

Self-Transcendence as Grounding
an Integral Understanding of the Faith-Reason Relation

Paul St. Amour

Saint Joseph's University

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The relation of faith to reason (and by extension, of theology to philosophy) is notoriously problematic. While reason involves the exercise of natural human cognitional capacities, faith involves a free response to a gratuitous divine initiative. Faith, it is claimed, “goes beyond” reason; it adds something to what we could discover merely by the exercise of our rationality within the empirically encountered world. Yet any attempt to directly specify, in language, precisely what it is that faith adds to reason, must itself be understood—*by reason*, and thereby presumably also becomes subject to reason’s critical standards. So exposed, faith will either clear the bar of those rational standards, or it will not. If it does clear the bar, i.e., if faith can be understood and rationally affirmed, then it is not at all clear that faith really does *add* anything to reason, for it is also rationally affirmable. Faith, in this case, seems redundant. Yet if the content of faith *fails* to clear the bar, i.e., when it is found to be unintelligible, or intelligible but not rationally affirmable by prevailing critical rational standards, then it is asserted that—far from adding to reason—faith actually amounts to a regression. When seen to detract from rationality, faith seems expendable.¹

In reaction to this impasse, and motivated either positively by the supremacy of religious experience, or negatively by the fallenness of human rationality, or both, some have come to reject the notion that faith should ever allow itself to be subjected to philosophical scrutiny, to alien rational standards, or even (at the extreme) to linguistic expression. But this countermove makes it even more difficult to understand what it is that faith *adds* to reason. A faith that would transcend reason while maintaining no identifiable commitment to reason has in effect left reason behind. Having done so, such a faith can never be assured that it was *reasonable* in

¹ David Burrell, “Philosophy” in Gareth Jones, ed., *Blackwell Companion to Modern Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 34-46.

having done so. (And it may very well not be.) While the loss of rational moorings may not be lamented, such a faith is disconnected from the human world it has left behind, from a culture and a history it regards as beneath itself.² Theology, at least in the sense of a faith seeking understanding, becomes impossible; and religion, consequently, is reduced to an affair of the heart—a heart thoroughly divorced from the head.

As none of the options indicated in this brief schema portend a felicitous complementarity of faith and reason, one may wonder what fundamentally underlies their mutual tension. I think it is important to recognize that that process by which persons and traditions negotiate the faith-reason relation is not groundless, not a view from nowhere, but emerges out of some existential stance that understands itself as already motivated by faith, or by reason, or in some way by both—but perhaps lacks the self-understanding that would clearly illuminate how this is possible. Hence the dominant response to tensions arising between faith and reason, historically and continuing to this day, has tended to be characterized by a spirit of mutual condemnation. Persons of faith tend to view the tension as stemming simply from lack of faith. Likewise, those who consider themselves reasonable are apt to censure for a lack of reasonableness. While both may be correct, clearly this amounts not to a genuine diagnoses, but merely to a complaining about the symptoms.

So what I would like to discuss today is an alternative theoretical horizon in which we might circumvent at least some of the prevailing disfunctionality in faith-reason relations. I suggest that difficulties of the varieties just adumbrated tend to arise inasmuch as operative definitions of faith and reason are conceived abstractly. By an abstract conception of faith or

² See Glenn Hughes, *Transcendence and History: The Search for Ultimacy from Ancient Societies to Postmodernity* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2003).

reason I mean one in which these are considered primarily or exclusively in relation to the *propositional content* they generate. This has been the tendency throughout what Lonergan called “the second stage of meaning” which is guided primarily by a “logical control of meaning.”³ What tends to be neglected when propositional content is foremost are the dynamic cognitional and existential *operations* of self-transcending *subjects*. Lonergan’s call for a “third stage of meaning” characterized by a shift from a logical to a methodological control of meaning gives rise to the possibility of a more concrete approach. What is needed here is common ground, an articulation of an horizon that both reason and faith could come to recognize as their own, and in which each might come to appreciate the indispensability of the other. I would like to propose that an integral understanding of the faith-reason relation might be achieved by attempting to locate both reason and faith in the context of Bernard Lonergan’s elucidation of self-transcendence.

In doing so we begin by asking not what *reason* is, but what *philosophy* is. For Lonergan, an adequate understanding of reason is mediated only by adequate *self-understanding*. It is by personal engagement in a philosophical programme of self-appropriation that we acquire this self-understanding. Self-appropriation begins by adverting to the conscious and intentional *operations* that constitute our knowing and choosing. By way of contrast to other approaches, this conception of philosophy does not take its basic stand upon any particular concepts, propositions, or arguments. Philosophy, as self-appropriation, effects a shift from a logical to a methodological control of meaning. It attempts to remedy a long-standing neglect of the subject-as-subject. It does not pit subjectivity against objectivity, but insists that “genuine objectivity is

³ See Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972; reprint ed., Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1979), 85-96.

the fruit of authentic subjectivity.”⁴ It does not dismiss traditional questions of epistemology, metaphysics, and ethics but seeks to ground answers to these in a personally verifiable cognitional-theoretic foundation.⁵

What is it then that a philosophy of self-appropriation discloses? Of course the point is to find out, concretely, for oneself! But, conceding to the shortcuts direct discourse requires, we can note that for Lonergan, “philosophy finds its proper data in intentional consciousness.”⁶ Philosophy, as self-appropriation, involves a series of exercises that gradually disclose the self-transcending subject to itself. Readers of *Insight* will be familiar with Lonergan’s notion of progressive levels of conscious intentionality. As we move from a consideration of the world of immediacy to the world as mediated by meaning and motivated by value, we become aware, both of a richer self, and of a larger world.

The consciousness of a person in deep dreamless sleep is, as it were, entirely closed in upon itself. It is minimally self-transcendent. Dreaming generates an ephemeral world of its own making. In waking, empirical consciousness confronts a world not of its own making. By questioning, that empirical world is transformed into something mysteriously more than already-out-there-real-now. One who wonders intends an intelligibility that is not yet present to his or her consciousness. The sudden arrival of this intelligibility Lonergan termed an act of insight, and insights can be quite enjoyable to have. But satisfaction of questions for direct understanding is not the ultimate fulfillment of the self-transcending subject. Rational consciousness insists upon inquiring further, with respect to already-attained insights: “Is it so?”

⁴ Lonergan, *Method*, 292.

⁵ Philosophy, for Lonergan, yields a “generalized empirical method [that] operates on a combination of both the data of sense and the data of consciousness: it does not treat of objects without taking into account the corresponding operations of the subject; it does not treat of the subject’s operations without taking into account the corresponding objects.” Bernard Lonergan, “Religious Knowledge” in *A Third Collection: Papers By Bernard J.F. Lonergan, S.J.*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe, (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1985), 141.

⁶ Lonergan, *Method*, 95.

“Have I understood correctly?” We demand sufficient evidence for rational assent, and are not satisfied with anything less than a knowledge of being mediated by virtually unconditioned judgment.

For Lonergan then, philosophy elucidates subjectivity as a dynamic unfolding of a progressive series of exigencies for self-transcendence. “Reason,” on this account, is not reducible to concepts, propositional content, or logical argumentation, but rather is that dynamic general method by which the cognitional subject achieves self-transcendence in coming to know.

By the mid-19th century, philosophical accounts of rationality had broadened to encompass the concrete *existential* subject in its cultural and historical self-constitution. Subsequent to *Insight*, Lonergan came to appreciate, as thinkers such as Kierkegaard had before him, that human subjectivity is something more than merely cognitional. He worked out a “fourth level” of conscious intentionality, constituted by operations of deliberating, evaluating, and deciding. Such operations are functionally related to properly cognitional operations, but are not reducible to these. This fuller elucidation of conscious intentionality broadens the range for self-appropriation, a process in which “as we move from level to level, it is a fuller self of which we are aware.”⁷ This fuller, properly existential self respects the integrity of cognitional operations, but comes to situate cognitional activity within a wider ethical context. By deliberation, evaluation, and decision, one chooses not only what one will make of one's world, but also what one will make of oneself.

... questions for deliberation sublate the previous three levels. They are concerned with the good. They end the one-sidedness of purely cognitional endeavor to restore the integration of sense and conation, thought and feeling. They not merely ask about a distinction between satisfaction and value but also assume the existential viewpoint that asks me whether I am ready, whether I am determined, to sacrifice satisfactions for the sake of values. Having put the question of moral authenticity, they reward acceptance

⁷ Lonergan, *Method*, 9.

with a good conscience and they sanction rejection with an uneasy conscience. Finally, they push the requirement of authenticity to the sticking point: good decisions must be complemented by good conduct and good actions; and failure in this respect is just the inner essence of hypocrisy.⁸

The introduction of this fuller anthropology does not place the existential subject into opposition with the subject-as-knower, but rather reveals the existential subject as a higher integration of the subject. “The fourth level of intentional consciousness—the level of deliberation, evaluation, decision, action—sublates the prior levels of experiencing, understanding, judging. It goes beyond them, sets up a new principle and type of operation, directs them to a new goal but, so far from dwarfing them, preserves them and brings them to a far fuller fruition.”⁹

With this relation of existential to cognitional subjectivity in mind, we are now in a position to ask more fruitfully what it is that faith “adds” to this richer, but nevertheless merely humanist anthropology.

In the period after *Insight* Lonergan came to more fully appreciate the significance of religious experience. He thematized religious experience in terms of the gift of God’s love, and the religiously converted subject as one whose living is radically transformed by a free response to that gift.

That love is not this or that act of loving but a radical being-in-love, a first principle of all one’s thoughts and words and deeds and omissions, a principle that keeps us out of sin, that moves us to prayer and to penance, that can become the ever so quiet yet passionate center of all our living. . . . Such unconditional being-in-love actuates to the full the dynamic potentiality of the human spirit with its unrestricted reach and, as a full actuation, it is fulfillment, deep-set peace, the peace the world cannot give, abiding joy, the joy that remains despite humiliation and failure and privation and pain.¹⁰

⁸ Bernard Lonergan, "Philosophy and the Religious Phenomenon," *METHOD: Journal of Lonergan Studies* 12/2 (1994): 130.

⁹ Lonergan, *Method*, 316.

¹⁰ Lonergan, Bernard Lonergan, “Natural Knowledge of God” in *A Second Collection*, ed. William F. J. Ryan and Bernard J. Tyrrell (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), 129. While Lonergan explicated religious experience in a specifically Christian context, often by referencing Romans 5:5, in which St. Paul speaks of “the love of God poured forth in our hearts by the Holy Spirit that is given to us,” Lonergan also proposed that the dynamic state of

Being in love is transformative because it is a conscious state that renews the conditions under which the fourth level of conscious intentionality is to be concretely operative. The state of being-in-love affects one's deliberations, one's judgments of value, one's decisions, one's free and responsible living. Being in love facilitates commitment to others and to genuine self-actualization. "It becomes the immanent and effective first principle. From it flow one's desires and fears, one's joys and sorrows, one's discernment of values, one's day-to-day decisions and deeds."¹¹ One who has fallen in love "apprehends differently, values differently, and relates differently because he [or she] has become different."¹² As occupying the ground and root of the highest level of intentional consciousness, the gift of God's love "takes over the peak of the soul, the *apex anima*."¹³ This divine occupation neither diminishes human freedom, nor obviates human reason, but rather cultivates an affectivity that *de facto* renders more probable the fulfillment of our self-transcending intellectual and moral capacities.

Just as unrestricted questioning is our *capacity* for self-transcendence, so being in love in an unrestricted fashion is the proper *fulfillment* of that capacity. That fulfillment is not the product of our knowledge and choice. On the contrary, it dismantles and abolishes the horizon in which our knowing and choosing went on and it sets up a new horizon in which the love of God will transvalue our values and the eyes of that love will transform our knowing.¹⁴

By the "eyes of love" mentioned here is meant *faith*. However irresistible it may be as a metaphor, the ocular analogy is philosophically troublesome. Lonergan's definition of faith as "the knowledge born of religious love" is also susceptible to the difficulty identified at the outset

being in love in an unrestricted manner is a basic phenomenon that underlies and unifies all major world religions. See Lonergan, *Method*, 109.

¹¹ Lonergan, "Religious Experience" in *Third Collection*, 123.

¹² Lonergan, "Theology in its New Context" in *Second Collection*, 66.

¹³ Lonergan, *Method*, 107.

¹⁴ Lonergan, *Method*, 106. Emphasis added.

of this paper.¹⁵ If faith is *not* a kind of knowledge, how can it be rationally acceptable? If faith *is* a kind of knowledge, does it *differ* from the knowledge generated by natural rationality? If it does not differ, why is it needed? But if it does differ, how again can it be rationally acceptable? Lonergan's position, if I understand it correctly, is that faith: 1) is a kind of knowledge, 2) that does differ from that generated by natural rationality, but 3) in a way that is rationally acceptable. How are we to understand this?

I have suggested that reason and faith can best be understood, both in themselves and in their relation to each other, if they are both situated in a unified anthropological context of self-transcending subjectivity. Lonergan takes this approach in attempting to explain faith as a "knowledge born of love" by explicating Pascal's remark that "the heart has reasons that reason does not know" in cognitional-theoretic terms.

Here by reason I would understand the compound of activities on the first three levels of cognitional activity, namely, of experiencing, of understanding, and of judging. By the heart's reasons I would understand feelings that are intentional responses to values... Finally, by the heart I understand the subject on the fourth, existential level of intentional consciousness and in the dynamic state of being in love. The meaning, then, of Pascal's remark would be that, besides the factual knowledge reached by experiencing, understanding, and verifying, there is another kind of knowledge reached through the discernment of value and the judgments of value of a person in love.¹⁶

The claim Lonergan is making here, it seems to me, is epistemologically quite reasonable. A life lived in a state of being-in-love will be a life lived under different concrete conditions than a life not lived in such a state. Being in love will tend to kick up experiences, insights, and judgments—but especially judgments of value—that would tend *not* to occur in the absence of love. The presence of love does not supplant human nature; it does not replace unrestricted questioning as our *capacity* for self-transcendence. But love does sustain and motivate and re-

¹⁵ Lonergan, *Method*, 115.

¹⁶ Lonergan, *Method*, 115.

orient this capacity in such a way that it makes the actual fulfillment of self-transcendence more likely.¹⁷

Does this assessment of the reasonableness of faith presuppose religious conversion? I don't think so. Even if one has not experienced religious conversion (which Lonergan frequently described under the Pauline rubric of "God's love flooding our hearts") it is not unreasonable to extrapolate from whatever love one *has* experienced to an affirmation at least of the *plausibility* of a "new horizon" and a radical transvaluation of values in light of transcendent value—should such an unrestricted love be factual. Such an affirmation would be conditional, but nevertheless reasonable.

Further implications could be discussed: the question of the openness of rationality and of philosophy to the religious dimension, the question of the importance of philosophy for doing theology, questions regarding the relation of faith to human progress, questions interjecting the dialectical nature of religious development, etc. But I hope in this limited time I have been cogent in suggesting that Lonergan's effort to situate reason and faith in the context of self-transcending subjectivity offers a helpful and interesting heuristic for thinking about faith-reason relations.

¹⁷ The relation of capacity to fulfillment here is analogous to the relation of classical to statistical law, which are complementary. See *Insight*, ch. 4.