^{viii} Lonergan, Bernard, Understanding and Being (Toronto, Canada, University of Toronto Press, 2005) p. 184-188

^{ix} Insight, p. 426

^x Insight, p. 513

^{xi} Insight, p. 519

^{xii} Insight, p. 523

^{xiii} Insight, p. 566