

Lonergan on General Transcendent Knowledge

In “General Transcendent Knowledge,” Chapter 19 of *Insight*, Lonergan does several things:

§1-3--He provides a radical reinterpretation of the meaning of “transcendence” (“beyond”) which overcomes the spatial and temporally image-bound notions--e.g., lying “beyond” a linear limit but still on the line, or “beyond” a spatial boundary but still in space, or “beyond” a temporal now but still in time. He does this by defining transcendence in terms of the pure unrestricted desire to know. On this basis, he also poses a critique of previous attempts at raising the question of the possibility of knowledge of the transcendent.

§4-7--He elaborates his “analogical extrapolation” of the idea of an “unrestricted act of understanding,” which will form the basis for assertions (judgments) about transcendent reality.

§8--He provides the crucial intermediate steps, wherein the “anthropomorphic notions” of causality are criticized and supplanted; and the issue of the contingencies of proportionate being and human knowing are confronted with the fact of the “intrinsic intelligibility of being.”

§9--He elaborates the parallels between the implications regarding his analogical conception of an Unrestricted Act of Understanding on the one hand, and traditional notions about God on the other. (In here is an excursus – “Twenty-fifth place” regarding theodicy-- how to reconcile the facticity of evil with what is asserted about God in the other 24 places.)

§10--Only here does Lonergan take up knowledge proper about transcendent reality (God). That is to say, only here does Lonergan move from analogical understanding to judgment.

In §11, then, he compares his own approach to those that went before.

We could say that there are two sorts of things entailed in what Lonergan termed “General Transcendent Knowledge.” The first, and fairly traditional, is the “knowledge” which comes by means of a “proof for the existence of God”--i.e., knowledge of God's existence.

The second, and seemingly less traditional, is the “analogical” knowledge of things about God that can be developed from the analogical conception of an “Unrestricted Act of Understanding” (pages 644-699 are concerned with this development). As it turns out, the analogical conception of an Unrestricted Act of Understanding and the proof for God's existence are interrelated.

(I)

Lonergan states the syllogism for the Proof for God's existence (p. 695 [672]) as follows:

Link: If the real is completely intelligible, then God exists.

Fulfillment of Conditions: But the real is completely intelligible.

Conditioned: Therefore, God exists.

Needless to say, the syllogism is far from self-evident, and requires a great deal of explanation, which the following reformulations are intended to assist.

(II)

Link, more completely stated: If the real is being, and if being is completely intelligible, and if there exists at least one contingent fact, then an Unrestricted Act of Understanding exists.

Fulfillment of conditions: But the real is being.

And being is completely intelligible.

And there is at least one contingent fact.

New conditioned: Therefore, an Unrestricted Act of Understanding exists.

New and old conditioned related: (But what is implicit in the notion of an Unrestricted Act of Understanding are qualities people attribute to God (pp. 680-92 [657-69]); hence, the existence of an Unrestricted Act of Understanding is equivalent to the existence of God.)

(III)

Fulfillment of the second condition:

There is at least one contingent fact--i.e., "I am a knower."

It is **not necessarily the case** that you are a "unity, identity, whole characterized by such activities as sensing, remembering, imagining, inquiring, insights, formulating, asking 'But is it so?,' reflecting, grasping sufficient reason (the virtually unconditioned) for judging, judging," etc. It is only the case **if you** as unity is present to yourself in your own consciousness, and if those activities are conscious to (experienced by) you. So your thinking and your existence are contingent facts.

(IV)

Fulfillment of the first condition:

(A) The real is being. Technically, this could be considered a tautology: The real is what is, and "what is" is what is meant by "being." However, counterpositions are grounded in the several patterns of experience--and especially in the discontinuity between the biological pattern of experience and the intellectual patterning of experience. The biological patterning gives rise to a sense of "reality" as spatial, temporal or at least imaginable. So identification of the real with being is a matter of more than logical argumentation. It is a matter of radical self-acceptance--of intellectual conversion to oneself as a unity-identity-whole oriented into a universe not merely biologically but intelligently, rationally and responsibly. (See *Insight*, pp. 413 [388], 498 [473] and more especially, *Understanding and Being*, pp. 181-88).

(B) Being is completely intelligible. [This is derived from the self-affirmed cognitional structure!]

By "intelligible" is meant what is known in an insight. "Intelligible" = the content, the "supervening addition over and above the sensible" which comes to awareness in an insight.

By “being” is meant the objective of your unrestricted desire to know, manifested in questions. That is to say, the unrestricted desire desires the answers to all questions; the answers to all questions will be had when the answers to all “what, why, etc.” questions are understood and the answers to all “Is it so?” questions are known in judgment. (Knowledge of the totality of what is.) So, being is known once all affirmative judgments have been made. (Not negative judgments, because negative judgments say something is not, and that is not what is (=being)).

But each and every judgment affirms that, what an insight grasps, is. And every insight grasps some intelligibility. Hence, every true, affirmative judgment affirms that some intelligibility is. Hence, everything that is, is intelligible.

Hence, being is completely intelligible. And, therefore, the real is completely intelligible.

(V)

Link, even more completely stated: If being is completely intelligible, and there is even one contingent fact, then there must be something which is both self-explanatory, and which explains the contingency of the fact.

Otherwise there would be a “mere, brute fact,” about which one could ask, “Why is it?” and for which, ultimately, there would be no answer. But if there were no answer, then being could not be completely intelligible. That is to say, for something which is, there would be no insight which grasped its “why.”

But in section (IV) it was concluded that being is in fact completely intelligible. Therefore there are not “brute facts.” Therefore there must be something which explains the contingent fact and is also self explanatory. (Another contingent fact--e.g., your conception, your parents, etc.--or even an indefinite series of such facts may explain your contingency, but is not in itself self-explanatory.)

(VI)

The analogical conception of an Unrestricted Act of Understanding:

A human insight is an answer to an inquiry. That relation between inquiry and insight makes an insight be what it is--that which resolves the tension of inquiry.

But there is a deeper and more profound tension which a single insight does not satisfy--the unrestricted desire to know.

On the basis of these three knowns, we may have a kind of understanding--and analogical understanding--of a fourth, unknown term, X:

an inquiry : its answering insight :: the unrestricted desire to know : X

X would have the characteristic of answering the unrestricted desire to know. X would also have the characteristic of answering it the same way that an insight answers a restricted desire--i.e., X would be some kind of insight or understanding. Hence, X would be an Unrestricted Insight, or, an Unrestricted Act of Understanding.

As such, an Unrestricted Act of Understanding would understand everything about everything. **It would be the very essence of compassion!!**

(VII)

It remains to be shown that an Unrestricted Act of Understanding is both self-explanatory, and is explanatory of everything that is contingent.

First, by “Explanatory” here we mean that which is the explanation for the being of something.

Now, an Unrestricted Act of Understanding would be the explanation for its own existence. For it is an Unrestricted Act, and therefore, a completely Invulnerable Act of Understanding. Moreover, while human invulnerable insights are invulnerable because there just, as a matter of fact, happen to be no further questions, the case is radically different for the Unrestricted Act of Understanding. For it there not only are no further questions whatsoever, but it also understands why there are no further questions whatsoever. (If it did not, it would not be unrestricted understanding). Hence, its unrestricted understanding is the condition of its own invulnerability, its own unconditionality, and therefore its being.

Again, (see p. 659) there is a Primary and Secondary component in the Unrestricted Act of Understanding.

The Primary component is the Self-Understanding of the Unrestricted Act of Understanding. For, if the Unrestricted Act of Understanding did not understand itself, then there would be something it did not understand--but by definition, it is that which understands everything about everything.

In understanding Itself, the Unrestricted Act of Understanding understands the reason for its being--otherwise there would be something about itself that it did not understand. Thus, the reason for its being is something the Unrestricted Act of Understanding, in its Primary component, grasps about itself.

Moreover, the reason for its being is identical with that understanding. For suppose the reason for Its being was distinct from the Unrestricted Act of Understanding. Then the Unrestricted Act of Understanding, though understanding its reason, would understand there to be something conditioning It which was apart from its understanding. But this is a contradiction, since Its understanding is unconditioned. In other words, the Unrestricted Act of Understanding grasps that to be an Unrestricted Act of Understanding is to be constitutive of its own existence.

Note that this is only true of the Self-Understanding of an Unrestricted Act of Understanding. For a human act of self-understanding does not grasp the reason for Its own existence. Human self-understanding recognizes itself as merely “conditioned,” for human consciousness, when It understands what is meant by the phrase “self-as-constituting” (or “self-as-’knower“”) immediately recognizes that Its self-understanding is not enough to know either the reason or the fact of Its being. Human beings go on to ask, “But is it so?” and “But why is it so?” However, there are no “Is it so?” questions for an Unrestricted Act of Understanding: It grasps the answers to all questions.

(VIII)

Finally, the Unrestricted Act of Understanding is also explanatory of every contingent fact. (p. 661)

(A) Detour: The Unrestricted Act of Understanding is perfect. (see p. 658) If the Unrestricted Act of Understanding had “any defect or lack or imperfection,” then in its own self-understanding, the Unrestricted Act of Understanding (because unrestricted) would understand what was missing. But in understanding what was missing, there would be present in Its understanding what is defective, lacking, imperfect. But this is contrary to the hypothesis that something is missing from Its Being=Its Understanding. Therefore, there is no defect or lack or imperfection in the Unrestricted Act of Understanding. Therefore it is perfect.

(B) The Unrestricted Act of Understanding would be imperfect if it could ground all possible universes, and all events in those universes, as objects of thought but not as realities (this is expanded on p. 664). But the Unrestricted Act of Understanding is not imperfect. Therefore it can ground all contingent events.

In this case, “to ground” means to be capable of making an intelligibility be actual in a non-arbitrary way. That is, to both be capable of making them be, and to do so intelligently--i.e., to know what the reasons for doing so are. As perfect, the Unrestricted Act of Understanding can make them be; as unrestricted understanding, It knows why they are.

However, it might seem that this part of the argument is vulnerable to Pascal's objection about the “God of the philosophers” vs. the “God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.” While the “God of the Philosophers” Pascal criticized was certainly not an Unrestricted Act of Understanding, the dimension of religious belief he was getting at pertains to dimensions of an Unrestricted Act of Understanding which are touched upon by Lonergan's remark that the complete intelligibility of all contingency is “ultimately accounted for by God's creative decision” (p. 663) , by his further remarks on pp. 664-665 regarding God as ultimate finality of the universe, and his discussion of Redemption in Chapter 20 and religious expression in Method in Theology.

Hence, the Unrestricted Act of Understanding is explanatory of all contingent events.

(IX)

Finally, this is only analogical knowledge of the Unrestricted Act of Understanding (or God). One does not hereby grasp God, the way one grasps the intelligibility of a window latch, an English word, a mitochondrion, or an internal combustion engine. Rather, the intelligibility of the Unrestricted Act of Understanding remains just that-- Unrestricted and therefore Mysterious!