

Insight & Beyond

Class 24, Part 2: March 31st 2010

Chapter 17 §3: “Truth of Interpretation”

“Expression and Interpretation”

Insight on **Interpretation**

“Philosophers and philosophies engage our attention inasmuch as they are instances and products of inquiring intelligence and reflecting reasonableness. [This] is the ground for finding in any given philosophy a significance that can extend beyond the philosopher’s horizon and, even in a manner he [or she] did not expect.”
(*CWL* 3, p. 412).

Evaluative history: “Better than it really was.”
(*CWL* 14, *MiT*).

On the counter-position, an objective interpretation would have be a cinematic reenactment of what was originally said and done and felt “already out there then.”

The intellectual pattern, by contrast, is unrestrictedly interested in the meaning of things.

Counter-positions can also influence what is meant by the phrase “the meaning is in the text” as if the meaning is already out there in the marks on the paper.

I thought I would begin with this remark. One of the difficulties with interpretation that Lonergan is focused on is the problems that crop up in what you might call the Philosophy of Interpretation, in Historiography, in Literary Criticism in the field, is, from Lonergan’s point of view, the presence of counterpositions that haven’t been cleared out. *And the counterposition that hasn’t been cleared out for so many people in general, and interpreters in particular, is the counterposition having to do with the already-out-there-now! So the interference with the intellectual pattern, which is unrestrictedly interested in the meaning of things versus the biological pattern which is restrictively interested in some sub-division of the already-out-there-now!*

Insight on **Interpretation**

“If the real is the ‘out there’ and knowing it is taking a look, then the ideal of interpretation has to be as close an approximation as possible to a reconstruction of the cinema of what was done, of the soundtrack of what was said, and even of the Huxleyan ‘feelie’ of the emotions and sentiments

of the participants in the drama of the past.”

(*CWL* 3, p. 604).

To the extent that the already-out-there-now controls one's sense of knowing and objectivity and reality, it has certain kinds of effects on interpretation and what one thinks interpretation is, and must be, or ought to be. And this at least is a very graphic example. It goes back to something that I think Maggie or somebody else mentioned a little bit earlier in the session.

“If the real is the ‘out there’ and knowing it is taking a look, then the ideal of interpretation has to be as close an approximation as possible to — ” (*CWL* 3, p. 604).

— Okay, now let me pause there for a moment!

Earlier on in the chapter, maybe it's later on — I can't remember where it comes — Lonergan makes the remark that *a certain kind of, if you might call it, “naïve realism” interpretation, consists in thinking of the task of interpretation as seeing the meaning that's in there in the text.* So you will find people, really good scholars, who would insist on *paying close attention to the text; and that's very good advice!* It's something that's terribly important! *It's also something that can be taken to an excess, that makes people overlook what they are actually doing, and gets into arguments!* So the thing that Maggie be asked about: *Is that really in the author's intent? You could say, “Is that really in the text? Look at the text! Show me where in the text that is!” That's metaphorical; and people almost always understand it as metaphorical. But at a certain point, the metaphor breeds over into being too literal! That if it's objective, it's in the text!*

There is of course a certain kind of way of construing a very traditional metaphysics, the metaphysics of Aristotle, of matter and form; that if the matter is, as Lonergan says in numerous places, *marks on a piece of paper; so the matter is marks on a piece of paper, and the meaning is the form of those marks on the piece of paper.* And *if it's the real meaning of the text, that means the form is “out there” in the marks on the piece of paper. So you make sure that you get the form as it is, the meaning as it is on the marks on the piece of paper. So one way in which*

the counterposition can come up is to say that the meaning has to be in the text, which is to say “out there”, not “in here”. That objectivity of interpretation is paying attention to the meaning that’s already residing out there!

Counter-position in interpretation of “plain meaning” as it is in the text, can lead to anachronism or archaism.

Both ignore the historical dimensions of meaning. Both interpret the text merely “descriptively” — “as it appears to me,” “as it is meaningful to me” — without criticizing “me” and situating “me” in explanatory relations to other historical persons and events.

Need for a heuristic account of how meanings are related to one another through developments and dialectics.

Connection of such counter-positions with Huxley’s horrific vision in the novel *Brave New World*.

Once one recognizes the difficulties and the impossibilities of interpretation as conceived along the lines of counter-positions, one is tempted to conclude there can be no objective interpretation.

This is not quite the same thing, but it’s somewhat parallel. This is on page 312 in *Method in Theology*, (or in *CWL 14, MiT*, p. 290), if you want to refer to it by that: **“What the methodologist may do —”** So *a person who is practicing methodologically grounded interpretation —*

“What the methodologist may do, however, is point to the different contexts in which such questions have been raised. First, prior to the emergence of historical-mindedness —” (*CWL 14, MiT*, p. 290).

Now, *historical-mindedness* is a developed version of what Lonergan is putting forward in a section to be read; but for the moment, let it stand in for what he means by a scientific interpretation grounded in a universal viewpoint.

“First, prior to the emergence of historical-mindedness one had the alternatives of *anachronism* and *archaism*. The *anachronist* attributed to scripture and to the [Church] Fathers an implicit grasp of what the Scholastics discovered. The *archaist*, on the other hand, regarded as a corruption any doctrine that was not to be found in the *plain meaning* either of scripture or of scripture and patristic tradition.” (CWL 14, MiT, p. 290, emphases added).

So by *“plain meaning”* there, he means the meaning as it is there in the text; and what he calls *“the archaist”*, which would have been one of the sets of concerns that led to the cultural disruption of the Reformation and the Counter-reformation, that led to saying, well, this stuff that we find in scholastic philosophy and scholastic vehicles, this stuff that we find in Scholastic theology, that’s not already *in Scripture*. And if we want to be true to the Scripture — which was the great and important motivating concern of the Reformation, to be true to Scripture, which became the principle of *“Sola Scriptura”* — *If you want to be true to Scripture, then these later accretions have to be regarded as departures from the original meaning of Scripture*. And so Greg’s question earlier about the *“Quest for the Historical Jesus”*, we want to go back to just what’s in Scripture and not what anybody layered over, and especially not those scholastic theologians. So that’s one version of it.

The other version of it that he — *the other thing that he’s getting at here* is something that we’ll see illustrated or addressed somewhat later: and *it is the failure to have recognized the difference between one’s own context and the context of the text as originally expressed*. So, to read a text and take it literally means literally relative to me! Lonergan doesn’t use the word *“descriptive interpretation”*, but that is what it would be: the text as it appears to me, the text as it is meaningful to me.

And so he is criticizing both of them [the anachronist and the archaist] for their failure to take into account exactly what he is trying to emphasize here in chapter seventeen, that

to do objective, scientific, explanatory, interpretation that addresses these various problems that we saw at the beginning, means that you have to have some account, some very profoundly deeply grounded account, of how meanings and expressions develop, and get distorted.

And if you don't have that, your tendency would be to say, if I pick up Scripture and I read it and it strikes me in a certain way, well that's what it means; without recognizing how much of my own conscious activity is caught up in that in a funny reflective way. And then the other version that he's got here is that the meaning has to be the plain meaning from the text.

But in this passage he doesn't focus on that; he focusses on what's the consequence. So, in other words, if you get to the point where you say 'Well obviously, meaning doesn't reside in the text, because the text is just marks on a piece of paper, or marks in a tablet of clay, or engraved in a monument. Obviously those are just physical marks; those are not meanings! *Then the alternative seems to be, if meaning is not already out there in the marks, then it must be already in there in the mind of the author.* And so an objective interpretation would require

“as close an approximation as possible to a reconstruction of the cinema of what was done, of the soundtrack of what was said, and even of the Huxleyan ‘feelie’ of the emotions and sentiments of the participants in the drama of the past.” (CWL 3, p. 604).

How many of you are unaware of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. ... [It seems like most of the class were familiar with this novel.] Wow, great! A universal test. That must be up to *The Catcher in the Rye*!

[Students pleasurable murmurs]

So that great moment, which Huxley of course sees with great horror, and which we are probably only about five seconds from realizing in the twenty-first century, of you not only have digitally mastered vivid visual images and Dolby sound audio images, but you sort of put the electrodes

on your feet, on your nerve endings, so that you actually get stimulated. And Huxley of course is aghast at this, because it leaves nothing to the human imagination, it leaves nothing to the authentic response of human beings to meanings. It does all the work for you, which means, of course, that the State does all the work for you. And if not the State, then Sony, or Podcast, or Google, does something, does all the work, does it all for you. And *he really sees that as the beginning of the enslavement of the human spirit.*

So what Lonergan is getting at here is that — by invoking Huxley here — to make us see the ridiculousness of that as a notion: that an interpretation would ultimately mean a reenactment of the flow of consciousness of somebody else; which of course, first of all, we cannot do, and secondly would not be meaningful if we could do it. The meaning doesn't reside — *The big point that he wants to make here is that the meaning does not reside in the sensitive elements, in what he calls the “material determinations” of an interpretation. It's just the potency about which we must ask questions: “What's the meaning of this?” It doesn't substitute for the asking and the answering of the questions of meaning, both what he calls “formal meaning” of the intelligibility, and “actual meaning”, by which he means the truth of what is said. So it's one thing — So the interpretation doesn't just rest with what ideas are being put forward, but goes on to want to know, well, were they true?!* And in what sense were they true? And in what dialectically complicated interaction between achievement of truth and distorted presentation of truth has this expression been put forward? *So this [Pat gestures to this slide] is not what interpretation is! Lonergan is certainly not alone in that!*

Insight on **Interpretation**

“If the real is the ‘out there’ and knowing it is taking a look, then the ideal of interpretation has to be as close an approximation as possible to a reconstruction of the cinema of what was done, of the soundtrack of what was said, and even of the Huxleyan ‘feelie’ of the emotions and sentiments of the participants in the drama of the past.”
(*CWL* 3, p. 604).

Loneragan is certainly not alone in saying that this is not what interpretation is! ! But Lonergan may be unique in saying: Well, if you can’t achieve that — Well, hang on, let me turn that around. For many a person, the recognition of the foolishness of thinking of this as the objective of what an interpretation is all about, leads to the conclusion that there is no such thing as an objective interpretation, which we’ve talked about before; and therefore interpretation is just a free creative act in which you give meaning to the text as you are so inspired. And there is some validity to that part of interpretation! And the minute people go down that path very far, people certainly and appropriately get troubled! If you want to say that insight is in fact a symphony, there is something seriously wrong with that interpretation if you meet it.¹¹ It breaks all bounds of liberal limitation, and so on; that there is something totally ‘off’ about that!!

And so Lonergan is steering his way between these counter-positional tendencies with regard to what interpretation is, and trying to find something that’s very thoughtful as an alternative!

So we ask once again, what is interpretation?

Loneragan emphasizes that an interpretation is an expression.

¹¹ The four words prior to this point are not clearly audible to the transcriber, and are merely his conjecture.

His emphasis is on expression (*Ausdruck*) rather than on understanding (*Verstehen*).

Different kinds of interpretation: commonsense, simple (historical), reflective, explanatory (scientific).

Difference between what Lonergan means by the phrase “scientific interpretation” in contrast to the misleading connotations likely to come to mind in connection with that phrase.

Explanatory (scientific) interpretation is concerned to understand expressions in their relations to one another.

This is Lonergan’s way of addressing the problem of relativism.

It includes understanding biased expressions in their relations to other expressions.

What is Interpretation?

“An interpretation is the *expression* of the meaning of another *expression*.” (*CWL* 3, p. 608, emphases added).

“By an interpretation will be meant a second *expression* addressed to a different audience.” (*CWL* 3, p. 585, emphasis added).

**Not Understanding (*Verstehen*)
but Expression (*Ausdruck*)**

Now, what for Lonergan is interpretation? This is terribly important, because for Lonergan interpretation is something different than it is for most people who write about interpretation! I won't say for all but for most!

The operative word here in Lonergan's definition of interpretation is the word 'expression'! "**An interpretation is the expression of the meaning of another expression.**" (CWL 3, p. 608, emphases added). And "**By an interpretation will be meant a second expression addressed to a different audience.**" (CWL 3, p. 585, emphasis added). The second interpretation is addressed to a different audience. The difference in Lonergan's emphasis — versus not all, but a great many *of those* who write on interpretation — is *the difference between expression and understanding*, or in German terms, between *Verstehen* and *Ausdruck*. *People who, particularly in the German philosophical traditions, who write about interpretation, focus on understanding; that interpretation has to do with understanding. For Lonergan, interpretation has to do with expression.* That's a terribly important distinction in Lonergan.

The nature of the distinction, and the reason why he makes the emphasis that he does, hopefully will become clearer in some of the further comments that we are going to explore here. So types of interpretation that Lonergan refers to, not in chapter seventeen, but in chapter six, *common sense interpretation*; and then in chapter seventeen, what he calls *simple, reflective, and explanatory interpretation*. "Explanatory Interpretation": he does use that phrase once (see CWL 3, p. 610), that educate once; but usually he refers to *scientific interpretation*. But given a variety of developments since the time he wrote *Insight*, a time in which people were debating about whether there was such a thing as scientific interpretation, I would prefer to go to his own

term, ‘**explanatory**’, to underscore what I think he is doing with his notion of “scientific interpretation”!

Types of Interpretation

Commonsense

Simple (Historical)

Reflective

Explanatory (“Scientific”)

In our contemporary context, the great interest in neuroscience and cognitive science and their intersections with philosophy, leads in certain directions, but among them, a major tendency is the direction that would regard giving an account of neural functioning as the interpretation of a text. You could think that that was what is meant by the phrase “scientific interpretation”! *Clearly Lonergan does not mean that! So what he means by “scientific interpretation” is closer to what he means by ‘explanatory’; something he began in chapter two of *Insight*, and repeated in various themes and variations throughout, in his moving viewpoint. ‘Explanatory’ remember means understanding things, understanding data, in relationship to one another. An explanatory interpretation is understanding expressions in their relationships to one another. Remember his early concern is to find a method that would overcome the problem of relativity, the problem of relativism of interpretation!*

The model that he is putting forward here is a model in which the objective is to understand expressions in relationship to one another; which is to say, to situate any subjective, culturally conditioned, and for that matter, counter-positionally or biased interpretation, in relationship to other interpretations. That is why he thinks that there is something special about his approach to interpretation.

So those [listed on the slide](#) are the four types that Lonergan talks about, one in chapter six and the other three in chapter seventeen.

Commonsense understanding and commonsense interpretation.

The richness of human communication requires human beings rather than computers.

Understanding the commonsense expressions of others requires continual self-transcendence — adding the one or two further insights to the previously accumulated inventory of insights and judgments.

The vast accumulation of insights required to understand ordinary, yet complex commonsense expressions.

“The only interpreter of commonsense expressions is common sense.” (CWL 3, p. 200).

No shortcut, formula or algorithm can substitute for a person of developed common sense.

So let's go back and remember what he said in chapter six. *Common sense remember is characterized by that dynamic process, that self-correcting cycle of question and insight, followed by further question, and further insight; common sense as an inventory of insights that are accumulated in that fashion, remains incomplete until there is added at least one further insight.* We talked about that last semester, and I'm not going to dwell on it right now: but just to remind us about it.

**Commonsense Understanding and
Commonsense Interpretation**

“Common sense ... remains incomplete until there is added at least one further insight into the situation in hand.” (*CWL* 3, pp. 198-199).

“For commonsense not merely says what it means; it says it to someone; ... It follows that the only interpreter of commonsense utterances is common sense.” (*CWL* 3, p. 200).

The important thing that I would like to underscore in this is its relevance to the phenomenon of expression and interpretation; and **also to recall** that the richness of human communication requires not computers, but human beings! That what makes it possible to comprehend the meaning of what someone says is the unrestricted desire to know that can go beyond the self as constituted so far; that empowers a remark, or a gesture, or action, or a facial expression, with incomprehension; and recognizes that in the total inventory of all the accumulated insights, there ain't enough there to make sense entirely of what I've encountered. Every day, every hour, we have to go beyond ourselves as constituted to understand the new complex nuances of what another human being is expressing, whether in word or in gesture or in deeds.

Then comes the remark in which Lonergan gives his account of what he means by commonsense interpretation. And so, I just would like to read the entire passage here:

“For common sense not merely says what it means; it says it to someone; it begins by exploring the other fellow's intelligence; it advances by determining what further insights have to be communicated to him; it undertakes the communication, not as an exercise in formal logic, but as a work of art; and it has at its disposal not merely all the resources of language but also the support of modulated tone and changing volume, the eloquence of facial expression, the emphasis of gestures,

the effectiveness of pauses, the suggestiveness of questions, the significance of omissions. It follows that the only interpreter of commonsense utterances is common sense.” (*CWL 3*, p. 200).

So it seems to me that what he is getting at there, is, in the rich phenomena of human expression, human face to face interpersonal expression, interpersonal conversation, one has to have a very rich accumulated set of commonsense insights in order to make sense of what one is observing and hearing and, in some cases, touching, in that rich kind of expression. That one needs to ask and answer, even though one isn't, so to speak, doing it in the mode of an organized discussion or a method, but spontaneously and regularly we are wondering about what's being said, using our accumulated inventory of insights, of our commonsense setting, to make sense of that, and adding the one or two further insights that you need to fill out the intelligibility of what is being expressed. “**The only interpreter of commonsense utterances is common sense**”, pointing here to the fact that *we need a tremendous accumulation of insights to be able to understand what a person is saying; and it can take twenty or thirty or more years to accumulate those.*

One of the difficulties that I run into sometimes when I encounter people who come from cultures other than the north-east United States — and that includes people from outside the north-east who come here to study — is the differences that people use in expressing themselves would, if taken literally within the framework of my accumulated commonsense insights, would mean something different than is being expressed. So that's what he means by saying that common sense is “**the only interpreter of commonsense utterances.**” There is no short-cut, there is no formula, there is no algorithm, that substitutes for the long process of accumulating insights that are needed to be what we sometimes call a “contextual horizon” within which we add those further insights. That's his point! That you don't have short-cuts to commonsense interpretation. You have to become an inhabitant of that commonsense culture!

**Since interpretation is an expression of an expression,
must first consider what expression is.**

Formalized account of expression — the numerous sets of insights that go into framing an expression.

Loneragan's account of what an expression is, is grounded in self-appropriation.

Expression has many levels of complexity of meaning, but first appears just as marks on paper.

The reality of meaning is not to be found in the sensible marks or sounds; meaning is to be found in correct understanding, and transcends the sensible.

Now, I stuck this long rather awful expression — There are a few other long awful expressions to follow — I stuck this long expression up there, because: notice how closely it corresponds to what we just said; that passage I just read where Lonergan says that the person draws upon the facial gestures, the modulation of tone, and volume, and so on. Notice how closely this formulized version in this slide corresponds to the more richly narrative formulation [that was read earlier](#).

“Suppose that a writer [or a speaker] proposes to communicate some insight [A] to a reader. Then by [another] insight [B] the writer will grasp the reader’s habitual accumulation of insights [C].” (CWL 3, p. 579).

Commonsense not only expresses itself, but it says it to someone. That means, it says it to at least its understanding of what that person is going to get! So we all not only have our commonsense insights, but among our commonsense insights are our insights into what other people have in mind, and what they are most likely to understand.

Expression

“Suppose that a writer proposes to communicate some insight A to a reader.

Then by an insight B the writer will grasp the reader’s habitual accumulation of insights C:

by a further insight D he will grasp the deficiencies in insight E that must be made up before the reader can grasp the insight A;

finally, the writer must reach a practical set of insights F that will govern his verbal flow, the shaping of his sentences, their combination into paragraphs, the sequence of paragraphs in chapters and of chapters in books.” (*CWL* 3, p. 579).

And we look for those nodding — We look for the light in the eyes, or the nods, or the puzzled stares that are found, or the rumpled frowns, that either mean that people are getting what we’re saying, or not. And we make these mid-course corrections as we are expressing. That’s what Lonergan means [when he writes](#):

“by [another] insight [B] the writer will grasp *the reader’s habitual accumulation of insights [C]*. Then by a further insight [D] he will grasp *the deficiencies in insight [E] that must be made up before the reader can grasp the insight [A]*.” (*CWL* 3, p. 579, emphases added).

So you can walk into a room, and assume that nobody knows what you are going to talk about; or you can walk into a room and assume that people have that accumulation of insights C; and you start to talk and then say: “Woops, no! They didn’t quite get that!” So I’ve got to shift over to E the deficiencies of insights E that I have to make up for.

So he is giving a formulized account of what happens when we are expressing, that parallels that commonsense passage [we saw](#). So an expression, whether it's a commonsense expression, whether it's the expression that you are using over a cup of coffee with a friend, or whether it's the expressions that I am using in conducting this class, and that you are using in asking questions and making comments; or whether it's the expression that a literary critic is using, it has always got this set of structures to it, for enlightenment. And then we've got that practical set of insights [F](#) that will govern the verbal flow, the use of facial gesture, the use of intonation and volume, and so on, so as to communicate the insight.

So expression. But remember that *interpretation is an expression of an expression*. If we are going to talk about interpretation as an expression of an expression, we have to first of all know what he means by 'expression'; what we mean by expression. And now, notice what Lonergan is doing: he is using the terms that we have won by the hard work of self-appropriation to give a self-appropriated grounded meaning of 'expression.' It's not burping! It's not like I've got an idea and I burp it out! Just to have an insight, A, doesn't mean that you can express it. There's an awful lot more understanding that is involved in expressing it. So an original expression, and then the interpretation as a second expression of the expression; in both cases, both the original expression and the interpretation, involve this structure.

Now, what are we doing when we are interpreting? We start with an expression; the expression in fact has all of the complexity that we just saw in the slide [entitled 'Expression'](#). But initially for us it's just spatially ordered marks on paper, or parchment, or papyrus, or stone. For us initially an expression, though in fact it is constituted by meaning, appears to us first of all just as spatially ordered marks.

I could have brought in, for those of you who don't know Greek, I could have brought in a Greek text, and you could say that that is just for you spatially ordered marks, and talk about what is involved in interpreting; but I'm sure you all have experiences of that, particularly of encountering written expressions in languages or scripts that are completely unfamiliar to you because they are in Latin Roman letters.

Maybe a comment here: for Lonergan, of course, there is a reality to meaning! *And the reality of meaning is not to be found in the spatially ordered marks. The reality of meaning is the*

reality of the true intelligibilities of those marks! And what interpretation is all about is transcending from the initial encounter of spatially ordered marks, or the chorally resonated sounds, that come simply as data, that need to be understood, to a correct understanding of those data.

Interpretation as Expression:

What is an Expression?

“Sensible manifestations of meaning through gestures, speech, and writing.” (*CWL 3*, p. 592).

“There are the external sources of historical interpretation, and in the main they consist in spatially ordered marks on paper or parchment, papyrus or stone.” (*CWL 3*, p. 588).

And I see by my watch that we are at the end of our time for today’s period. So I will resume this after the Easter Break. And we will begin and get as far as we are able through chapter eighteen (*CWL 3*, “**The Possibility of Ethics**”, pp. 618-656) for our next class. So you have no new homework assigned for the break, except for you to review what we have been doing today. So I wish you a happy and a good Easter Break!

End of Part Two of Class Twenty-Four.