

Bernard Lonergan's Puzzling Comment About the *Vis Cogitativa*

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Preamble

This essay is a demonstration of the first functional specialty, Research. As I understand it, the principle aim of the specialty is to assemble materials relevant to understanding some issue. Interpreting those materials is the goal of the second specialty, Interpretation.¹ Placing different interpretations of the same issue in developmental sequences, moving from the least comprehensive to the most comprehensive, is the distinct aim of the third specialty, History. My task, therefore, is to gather in one place all the available relevant comments that Lonergan made on the *vis cogitativa* and the Freudian superego. I will also include supplementary materials that provide background to Lonergan's comments and an updating of how contemporary neurosciences speak about the traditional function of the *vis cogitativa*.

Relevant Texts

I The Puzzle

At the beginning of his "Humus 2,"² Philip McShane quotes an unpublished letter from Bernard Lonergan to Fred Crowe. The cited passage reads:

Incidentally, re anxiety, what the Freudians call the Super-Ego is Aquinas' *cogitativa*: just as the little birds know that twigs are good for building nests and the little lambs know that wolves are bad, so little human beings develop a *cogitativa* about good and bad; it reflects their childish understanding of

¹ My second essay to follow in this issue, "Early Forms of Apprehension and Moral Evaluation," *Journal of Macrodynamic Analysis* 10 (2018): 46-79 is an exercise in doing the second specialty and makes use of materials assembled in this first essay.

² Available online at philipmcschane.org/humus/.

what papa and mamma say is good or bad, and in adult life it can cause a hell of a lot of trouble.³

This passage is puzzling for three reasons. It is not obvious, even with the examples, how the Freudian superego is an instance of the *vis cogitativa*. Second, Lonergan's linking of the two terms is a noticeable departure from the traditional interest in the *cogitativa* as part of an inquiry into how human sensibility already 'recognizes' the universal in the particular, for example in classifying a perceived object as an instance of a class of objects. Third, when contemporary neurosciences take up the inquiry into the 'binding problem' (that is, the ordering or unifying of different types of sensations into a 'compound' awareness of a single object), they make no mention, as far as I have found, of Freud's superego.

This 'musing on the *vis cogitativa*,' as McShane calls it, is something of an oddity. Lonergan's linking in his 1955 letter of Aquinas' *vis cogitativa* and Freud's superego has no precedent in Lonergan's published writings, and it seems unrelated to the questions about object recognition which prompted both Aristotle's speculation about a *sensus communis* and medieval writers' interest in a variety of special senses.

This puzzling text supplies the focus for an experiment in doing basic research. The first step is to assemble Lonergan's texts on the *cogitativa* (primarily from *Verbum*). Next to gather are passages in his later works referring to the superego (from *Insight* and *Topics in Education*) and, because of the relevance of *cogitativa* in human development, supplementary texts referring to Lonergan's theoretical meanings of 'development' and 'finality' (from *Insight* and *Collection*).⁴ Finally, my assembling adds some primary sources from philosophical and neuroscientific texts on the "binding problem. Drawing on these assembled texts interpreters doing the second specialty can go on to develop their interpretation of Lonergan's understanding of the *vis cogitativa* and consider how they might integrate 'Lonergan's odd musing' with these assembled texts.

II Texts on the *Vis Cogitativa*

(1) A young Lonergan inquired whether there were any 'universals of sense.' In the first of what are now called the 'Blandyke Papers,' he writes: "But it would seem highly probable, when one makes more

³ From a letter dated December 27, 1955. Quoted verbatim from the letter without alteration.

⁴ The fuller relevance of adding texts on development and finality is discussed in the follow up article in this volume. See footnote 1 above. Since the puzzle is about Lonergan's meaning of the Freudian superego, there is no gathering of texts on Freud's use of the term.

gradual the change from concrete inference to universal proposition, that both inference and axiom are apprehensions of the *vis cogitativa*.”⁵

(2) In the preceding source, he continues: “...it would seem that axiom and concrete inference are on the same level of thought, that both depend directly upon an intuition of the *vis cogitativa*, and therefore both are equally and *per se* valid. In no real sense, then, is the truth of the particular a consequence of the truth of the general: there seems to be the same relation between them – or at least a similar one – as is found between the scientific law and a fact of experience.”⁶

(3) “I do not know what other solutions there are to the question, Why are symbols essential to algebra? On this hypothesis it is because they make ideas suitable objective-matter for the operations of the *vis cogitativa*. However, conventions are the chief source of the algebraic economy of thought.... By a convention I mean the transference of an axiom into a rule: this involves the substitution of a habit for an act of reason; for example, a mathematician cancels the common factors, multiplies across, or transfers quantities from one side to the other, not from any reference to the four axioms about equals or because of a direct intuition of *vis cogitativa*, but simply from memory and habit.”⁷

(4) “[T]he man of experience knows that such and such medicine cured such and such patients in such and such circumstances; but the technician knows that such a kind of medicine cures such a kind of disease. Like the senses, the man of experience merely knows *quia*; but the technician knows the abstract universal, which is an inner word consequent to insight. But the man of experience merely knows the *universale in particulari*, and that knowledge is not intellectual knowledge but exists in a sensitive potency variously named the *ratio particularis, cogitativa, intellectus passivus*. It carries on comparisons of particulars in virtue of the influence of intellect, and it knows Socrates and Callias, not merely as Socrates and Callias, but also as *hi homines*, and without this sensitive apprehension of the universal in the particular it would be impossible for intellect to reach the abstract universal.”⁸

⁵ Bernard Lonergan, “Blandyke Papers,” in *Shorter Papers. Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan 20* [CWL 20] eds. Robert C. Croken and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 7.

⁶ CWL 20, 8.

⁷ CWL 20, 10.

⁸ *Verbum: Word and Idea in Aquinas. Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan 2* [CWL 2], eds. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 43.

(5) “[O]ur immediate concern is to observe that not a little of the Thomist theory of abstraction is psychological. As a preliminary, we may recall that knowing the universal in the particular, knowing what is common to the instances in the instances, is not abstraction at all; it is an operation attributed by Aquinas to the sensitive potency which he names the *cogitativa*.”⁹

(6) In commenting on the relation of potency and act, he writes: “As sight is to seeing, so hearing (*auditus*) is to hearing (*audire*)....The former is the proportion of matter to form; the latter is the proportion of operative potency to operation. Now, can this be put in different terms? I think so. One begins by imagining the instances. The comparisons of the *cogitativa* prepare one for an act of insight, seeing in the data what itself cannot be a datum.”¹⁰

(7) “Perhaps, agent intellect is to be given the function of the subconscious effect of ordering the phantasm to bring about the right schematic image that releases the flash of understanding; for agent intellect is to phantasm as art is to artificial products.” [Lonergan surmises in a footnote:] “It would seem that this influence of agent intellect on phantasm is mediated by the sensitive potency named the *cogitativa*.”¹¹

(8) In commenting on the requirements for providing “an object in act for the possible intellect” (183), Lonergan writes: “The third requirement is connected with the work of the *cogitativa* which operates under the influence of intellect and prepares suitable phantasms; the significance of this preparation appears from the statement that different intelligible species result from different arrangements of phantasms just as different meanings result from different arrangements of letters.”¹²

(9) “What leads many astray is the opinion of those who hold that universals are known only through the intellect, and therefore whenever they come to know a universal, they immediately think they have understood something. But there are two universals: one is that which is uttered because a ‘why’ has been grasped; the other is the universal in a particular individual, which is apprehended by some sensory faculty.” What follows in the text is a lengthy quote from Aristotle that Lonergan has paraphrased in (4) above. He then adds: “Those, therefore, who claim to understand because somehow or other they perceive a universal are absolutely wrong. Take, for example, the case of the circle: those who know perfectly well the external shape, the Gestalt, of a circle yet

⁹ *CWL* 2, 53.

¹⁰ *CWL* 2, 56.

¹¹ *CWL* 2, 93 and footnote 165.

¹² *CWL* 2 184.

have never thought about why a circle is necessarily round have really not progressed beyond the operations of their senses.”¹³

III Texts on the Superego

(1) In applying his theoretical understanding of development to human development and, in particular, to the insights of depth psychology, Lonergan writes: “...it hardly will be remiss to indicate that our definition of development serves to supply a single scheme that unites otherwise unrelated principles. Thus, the notion of finality brings together Freud’s wish fulfillment, his somewhat ambiguous sublimation, and Jung’s archetypal symbols. The unconscious neural basis neither means nor wishes in the proper senses of those terms, for both meaning and wishing are conscious activities. But the unconscious neural basis is an upwardly directed dynamism seeking fuller realization, first, on the proximate sensitive level, and secondly, beyond its limitations, on higher artistic, dramatic, philosophic, cultural, and religious levels. Hence it is that insight into dream symbols and associated images and affects reveals to the psychologist a grasp of the anticipations and virtualities of higher activities immanent in the underlying unconscious manifold.

A similar phenomenon on a different level is offered by Freud’s superego: within consciousness, it is a compound of preceptive symbols and submissive affects; by its finality it anticipates, by its subordination it reflects, by its obsessive and expansive tendencies it caricatures, the judgments of rational consciousness on the conduct of a rational being.”¹⁴

(2) I have found the following texts helpful in understanding Lonergan’s use of ‘development’ and of ‘finality’ in III (1):

(a) By ‘development’ he means: a flexible, linked sequence of dynamic and increasingly differentiated higher integrations that meet the tension of successively transformed underlying manifolds through successive applications of the principles of correspondence and emergence.”¹⁵

¹³ *The Triune God: Systematics. Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan* 12 [CWL 12], translated from *De Deo Trino: Pars Systematica* (1964) by Michael Shields, ed. Robert Doran and H. Daniel Monsour, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 587.

¹⁴ *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding. Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan* 3 [CWL 3], eds. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 482.

¹⁵ *CWL* 3, 479.

(b) "On finality is affirmed, besides the absolute reference of all things to God and the horizontal reference of each thing to its commensurate motives and ends, a vertical dynamism and tendency, an upthrust from lower to higher levels of appetition and process; thus are provided the empty categories of the ultimate solution, since horizontal ends are shown to be more essential and vertical ends more excellent."¹⁶

(c) "For it is not only our notion of being that is heuristic, that heads for an objective that can be defined only in terms of the process of knowing it, but also the reality of proportionate being itself exhibits a similar incompleteness and a similar dynamic orientation towards a completeness that becomes determinate only in the process of completion."¹⁷

(d) "As what is to be known becomes determinate only through knowing, so what is to be becomes determinate only through its own becoming. But as present knowing is not just present knowing but also a moment in process towards fuller knowing, so also present reality is not just present reality but also a moment in process to fuller reality."¹⁸

(e) "In the general case, [the operator] is the upwardly directed dynamism of proportionate being that we have named finality. It is conditioned by instability in the underlying manifold, by incompleteness in the higher integration, by imperfection in the correspondence between the two. It is constituted inasmuch as the higher system not merely suffers but provokes the underlying instability; inasmuch as the incompleteness of the higher system consists in a generic, rudimentary, undifferentiated character that can become differentiated, effective, specific; inasmuch as the imperfection of the correspondence is, so to speak, under control and moving towards a limit where the principles of correspondence and emergence result in the replacement of the prior integration by a more developed successor; inasmuch as such operators form a flexible series along which the organism advances from the generic functioning of the initial cell to the flexible circle of ranges of schemes of the mature type."¹⁹

¹⁶ "Finality, Love, Marriage," in *Collection. Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan* 4 [CWL 4], eds. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), 18.

¹⁷ *CWL* 3, 476.

¹⁸ *CWL* 3, 471

¹⁹ *CWL* 3, 490-491.

(3) In summarizing the remarks of Georges Cruchon on “a correlation between the Freudian distinctions of superego, ego, and id, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, distinct areas in the brain” Lonergan writes: “In the frontal lobes are located the controls and the integration of nervous activity, and there is a correspondence between this part of the brain and Freud’s superego. The account of the superego, the ego, and the id in terms of their neural foundations in the brain removes some of the mythical thinking connected with Freud’s theories, and at the same time enables us to draw on what is useful in his distinctions.

Now the formation of the superego, which on its neural side entails the development of the frontal lobes of the brain, keeps occurring through childhood with the world of ‘do’ and ‘don’t.’ And the intellectual crisis of adolescence is the period in which adolescents reject the set of precepts and evaluations that were imposed externally through precepts at a time when they were not able to think for themselves.”²⁰

(4) In comments on Mary Renault’s *The King Must Die*, Lonergan remarks that the work “exemplifies a statement made by Christopher Dawson that the achievement of Christianity was the transference of religion from the id to the superego. Pagan religion is mixed in with sexuality....” A footnote cites Dawson’s words: “Even today very little thought is given to the profound revolution in the psychological basis of culture by which the new society of Western Christendom came into existence. Stated in the terms of Freudian psychology, what occurred was the translation of religion from the sphere of the Id to that of the Super-Ego.”²¹

IV Philosophical and Neuroscientific Texts on the ‘Binding Problem’

(1) In writing on the *sensus communis*, one author reformulates the traditional philosophical puzzle: “...while recognizing that some contemporary philosophers are still influenced by an atomistic view of sense impressions, most acknowledge that we are aware not merely of isolated disparate sense data, but of concrete individual sensible things, which at the level of the external senses are wholes composed of many sensible aspects. One of many philosophical problems faced by these philosophers, however, is to explain precisely how these distinct simultaneously presented sensible aspects are objectively (that is, with respect to their being distinct sensible aspects of one individual concrete

²⁰ *Topics in Education. Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan* 10 [CWL 10], eds. Doran and Crowe, revising and augmenting the text prepared by James Quinn and John Quinn (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 101.

²¹ CWL 10, 254 and footnote 33.

sensible thing) and subjectively (that is, with respect to the unity of the diverse activities of the external senses, all as pertaining to the same awareness center or subject of awareness) cognized as belonging to the same individual sensible thing.”²².

(2) “The binding problem in cognitive science has many facets, but one problem traditionally at its core is to explain the unity of perception. How is the information processed by different sensory systems brought together to provide a unified representation of the world? Call this the perceptual binding problem. The problem is Janus faced. On one side, we want to explain phenomenal binding: the fact that we experience a single world rather than separate perceptual fields for each sensory modality. On the other side, we are faced with a computational or functional problem, namely, to explain how a neural net like the brain links representations of objects with representations of their properties, for example, the representation of an apple with representations of its color, shape, taste and heft. In general, we want to know how the brain manages to represent the assignment of instances (this apple) to types (red).”²³

(3) “The singular term ‘problem’ suggests that binding is a unitary problem. In fact, the binding problem is a class of problems, and some of the confusion in discussions of binding may stem from the fact that different phenomena are being referred to by a single name. Besides visual binding, which includes binding information across visual space, binding information across types of features, and binding neural signals across cortical space, binding occurs in other modalities. For instance, auditory binding may be needed to discriminate the sound of a single voice in a crowd; binding across time is required for interpreting object motion; and cross-modal binding is required to associate the sound of a ball striking a bat with the visual percept of it, so that both are effortlessly perceived as aspects of a single event.”²⁴

(4) “For any case of binding, the binding problem can actually be dissected into three separable problems. Different theories have focused primarily on one of the three.

(a) Parsing. How are the relevant elements to bind as a single entity selected and segregated from those belonging to other objects, ideas, or events?

²² Stephen J. Laumakis, “The *Sensus Communis* Reconsidered,” *ACPA Quarterly* 82 (Summer 2008): 429.

²³ James W. Garson, “(Dis)solving the Binding Problem,” in *Philosophical Psychology* 14, no. 4 (2001): 381.

²⁴ Adina L. Roskies, “The Binding Problem,” in *Neuron* 24 (September 1999): 7.

(b) Encoding. How is the binding encoded so that it can be signaled to other brain systems and used?

(c) Structural description. How are the correct relations specified between the bound elements within a single object?

The second and third operations are not necessarily sequential, and in fact some models combine all three as part of the same process.”²⁵

Postscript

The preceding texts are materials relevant to understanding Lonergan’s ‘musing’ on the *vis cogitativa* and the Freudian superego. They supply clues for interpreters doing FS2 as they try to resolve some of the puzzles Lonergan’s brief comments generate. My second essay in this issue, “Early Forms of Apprehension and Moral Evaluation,” demonstrates how to integrate these ‘received’ materials in doing functional interpretation.

After retiring from teaching for over forty years at St. Edward’s University in Austin, Texas, William J. Zanardi is continuing to write articles and books about functional specialization. A six-volume co-authored series on the third and fourth specialties contains multiple experiments in testing their worth in diagnosing and evading contemporary intellectual impasses. The most recent volumes are *The Education of Liberty: Fantasies about the Future*, *Comparing Philosophical Methods: A Way Forward* (with R.G. Aaron Mundine and Clayton Shoppa) and *Rescuing Ethics from Philosophers*.

²⁵ Anne Treisman, “Solutions to the Binding Problem: Progress through Controversy and Convergence,” in *Neuron* 24 (September 1999): 105.