

**LEARNING THE PRACTICE OF UNDERSTANDING MYSELF**

*Kenneth R. Melchin*

I am grateful for the invitation to contribute to this volume in honour of Phil McShane. Phil and Sean McEvenue were two mentors who changed my life. I was doing a PhD at Concordia University, Montréal, in 1979 and had just discovered that my thesis plan would not work out as hoped. I was looking for an alternative and Sean told me he thought I should study Lonergan. My experiences of Lonergan to that point had been unpleasant. So you can imagine my reaction. Sean's advice, however, had been reliable in the past, so I decided to think about it. He was in the process of launching Lonergan University College at Concordia and had invited Phil to come for the first year as visiting scholar. After some thought, I decided to take a leap of faith—in this case, faith in Sean's judgement.

For the first while, my experience of Phil was unpleasant. But for some reason—likely sheer stubbornness—I wasn't going to let this get to me, so I persisted. What I learned that year changed everything, so I'm glad I did.

I was in a seminar with Phil and we were supposed to be reading *Method in Theology*, but we didn't actually read much of anything. Instead, most of the time, both in class and out, we focused on what I'd call "learning the practice of understanding myself." I used Phil's little book, *Wealth of Self and Wealth of Nations*, and I recall hours and hours spent doing puzzles while making observations on what my mind was doing. I was a musician and had studied classical violin and played the bass in jazz bands, so I knew that serious learning required practice. In those years, I don't think I explicitly adopted learning a musical instrument as a model for learning philosophy properly. But later I realized what a good model it is.

Phil's approach was rather blunt. Thinking back, what comes to mind is the image of learning to swim by being tossed into the water and thrashing about to stay afloat. Since then I've devoted some time to developing learning methods that are a bit more user-friendly. Still, I came to appreciate the practice of self-understanding using puzzles. I started with the puzzles in *Wealth of Self*, chapter 4, and then developed some of my own. Of all the diverse operations I observed my mind performing, what grabbed my attention was direct insight. I don't know whether this was because of Phil's influence. But somehow I was able to create the conditions for enough repeat experiences of direct insights to notice some of their strange features. It was in probing these strange features that I

began entering into a way of thinking that was totally different from anything I had experienced previously.

I will recount two moments that were significant in that tumultuous journey of practice-based learning with Phil. The first arose when I was trying to understand the meaning of the term “abstraction.” In addition to my seminar with Phil, I was doing other courses reading texts by Lonergan, and I ran into the term as a way of talking about what happens when I understand something. I began wondering about what gets abstracted and what gets left behind in the operation of abstraction. Thinking back, I’m pretty sure I was making the assumption that everything had to come from something else. So my question about abstraction was about where intelligibility comes from when I understand something. I was pretty sure that it had to come from somewhere, and the likely location was out there in the data. If so, then abstraction was the process of sorting through the bits in the data and assembling some bits while discarding others.

At one point, however, I stumbled on the image of a scientist finding a bone and getting the insight that it is a wing of a bird. I found this amazing. What arose from the insight was not something that had been present as bits in the data. What emerged was something more. I began examining the insights I was gaining in my puzzle solving and realized that this “something more” was likely what had been happening to me all along. The intelligibility that arises in an insight explains the data, but it doesn’t come from the data. It is something more than the data. I found this to be an astonishing way of thinking. It seemed to be a game changer. I began thinking that perhaps things don’t always need to come from something else. Novelty can emerge onto the scene of reality and can be more than what preceded. Who knew?

In the years since then, I have given a lot of thought to this “something more” that emerges in acts of direct insight. I came to realize that a lot of further questions need to be raised and answered in order to verify whether this is indeed a correct understanding. Lonergan devotes a good chunk of *Insight* to doing precisely this. What was compelling at the time, however, was the new way of thinking that it opened up that had not been available to me beforehand. Most important, I could not have entered into this new way of thinking without following Phil’s guidance. I needed to dedicate the time to the practice of self-understanding—in this case using puzzles. In doing so, I became personally familiar with some of the strange features of direct insights, and I was able to relate these observations to the problem of correctly understanding Lonergan’s terminology.

Understanding the terminology requires a new way of thinking. But gaining the new way of thinking requires learning the practice of understanding myself. This was the gift I received from Phil.

The second significant moment arose as a result of some pondering I was doing about science. I had gained a pretty good education in philosophy by that point and had a basic grounding in high school math and science. In our sessions with Phil, we talked about that sort of thing. I was thinking about the way that scientists seemed to talk about matter and materialism. I wondered whether some of the challenges facing scientists about the basics of matter might benefit from the sort of practice we were doing.

My assumption was that, understood scientifically, reality was made up of matter with properties and science studied the properties of matter. I realize now that this was not only the assumption of many scientists, it was also my own assumption. Years later I discovered that this assumption didn't actually come from science, it came from a philosophy that had attached itself to science. But I didn't know this at the time. I had read enough about physics to know that there were some sticky questions that scientists did not seem able to answer about the basics of matter. The line between matter and energy seemed to be somewhat blurry. And new discoveries were revealing aspects of particles that seemed to challenge the idea that reality is matter with properties. I had learned that many scientists were aware that the term "particle" in physics had a highly technical, carefully circumscribed meaning. Still, none of this seemed to dislodge a way of talking about matter and properties.

It was while thinking about what I had learned from my puzzle practice with Phil that I stumbled on a new path of pondering. I began thinking, not simply about the objects of science, but about the activities of scientists gaining and verifying insights. I had come to realize that the intelligibility grasped in insight could not be understood as matter or material. Yet, it was what science "produced." Science, when studied self-reflectively in a practice-based mode, could be understood to "produce" intelligibilities that were not material. These intelligibilities sought to provide answers to ranges of questions that presupposed that the object of explanation must be reduced to matter. In my pondering, I wondered how the immateriality of insight (the product of scientific explanation) could be reconciled with the assumed materiality of what insight explained (the object of scientific explanation).

I recall the day of my pondering. It was either rainy or snowy-slushy, and I was on the Loyola campus of Concordia University at Sherbrooke

Street. I think I may have been on the south side of the street because the image that stayed with me was of the main building of the campus viewed from across the street. I was trying to reconcile an understanding of the scientist's cognitional operations gained from a self-reflective practice with a materialist assumption about the object of these operations. I was doing this by taking science's materialist opinion about its object as the authoritative voice. What hit me was this: *Why not reverse the two?* Why not investigate the object of science in light of the insights gained from a practice-based study of scientific understanding? Doing so, it struck me that perhaps many of the problems encountered by scientists might disappear, or at least be converted into more manageable problems. The intelligibilities grasped and verified by science would not need to measure up to a standard imposed by materialist assumptions. They would be measured in light of a standard gained from a verified explanation of cognitional operations.

As with my first significant learning moment, I later came to realize that a lot of further questions needed to be raised and answered in order to verify this way of thinking. And as with my first moment, I learned that Lonergan devoted a good chunk of *Insight* to wrestling with some of these questions. But what was important at the time was the spectacular novelty and import of a way of thinking that had not been available to me beforehand. I began detaching myself from thinking about objects of experience as hard material and began thinking of them as constituted by intelligibility. I began thinking about the feeling of material hardness as the interaction of intelligible force fields instead of as matter bumping. I began thinking about my experiences of pain upon bumping my elbow as an intelligible state of my nervous system induced by interactions of force field intelligibilities. The list goes on. All of that happened over forty years ago, yet even today I can still feel the thrill of the new way of thinking.

What remains important in all this is the role played by my puzzle practice activities under Phil's guidance. In doing the puzzle exercises, I became familiar with direct insights and the intelligibilities that become consciously present with their occurrence. I gained the ability to notice features of my conscious operations and their objects that I could not have noticed previously. I gained the ability to think in terms of these operations and observe the role they play in ordinary interactions and conversations. I gained the ability to think about the explanations of science as intelligibilities grasped and verified by cognitional operations. I think all this, more than anything, helped in my shift away from materialism. When I contemplated giving up materialism, I had something else to take its

place that was just as real and familiar as anything else I had experienced. I gained that familiarity by doing the puzzle practice activities.

In the years following, I have been able to answer some of the further questions for verification and not others. I have had the privilege of working with colleagues using the insight approach to conflict and have learned a bit about why I found my initial experiences of Lonergan and Phil so unpleasant. In writing this short essay, however, I have had to resist the temptation to explore these questions and issues more deeply. My goal has been to present as faithfully as possible some initial insights I gained in those first months of working with Phil. They were life-altering.

One final point. The practice-based work of gaining these insights is difficult and takes time. But it is no more difficult than learning to play the violin. The key is daily practice. I think Lonergan scholars can help accelerate and ease the path of this learning by developing entry-level and small-step-incremental learning modules. I know, for me, this was the key to learning the violin. My effort here has been to offer an autobiographical portrait of why I found this learning path worthwhile. The word that comes to mind to describe the experience is “thrilling.” Phil’s greatest gift to me was to help place me on a road that has never ceased to be thrilling. I hope, when my working life is over, I will have been able to pay forward this gift by sharing the thrill with others.