

MC SHANE'S PUZZLES: APOLOGIA FOR THOSE WHO FLUNK THEM

FREDERICK E. CROWE

Philip McShane has had as one of his leisure specialties the provision of tantalising puzzles which are meant to provide samples of insight but sometimes, instead of promoting insight, reduce his readers to angry frustration. In collaboration with Garrett Barden he provided a sampling of such puzzles in their book *Towards Self-Meaning*¹ but, leaving the book aside, I will take as point of departure for my reflections a single puzzle Philip once presented on his own to some learned society – I forget which. Those present were invited to find the meaning of the letters SMTWTFS; when it was clear they were getting nowhere, Philip rescued them from their frustration with the answer: the letters are the initials for the seven days of the week. Facing then the understandable chagrin of his audience at their failure and their irritated protest that they couldn't be expected to find a sensible answer to such an absurd question, Philip informed them: 'I gave the problem to a class in Grade School and they solved it.'

As one of the frustrated academics who didn't solve the problem, I wish to reflect on this exchange, not just because, like the person in the Gospel, 'I am willing to justify myself,' but more importantly because it suggests an appropriate topic for the volume Michael Shute is editing in Philip's honour, and gives me an opportunity to ponder once more a question we will never ponder enough or come close to exhausting: the

¹ Garrett Barden and Philip McShane, *Towards Self-Meaning: Exercises in Personal Knowledge* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969); see especially pp. 126-37.

working of the human mind as it strives to achieve and sometimes does achieve an insight. How does insight occur? How can it be encouraged to occur? And why in the present case did it not occur in the circle of academics, when it did to a Grade School class?

Some Sample Puzzles: Word Games

Let us start with a puzzle that is the simplest possible, hardly worthy to be dignified with that name: to find a word with three letters doubled in the spelling. Naturally I start running through the words in my memory, or perhaps resort to a dictionary. I may come very quickly or very slowly to 'bookkeeping' (or some other word that answers the problem) but unless I go into fancy mathematics, the solution is just a matter of time, and the time needed is just a matter of running through the words I know, one by one, till I come to a word that fits. So this simple exercise is solved on the pedestrian basis of checking the possibilities – a material exercise, with no intelligence required. (Of course the intelligent puzzle fan will work out tactics that go beyond the pedestrian level.)

Take now an exercise requiring more intelligence, depending more on insight than on material checking: namely, doing crossword puzzles of the challenging kind. My daily paper provides one Monday to Friday called in fact a 'Challenge,' and a much harder one on Saturdays called 'Cryptic.' We find now that mere material checking plays a quite subordinate role, that an act of insight is far more often called for. Thus, 'Trunk roots twisted' means 'Torso,' 'A Greek follower' means 'Beta,' 'First offender caught in the very act' is 'Eve,' 'NMN' means 'German Cardinal,' and 'cites' said out loud can mean what a tourist seeks as well as a procedure in a law court. These samples show how patterns of search develop; familiarity with these patterns and with the style of the puzzle-maker leads one to check recurring ploys. An anagram turns 'roots' into 'torso,' the ambiguity of 'follower' applies to the order of the Greek alphabet, the letters of 'Eve' were hidden in the words 'the very act,' 'em in ens' describes what is seen but when spoken leads to the answer, 'cites' sounds the same as 'sights,' and so on.

Patterns of Discovery

From these few samples, and their contrast with mere checking, emerges the role of patterns of discovery; in puzzle-solving they function the way they do in science, as the upper blade in what Lonergan calls the scissors action of heuristic method. There is no upper blade in my first example (though we may be able to create one), but the various ploys adopted in the second sampling – anagrams, hidden words, and a score of others – are an upper blade that will possibly yield the solution, and greatly reduces the labor of research.

A special type of pattern is the work of the ‘cogitativa.’ If I were asked to ‘date’ a fragment attributed to Thomas Aquinas and find it discussing historicity, horizons, foundations, and the like, I could say at once that it’s not from Thomas; these are not his usages. Again, if the question is whether a reported lecture comes from Lonergan, and I find that it uses ‘upon’ rather than ‘on,’ locates ‘also’ early in the sentence rather than after the verb, and resorts often to the phrase ‘in other words,’ then at least I can say that those are Lonergan usages and they encourage further investigation. Now to notice such usages is an exercise of the ‘cogitativa’; Thomas, after Aristotle, could say that a nurse knows from repeated experience that a certain medicine works, but the doctor knows why it works. To have that ‘repeated experience’ and notice the repetition is the work of the ‘cogitativa’ discovering a pattern; there is a puzzle, and the ‘cogitativa’ offers a pattern for discovery of the answer.

From patterns in the ‘cogitativa’ we may turn to concepts and categories. Though we do not generally think of them as solving puzzles, they too function as patterns of discovery do, to bring into play as an upper blade a huge thesaurus of possibilities that we may test for their relevance. Every concept offers a pattern of discovery, and provides an upper blade of research. It functions in collaboration with the nurse’s ‘cogitativa’ (knowing *that*) and the doctor’s science (knowing *why*). It is derived from an insight, is applied to a case the way the ‘cogitativa’ is applied, but adds science to repeated experience. This is more obvious in the exact sciences, but holds also for historical science; any reader exercising the faculty of the ‘cogitativa’ may notice a certain Pauline usage,

but only the scientific historian, knowing the Pauline writings and their place in the history of New Testament literature, can say 'This is Pauline, but that is not.'

Context

When Lonergan used the Archimedes experience as a dramatic instance of insight, he proceeded to list five features of the experience. It comes as a release to the tension of inquiry, it comes suddenly and unexpectedly, it is a function not of outer circumstances but of inner conditions, it pivots between the concrete and the abstract, and it passes into the habitual texture of the mind.² Some twenty years later, from the matrix of those five he described a feature more specifically directed toward achieving insight. It plays a key role in what he called 'discovery of discovery,' thereby assigning exceptional significance to the insight, and bringing me to my exhibit A in the technique of solving questions or problems or puzzles.

My exhibit A is 'context,' a term of high importance for Lonergan. A good locus for its study is found in one of the most neglected of his papers, 'Method: Trend and Variations.'³ Here he deals with the 'law of effect. Development goes forward where it succeeds. So one's horizon ... tends to extend and expand where extension and expansion are already under way.'⁴ This is the occasion for the passage on context that I have found so helpful.

The key point here is context. To learn is not just the sensation of seeing or hearing or touching or the like. To learn is to perceive, and to perceive is to complete that hypothetical entity, the raw datum, with memories, associations, a structure, and one's emotive

² *CWL* 3, 27-31.

³ *3 Coll*, 13-22. The paper was listed on the program of the Southwestern Regional Joint Meeting of the Societies affiliated with The Council on the Study of Religion (Austin College, Sherman, Texas, March 15, 1974), under the title 'Method: Theme and Variations;' it is just possible that someone somewhere misread the title and 'theme' got changed to 'trend'; 'theme' actually fits better, but Lonergan certainly wrote on 'trend' (see p. 20).

⁴ *3 Coll*, 17.

and expressive reactions. It is this difference between sensation and perception that underlies the range of strange phenomena called ocular illusions.⁵

Loneragan appeals to Collingwood to support his case in regard to sensation and perception.

What the investigator needs, what the methodologist recommends, is a mind well stocked with questions. ... So Collingwood could urge the archeologist never to dig a trench without first formulating just what questions he hoped to be able to settle or at least advance by the digging. ... The investigator needs a well-stocked mind, else he will see but not perceive; but the mind needs to be well-stocked more with questions than with answers, else it will be closed and unable to learn.⁶

The relevance of this to the present question is that the difference between sensation and perception works itself out quite differently in Grade School and Academe. Grade School, I would say, is strong proportionately on sensation and less strong proportionately on perception. Those who perform magic, I am told, don't like to perform before children, for children see what actually happened, what the performer actually did, whereas adults perceive so much more than they sense that they fail to see what the Grade School pupil sees, and misinterpret what they do see.

The academics have a different proportion of sensation and perception. In the puzzle Philip gave them they were handicapped by their erudition (people of culture) or by their specializations (people of science), which would preempt their thinking and point them away from the true solution. People of culture, who know history, literature, music, geography have an immense storage in brain cells compared to a pupil nine or ten years old. They may be more likely to hit upon the answer in the long run (certainly more likely, when it comes to judgment, to find the true answer), but less likely to do so in

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid. 14; see 21.

the short run.

Of course the central idea in Lonergan's paper is method, but he weaves method and context together in a close linkage. Method has discovery of discovery as its end,⁷ it 'takes command ... when one grasps how questions combine with answers, how they are woven together into contexts, how contexts merge into the horizons of subjects ...'⁸ All this suggests a closer study of the context of the puzzle solver.

So what enters into one's context? We think at once of ideas and judgments and commitments, but there is a prior element of context more important than any idea or set of judgments and values: it is the dynamism operating in the background, the Scholastic agent intellect, pushing us always to know and to understand, and providing a permanent basic context. Next, having given priority to dynamic interiority, we can add context in the usual sense: whatever experience we have had, whatever concepts we have learned, whatever judgments we have formed, or values made part of us, or education, socialization, inculturation received – all this gives an ongoing habitual context. Though habitual, it varies, partly because it is steadily growing, partly because the habitual core admits the fleeting context of the moment, depending on what TV show I watched last night, or what French I read on my serial box at breakfast this morning.

Further, let us not omit the despised material factor that also belongs in the context. In speaking of an upper blade for the scissors action of our research, and of the role of context in cognitional process, I have moved further and further from the simple checking that I used in my first exercise. If we are not just to squirm helplessly, running through the several million brain cells stored in memory, we need an upper blade. If development is to go forward according to the principle of effect, we cannot ignore context. Nevertheless, the quantitative factor has its own importance. It is easy to see that a large quantity stocked in the mind is both a plus and a minus: plus, for it is more likely to contain associative ideas; minus, for it takes longer to run through the stock. On the plus side, the

⁷ Ibid. 21.

⁸ Ibid.

quantity of brain cells available to the human species is enormously greater than that of the animal kingdom, and becomes an accordingly powerful instrument of intelligence. Further, there are similar quantitative differences within the human family that make for higher or lower intelligence. And besides quantity and numbers we must also consider paths of communication in the brain, and the degree in which they serve intelligence. This factor may be as important as quantity of cells in making us quick-witted or slower.⁹

Application to Our Question

Within this general framework belongs the present discussion of puzzles and their solution. For individual persons, context will vary greatly, but we can still hazard some remarks that will apply widely, if not universally. Consider the limiting case of the new-born infant, as innocent of the days of the week as it is of Einstein's ideas, and perform the thought-experiment of following the child from infancy to Grade School. What slow process of mental acts gradually prepared children for puzzles like McShane's? When did they learn the days of the week? When how to spell them? Suppose the class to have been taught just yesterday to spell the seven days; would they not solve his puzzle almost immediately? Or, suppose they were just yesterday taught a batch of acronyms (as necessary in the curriculum today as spelling once was); would they not see the present problem as a parallel case?

Academics, however, if they do see the seven letters as parallel to acronyms, will not think of days of the week but rather of something concerned with their interests, perhaps learned societies and journals: AAR, CTSA, JBL, and so on. Thus, expecting something recondite, they would be led astray in the search for it. The expectations of young pupils would also be determined by their interests, maybe the classes of the day, or if they learn of their victory over the academics on

⁹ This little note says nothing on empirical psychology, neurology, and intelligence, but the need for dialog between Lonergan's thought and empirical studies of intelligence is obvious. From our viewpoint the trick is to find empirical scientists who are open to interiority and cognitional philosophy.

SMTWTFS they might be led astray themselves and waste time seeking a similar interpretation of NMN.

Grade School pupils do have their expectations, their own upper blade of context in storage. But they have a much smaller storage, which means, of course, that they would come more quickly to any particular item stored there. Then, as the days and years pass, and their minds become the storehouse of more and more materials, the seven days, once nearer the foreground, recede into a larger and larger background against which they are but insignificant details. When I first began to store items on my computer, I could do a search for a particular term and find it in seconds; now that I've filled my storage space with motley materials, the same exercise takes minutes. Perhaps the human brain doesn't work like a computer, but perhaps it is not totally dissimilar either.

It is time to consider an objection. Does not the use of patterns and context prejudice the issue? It could do so, if one does not understand the difference between the level of insight and the level of judgment. Patterns and context give us ideas, but the wise person knows better than to seize on the first idea that comes along and adopt it as the truth. Verification is necessary. In the McShane example there is implicit verification; it would be expressed in some such remark as 'What else could SMTWTFS mean? If there is another set of words with initials in that pattern, it is to be found in some situation so remote from the actual as to be rightly judged irrelevant. Therefore ...' Patterns and context guide our expectations, but do not give the final word of judgment.

Writing this note for Philip's *Festschrift* has been a truly pleasant exercise. May it encourage him to continue his life-long apostolate for a better understanding of understanding, even if – especially if – it means irritating us with more of his challenges.

Frederick E. Crowe is founder of the Lonergan Research Institute and General Editor, with Robert M. Doran, of the *Collected Works*.

Comments on this article can be sent to
jmnda@mun.ca.