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Experience and Consciousness

This essay addresses three anomalies that arise from Lonergan's well-known model of knowing as experience, understanding and judging. Each comprises a level of operations and contents where, as knowing progresses, the next set of operations is considered as a higher level which subsumes the results of the prior level. Consciousness changes as we move from one level to the next. Experiential consciousness yields to intelligent consciousness which in turn is subsumed, or sublated, by the rational consciousness of reflective understanding and judging. There are two modes in which knowing occurs, a direct and an introspective mode. In the introspective mode the operations become objects of experience, understanding and judging for themselves. In the direct mode other objects of inquiry are the primary concern. The introspective mode as it develops yields, minimally, the self affirmation of the knower.

The first anomaly is that intelligent and rational consciousness are experienced and known through the introspective mode. But if intelligent consciousness is intelligent, how can it also be experience? The same issue arises for rational consciousness. The second is that contents of experiential consciousness can be symbols. Symbols have meaning. How can something meaningful be a content of experience? The third is that cognitional structure is understood in terms of levels, which is a visual metaphor. In a fully explanatory account I would expect the visual metaphor to be transcended. Is there a model that can do that?

The first anomaly can be addressed via an understanding of consciousness per se. The second can be addressed through a functional model of operations and their possible noematic contents or correlatives. The third is met by understanding the functional model as contextual.

Consciousness Per Se

To consider consciousness per se is to consider consciousness as itself. There is an issue here. For Lonergan consciousness is a quality of operations, not an operation itself. So it never occurs by itself. As a quality, then, to consider consciousness as itself is to consider it abstractly.

If it is not an operation, then it cannot be a content for itself. Yet consciousness is part of its own field. So properly speaking, consciousness per se is not consciousness of, or is not intentional. Intentionality regards some of our conscious operations. To consider consciousness as intentional is a secondary notion where the intentionality is a characteristic of the operation which happens to be conscious.

If consciousness is not an operation or a content proper to an operation as the seen is to seeing, the intelligible to understanding and so on, then consciousness is not determinate. All

determinations, distinctions and so on are the results of conscious operations. Their presence within a unitary field is due to their being conscious. So consciousness is a common quality of operations where any distinctions of different kinds of consciousness are due to the different operations which happen to be conscious. This leads to the characterization of consciousness as nothing.

As an indeterminacy within its own field, consciousness is, “for itself”, an unmediated immediacy. It is immediately transcendental as a presence that permits presence of operations and contents without affecting what they are beyond being conscious. I believe this view of consciousness is consistent with the understanding that consciousness emerged as an epiphenomenon of neural activity that enabled neural operations to become psychic operations which in turn enabled the emergence of psychic operations as intelligent, reasonable and so on. This means that the unity of neural activity is the material basis for the unity of consciousness. Put another way, the unity of consciousness supervenes on the material unity of neurons in act.

The first level of cognitional process is experience which can be of data of sense and of data of consciousness. But this means that experience can include understanding and judging which are not properly characterized as experience. If the correlative of experience is data, then consciousness as making any distinction or difference possible can be considered functionally in the role of experience. For example, understanding can be data because it is conscious. Then our anomaly is resolved. All levels are conscious so all are available as data. Some data exists prior to inquiry. Some data emerges with inquiry and understanding. And so on.

A Functional Model of Intentionality

Our second question is “How can data be meaningful, yet be data, if meaning and intelligibility in general are correlatives of the second level of knowing, understanding?” This requires an understanding of intentionality, immanence and understanding the levels functionally.

Direct understanding is insight into images. These can be images of objects encountered via sensing and the insight can be into sensed relations or unities. The imagination has a functional role in understanding in the provision of images for insight. But while insight is characterized as insight into images, the imagination is intentional. Objects are intended via images. So the insight into images can also be insight into the object intended via the image. There is a categorical intentionality of words immanent in their function as signs. The imaginative flow of words in thinking supports the ongoing understanding of meaning and structuring of behavior via the “automatic thoughts” studied in cognitive psychology. Due to intentionality, insight into the imaginative flow is both an insight into images and insight into the meant. The insight into the meant can yield new meaning for us, but it can be into meaning that is pre-existent for us also. So the imaginative flow is functional in providing meaningful data.

We can characterize the level of experience as what is given prior to inquiry, but not as what is given prior to inquiry in general. Rather it is what is given for a particular inquiry. So

the given can include meaning achieved via prior inquiry and understanding. In fact, as discussed earlier, the given, as data, is any conscious element. The understanding of levels takes two directions. The first is a question of operational timing or sequencing. The level of experience is what is given prior to inquiry. The level of understanding emerges with the questions “What?” or “How?” The level of reflective understanding and judging emerges with the question “Is it so?” Yet both these levels are given as they emerge because they are conscious. But they may not be the given for the inquiry which does not aim at an understanding of understanding or judgment but at understanding something else. As noted this is the direct mode of the process.

The second direction regards what is correlative to the level at the particular time. This is dependent on cognitive development and the mode of knowing. We saw that meaning can be a correlative to experience as the given prior to inquiry. This is a result of cognitive development or prior understanding and knowing. Understanding, as conscious, can be a correlative to experience as the given prior to the particular inquiry into its nature via the introspective mode. This leads to the possibility of a theory of consciousness which regards the operational ranges of operations and their interrelationships.

The model of experience, understanding and judging as levels of consciousness operating in two modes masks enormous complexity. Its pedagogical value is not to be underestimated. But it is clear that it needs to be transcended as we move to full explanation. The movement is not to a more thorough phenomenology, though we shall see where that also is needed. The movement is to a sufficiently robust general model that handles all the variables as functional.

From Levels to Contexts

A key notion in Lonergan’s model of cognitional structure is sublation. In the simplest case, what is experienced is what is understood and what is understood is what is affirmed to be so. There is a common intendens, or object in the broad sense, throughout the process. Another way to put this is that the results of the prior levels are retained in the subsequent levels. The subsequent levels are also a change in context. The orientation of the prior level is transformed in terms of the questions of the next. It is tempting to claim that the new context is evoked with the new question. It is possible to develop a neural model that supports this where prior development sets the context for current operations in terms of the further questions. Lonergan provides a more general explanation in understanding development in terms of integrators and operators. Sublation can be the integration of X within a broader integration. But sublation also can be the admission of X into a broader context. In this instance we use integration to suggest the systematic and context to suggest the situational or non-systematic. As sublated within a context it can be the “it” in the question “Is it so?” and becomes an element within the set of ensuing cognitional operations of reflective understanding and judgment. The notion of sublation also suggests another resolution to our first anomaly. Consciousness per se and the given are sublated in understanding which is illustrated in the experience, or consciousness, of understanding. It also provides an illustration of the function of cognitional elements. The

intelligible as the understood is an element within the next context. Its achievement enables the emergence of the subsequent context.

There are issues with the notion of levels. The most serious one is the temptation to understand the order of nature along the lines of the order of knowledge. In that case, just as chemistry organizes what is left open by, or is merely coincidental to, physics, biology organizes what is left open by chemistry and so on. This becomes a difficulty in understanding the organism if one thinks there is a physical-chemical level that is organized via biological relations which in turn are organized by psychic relations and so on. These are more specific cases of understanding levels of organization in terms of degrees of complexity. There is no doubt that as one moves through the cognitional process that the situation becomes more complex, but with the transition from one type of question to another it also becomes contextually different. This is where a more extensive phenomenology is needed to work out the differences in context as well as the interrelations of elements not considered in the sparse model of cognitional structure, such as feelings. The shift in context is not a new structure or a specification of a current structure, it is a new conscious situation and the person works within that situation to arrive at the answer to the set of questions operative in it. Illustrative of this is the profound shift in context we find in the discussion of psychic and intellectual development in Chapter 15 of *Insight* (pgs. 492 – 494). Moving from understanding knowing in terms of the basic structure of Chapter 9 to understanding it in terms of development in Chapter 15 is also an example of the moving viewpoint of *Insight*.

Here we find another anomaly. Organic, psychic and intellectual developments integrate “underlying manifolds”. In the case of psychic development the underlying manifold is organic. In the case of intellectual development, the underlying manifold is primarily psychic. This suggests that the psychic sublates the organic and the intellectual the psychic, and, ipso facto, the organic. Whether the use of sublation here is warranted I think is open to question, but we can minimally say that there are subsequent integrations. (sublation is my usage here, not Lonergan’s – I am just playing with it – brings out the Derrida in me) Since they are integrations of prior integrations we can say they are more complex. Metaphorically we can say they are higher integrations. Why do I confine the notion of higher to metaphor versus explanation? It is because the integration is a type of whole. We can distinguish parts or elements of the whole, but they are inadequately distinct from the whole itself. Thus, any “levels” within the whole are merely conceptual, not real. Considering them as real has led others to a reductive understanding of organisms. Ironically, considering them as merely conceptual also can lead to a reductive understanding (especially if one considers the order of knowledge along the lines of the order of nature).

The anomaly is that Lonergan considers the higher integration to be a higher system. Yet the general operator of development is characterized as being “...conditioned by instability in the underlying manifold, by incompleteness in the higher integration, by imperfection in the correspondence between the two.” If it is a system, it is not fully systematic. It has principles of internal destabilization. It can, in fact, dis-integrate, requiring a new integration. We can

consider the breakdown of a viewpoint and its replacement by a broader and more knowledgeable viewpoint as an example. If we consider the state of knowledge at a particular time, there are multiple integrations which need not all be interrelated. Thus, as the viewpoint continues to move into the next chapter of *Insight*, Lonergan characterizes man as "...the being in which the highest level of integration is, not a static system, nor some dynamic system, but a variable manifold of dynamic systems." Discussing this in terms of the "...variable set of moving systems that regard the universe of being..." he adumbrates both the discussions of dialectic and the canons of hermeneutics to follow.

Given this, how are we to characterize the integration of the organic, psychic and intellectual? First there are sets of integrations within the wholes that we are. These sets are variable in their systematization. Within any single integration there is a mutual self-mediation of the three. The organic enables the psychic and is transformed by its activity. The psychic enables the intellectual and is transformed by its activity. The intellectual is transformed by its own activity for which it is reliant on the psychic. A change in elements in any one of these can lead to corresponding changes in the other. For example, brain damage can lead to a loss of neurons which can lead to the loss of certain capabilities of the imagination which leads to cognitive deficits. A change in an intellectual viewpoint leads to a change in habitual understanding which also is a change in neural and imaginative patterns. There is a concomitance of organic, psychic and intellectual operations which is their correspondence. This in turn is a unity in process (system on the move) within the unity in process that is consciousness as a whole. Thus, inquiry in process finds its principle of unity in the inquiring itself. But the unity of the process is the unity of a context. Rather than being fully systematic, it tends towards system, or integration, but does so within a non-systematic context. This is clearer if we consider each of the three in their distinct, but inter-related developments. Here we find the non-systematic as operator. Lonergan notes that "...the difficulty in understanding the operator lies in the complexity of its data." There is much to be understood here. But I would like to suggest that there is a role to be played here by an explanatory, or functional, phenomenology. Such a phenomenology, as research, for example, would work within the context of intentionality analysis to lay out the vicissitudes of personal development.