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The Unfolding of Intellectual Conversion

Throughout the history of thought there have been several discussions relevant to Lonergan's understanding of intellectual conversion, including Plato's Cave, Augustine's contemplation of the eternal reasons, Descartes' *Cogito Ergo Sum*, Kant's Copernican Revolution, and Hegel's movement from Substance to Subject, to name a few, but none save Lonergan have discussed intellectual conversion as both a life-long process (*Method*, 118) and a resulting radical shift of orientation (*ibid.*, 130) that is necessary for authentic self-appropriation of one's own rational self-consciousness. To dive deeply into each of the above discussions and how they relate to Lonergan's explication of intellectual conversion is beyond the scope of this paper. However, in this presentation we will explore the last two, that of Kant, and Hegel in order to make more explicit the nuances and subtleties of two distinct moments in Lonergan's account of intellectual conversion.

Lonergan distinguishes three types of conversion—intellectual, moral, and religious—which are all connected, but Lonergan affirms that each has to be considered in itself before being related to the others (*Method*, 238). Therefore, this paper can be thought of as groundwork for the further conversation of how intellectual conversion relates to moral and religious conversion. Let's begin with a general definition of conversion before we discuss intellectual conversion specifically. For Lonergan, conversion is, "a transformation of the subject and his world. Normally it is a prolonged process though its explicit acknowledgment may be concentrated in a few momentous judgments and decisions. Still it is not just a development or

even a series of developments. Rather it is a resultant change of course and direction” (*Method*, 130). What does it mean for a conversion normally to be a prolonged process that results in a change of course and direction? It seems contradictory to at once point out that conversions are normally prolonged and yet also claim that they result in a change of course and direction that is not a development, or series of developments. Is the process leading up to the conversion, the conversion itself, the aftermath of the conversion, or some combination of these, prolonged?

To complicate the issue further, Lonergan seems to discuss intellectual conversion in two different ways. For example, in *Method in Theology*, Lonergan defines intellectual conversion as, “a radical clarification and, consequently, the elimination of an exceedingly stubborn and misleading myth concerning reality, objectivity, and human knowledge. The myth is that knowing is like looking, that objectivity is seeing what is there to be seen and not seeing what is not there, and that the real is what is out there now to be looked at” (238). However, in other places, such as his 1968 Boston College Lecture, “Religious Expression, Faith, Conversion”, Lonergan discusses intellectual conversion in terms of a, “radical clarification”, and an, “account of human knowing, of its criteria of objectivity, of the universe thereby known...” Is intellectual conversion merely the overcoming of the myth that knowing is like looking, or is a full account of human knowing, its criteria of objectivity, and the universe thereby known, necessary? It is my contention that this is not merely a nominal confusion about the use of the term ‘intellectual conversion’. On the contrary, understanding this question has great importance for appropriating one’s own rational self-consciousness and being at home in critical realism.

In order to elucidate how we might reconcile these issues, I have broken the paper into three major sections. First, I discuss what is necessary for intellectual conversion at its inception by paying special attention to why Mark Morelli calls for us to recognize that Hegelian absolute

idealism, not Kantian transcendental idealism, is the halfway house between materialism and critical realism. Second, I look at Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, more closely in order to make explicit Hegel's status in relationship to critical realism. Finally, I end with a discussion of the major moments of the unfolding of intellectual conversion in order to better understand how they relate to one another.

In his "Lonergan's debt to Hegel and the Appropriation of Critical Realism", and "Going Beyond Idealism: Lonergan's Relation to Hegel", Mark Morelli calls attention to what is truly required to be intellectually converted. He points out that the halfway house between naïve realism and critical realism is Hegelian absolute idealism, not Kantian transcendental idealism, for Kant "retains the ideal of knowledge as an immediate confrontation with an already-out-there-now-real"; whereas, Hegel jettisons the intuitionist ideal of knowledge in his recognition that truth is the fundamental criterion. Let's dive into this important and difficult discussion so that way we might be able to add to it without missing any important steps.

In the introduction of *Insight*, Lonergan discusses the stages of self-appropriation and idealism as a halfway house between materialism and critical realism:

For the appropriation of one's own rational self-consciousness...is not an end in itself but rather a beginning. It is a necessary beginning, for unless one breaks the duality in one's knowing, one doubts that understanding correctly is knowing. Under the pressure of that doubt, either one will sink into the bog of a knowing that is without understanding, or else one will cling to an understanding, but sacrifice knowing on the altar of an immanentism, an idealism, a relativism. From the horns of that dilemma one escapes only through the discovery—one has not made it yet if one has no clear memory of its startling strangeness—that there are two quite different realisms, that there is an

incoherent realism, half animal and half human, that poses as a halfway house between materialism and idealism, and on the other hand that there is an intelligent and reasonable realism between which and materialism the halfway house is idealism (*Insight*, 22).

Lonergan regards incoherent realism, or naïve realism, as halfway between materialism and idealism because naïve realism recognizes that human intelligence is at play in knowing, yet this incoherent realism still considers knowing fundamentally to be a matter of perceiving, which is why it is half animal and half human—half perceptual, half cognitional. Materialists, on the other hand, do not think that cognitional acts play any role in knowing; just the opposite, materialists hold that knowledge is a product of neural, atomic, or even quantum, material processes, depending on the level of reductionism.¹ In other words, Lonergan recognizes that there are advances and developments among those schools that have not fully differentiated and appropriated cognitional structure; however, he demarcates a higher milestone in the attainment of idealism. Here, it is not made explicit to which type of idealism Lonergan is referring, however. Many have considered that Lonergan means Kantian transcendental idealism, but Mark Morelli thinks that Lonergan can only be referring to Hegelian Absolute idealism.

Lonergan points out that the world mediated by meaning is not real, but ideal, for Kant.²

Lonergan says that, “The idealist insists that human knowing always includes understanding as

¹ For a discussion of Lonergan and reductionists’ theories on consciousness see my article, “Neural Correlates of Consciousness and Lonergan,” *Journal of Consciousness Studies* (forthcoming). The paper was originally presented at Lonergan On the Edge, Marquette University, 2009.

² Let’s look at Kant a little more closely to see if Kant retains the confrontationalist’s ideal, and what role it plays in his philosophy. In the “Transcendental Aesthetic” of his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant asserts and argues at length that “Space represents no property at all of any things in themselves nor any relation of them to each other, i.e., no determination of them that attaches to objects themselves and that would remain even if one were to abstract from all subjective conditions of intuition” (A26/B42). This is the first time, outside of the preface, that the phrase ‘things in themselves’ is used, which is why Kant goes on to clarify what he means by such a phrase when he explains that space is no determination that attaches to objects independently of the subjective conditions of intuition. Notice that for Kant space is ideal precisely insofar as it is not a property that attaches to objects outside of the subjective conditions of intuition. In other words, the unity of space is a condition of the subjective experience of objects, and, therefore, cannot be a property of things in themselves—it is a form of any intuition whatsoever.

well as sense; but he retains the empiricist's notion of reality, and so he thinks of the world mediated by meaning as not real but ideal" (*Method*, 238). Here, we see Lonergan using 'the idealist' to refer to what is clearly Kantian thought, but just because he uses the term in this way does not mean that he means to refer to Kant anytime he uses 'the idealist', or 'idealism'. As Morelli says, Lonergan frequently speaks of idealism without qualification, which leaves us to determine from the context, which idealism he means ("Lonergan's Debt", 26). In addition, Lonergan states that, "...Kant did not break completely with extroversion as objectivity, inasmuch as he acknowledged things themselves that, though unknowable, caused sensible impressions and appeared..." (*Insight*, 447), "he was unable to break cleanly from the basic conviction of animal extroversion that the 'real' is the 'already out there now'" (ibid., 439). Kant has not fully broken with the myth that knowing is like taking a look. Insofar as this is true, Kantian transcendental idealism cannot be the halfway house between materialism and critical realism, for this idealism is akin to empiricism insofar as it rests on the false ideal that, "what is

This quick gloss of Kantian transcendental idealism reveals much about Kant's philosophy. Kant retains a confrontationalist ideal of knowledge as immediately given, which is shown by his insistence that there is no way to achieve an immediate confrontation with things themselves because the subjective conditions of intuition form our experience. In other words, we are limited to knowledge of the phenomena of our experience, which are only experienced because of the forms of our intuition, namely, space and time. For Kant, we are limited to transcendental and phenomenal knowledge with no way to what is truly wanted—immediate confrontation with things in themselves. Later in the *Critique* we learn that this unity goes all the way down to the original synthetic unity of apperception, which is the unity of our very identity, the "I think", and the "standing and lasting I" (A124) that, "must be able to accompany all my representations, for otherwise something would be represented in me that could not be thought at all..." (B132). The fact that this original synthetic unity of apperception underlies the forms of intuition and is "the supreme principle of all use of the understanding" (B136) results in all knowledge, insofar as any knowledge is necessarily a unity, being transcendental or phenomenal, but never of things themselves.

The purpose of this brief Kantian analysis is merely to focus on what Kant desires and what he attains with regard to that desire. Kant holds things in themselves as his ideal, but argues that it is impossible to know things in themselves from the human standpoint, which is the only standpoint available to us. In other words, Kantian transcendental idealism never breaks with immediate confrontation; on the contrary, immediate confrontation is the ideal that drives the entire Kantian project, it is the regulative idea. It is precisely this inability to break with the ideal of immediate confrontation that causes Kant to divide his "Transcendental Analytic" from his "Transcendental Dialectic". In his "Transcendental Analytic", Kant argues that the concepts of pure understanding, when applied to the forms of sensibility, give rise to sound principles of judgment; on the other hand, in his "Transcendental Dialectic", Kant argues that any inference of pure reason performed without respect to the limits of sensibility is a spurious attempt to have insight into things in themselves and only gives rise to metaphysical illusion (Guyer and Wood, 3-6). Notice that the principles are only sound when the inquiry is done with regard to sensibility.

obvious in knowing is what knowing obviously is” (ibid., 441). Short of such confrontation, Kant limits knowledge to the transcendental, and leaves things in themselves outside of that limit.

Kant has recognized that knowledge as immediate confrontation is not possible for humanity, but he has not let go of that ideal, which renders all knowledge merely phenomenal. Hegel, on the other hand, following Fichte, does away with the thing in itself precisely because the concept is the obsession with immediate confrontation, and the false assumption that cognition is on one side and the Absolute is on the other side with no way to bridge the gap since cognition alters the Absolute in some way. Now we will turn to Hegel to see in what way he discredits that knowing is like taking a look and what his criterion for reality is.

In his introduction to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel discusses that before we start doing philosophy and inquiring into what truly is, it is natural to discuss what cognition is. Here, Hegel starts by pointing out that cognition “...is regarded either as the instrument to get hold of the Absolute, or the medium through which one discovers it” (PS, 46). He goes on to discuss that, either way, the instrument or the medium does not let the Absolute be as it is and alters it in some way. Perhaps, then the goal is to become familiar with the way that this instrument functions so that what is altered can be removed, and what is left will be the Absolute as it is. Alas, this effort is thwarted before it is begun, for it would only allow us to return to where we started before cognition—not having the Absolute.

Hegel concludes that the assumption that cognition is an instrument, or is a medium, is a fear of the truth disguised as a fear of error insofar as it takes for granted certain ideas that are themselves in need of scrutiny, namely, whether cognition is an instrument, or medium:

To be specific, [this fear of error] takes for granted certain ideas about cognition as an *instrument* and as a *medium*, and assumes that there is a *difference between ourselves and this cognition*. Above all, it presupposes that the Absolute stands on one side and cognition on the other, independent and separated from it, and yet is something real; or in other words, it presupposes that cognition which, since it is excluded from the Absolute, is surely outside of the truth as well, is nevertheless true, an assumption whereby what calls itself fear of error reveals itself rather as fear of the truth (PS, 47).

These ideas are echoed by Lonergan when he asserts that, “being is divided from within” (*Insight*, 401). Lonergan asserts that one cannot stand outside of being and look at it; before one can look, he has to be. Hegel is pointing out that one’s cognition cannot stand outside of the absolute, for if cognition is, then it is true, and it is, therefore, not outside of the absolute. Hegel goes on to state directly thereafter that, “the truth alone is Absolute.” These statements have far reaching implications that extend beyond the purview of this presentation, but it is important to understand that both Hegel and Lonergan recognize that dividing reality and trying to bridge the gap is to take for granted that cognition is the mediation between what is out there and the knower. This assumption results in the impossibility of knowledge due to fear of error. One is immediately riddled with hyperbolic doubt because the truth is always altered by the mediation and there is no way around this instrument to true knowledge. Hegel asserts that this fear of error is really a fear of the truth for one only need recognize that cognition is, in order to break with this assumption and get down to the, “hard work of Science” (PS, 48), for to hold the assumption that cognition is an instrument, or medium, is to claim that cognition is incapable of grasping the Absolute, but is still capable of grasping other kinds of truth, which leads to, “a hazy distinction between an absolute truth and some other kind of truth...” (ibid.).

It is clear that Hegel has Kant in his sights here, and Hegel exposes that Kant is not intellectually converted insofar as Kant has immediate confrontation as an ideal that he cannot attain. In making this turn toward truth and away from immediate confrontation, Hegel is showing that he is intellectually converted insofar as he has completely broken with the myth that knowing is like looking.

This raises the question, what is the criterion of truth for Hegel? For Hegel, truth is comprehensive-coherence (“Going Beyond Idealism”, 29). Hegel is concerned with the whole and his philosophy is, as Lonergan says, “comprehensive in connotation”. However, here is where we find major differences between Lonergan and Hegel, for Lonergan points out that Hegel’s philosophy is “restricted in denotation”. In other words, Hegel does not have an account of how judgments of fact are made because he does not have an understanding of judgment as virtually unconditioned. For Hegel, to know is to have reached the absolute idea, the formally unconditioned. As Lonergan puts it, “The only objective Hegel can offer the pure desire is a universe of all-inclusive concreteness that is devoid of the existential, the factual, the virtually unconditioned. There is no reason why such an objective should be named being. It is, as Hegel named it, an Absolute Idea” (*Insight*, 397). Nonetheless, Lonergan points out that his attitude toward Hegel is not merely negative and says that his whole argument in *Insight* proceeds in the triadic process of in itself, for itself, and in and for itself (*ibid.*, 398). A full study of this statement is outside the control of this essay, but it is worth pointing out that Lonergan himself employs Hegel’s process by which we come to understand understanding and that Hegel has penetrated the Absolute Idea of, “the all-inclusive summit of the pure desire’s immanent dialectical process...” (*ibid.*, 397). But, while Hegel has reached this height he has not reached

the conclusion that, “Understanding is partial, for the relativist, short of comprehensive coherence, there can be ‘no sure footing’ ” (ibid., 366).

In his, “Lonergan, Hegel and the Point about Viewpoints”, Matthew Peters explains that in all of Hegel’s transitions, “is the objectification for the new form of consciousness of what on the previous level had been the *relation between* consciousness and its object” (3). This is an interesting notion because Lonergan says that the only thing Hegel’s, “system has to fear is that it itself should be no more than some incomplete viewpoint, and in fact that is what it is” (*Insight*, 397). So, if Peters and Lonergan are right, we can understand Lonergan’s improvement on Hegel as an objectification of what is going on behind Hegel’s own back. In other words, Hegel is trying to put motion and development into logic and the *Begriff*, but because he has not objectified his relationship to that object, his philosophy is incomplete and, while unrestricted in extent, restricted in content. That is, Hegel understands the principal notion of objectivity, but he can't make any judgments of fact because he has not come to understand that the dynamism is not in logic and concepts, but the protean and polymorphic process by which an individual comes to know concepts and employ logic.

As Lonergan states in his *Phenomenology and Logic: The Boston College Lectures on Mathematical Logic and Existentialism*, it is one thing merely to be intelligent, but to know what it is to be intelligent is something quite different. Yet, he goes on to point out that it requires a further step to appropriate rational consciousness’s demand, grasp, and affirmation of the virtually unconditioned. These movements are, “...a matter of making the subject *leap*, to move him from the first level, the level of sensism, materialism, and so on, to the second, to bring him up to the level of the idealist. And it is another leap to bring him from the idealist position to the realist position” (110, Lonergan’s emphasis). It is clear that there are two distinct moments of

intellectual conversion in coming to appropriate one's own rational self-consciousness. The first is the overcoming of the myth that knowing is like taking a look, which Kant has not accomplished, but Hegel has achieved. The second moment is the appropriation of judgment—the demand, grasp, and affirmation of the virtually unconditioned.

No other thinkers, except for perhaps Aquinas, have an explicit account of judgment that even comes close to Lonergan's account of the virtually unconditioned, let alone relates judgment to the formally unconditioned, which may be why Lonergan considered his account of judgment to be his greatest contribution to philosophy. Even Aristotle, who recognized the act of understanding, gave an account of judgment as a synthesis (*De Anima*, 430b6-430b15), not as the positing of a synthesis. How is it possible that this great achievement and radical clarification does not itself constitute a conversion? There seems to be two main reasons for thinking that it might.

First, there is a conversion that relates to each ascending cognitional act other than the rational level of consciousness. There is the initial getting over of the myth that knowing is like taking a look—intellectual conversion. There is the conversion from satisfactions to values—moral conversion. And, there is the being grasped by ultimate concern, other-worldly falling in love—religious conversion. Given Jeremy Blackwood's work on the fifth level of consciousness, the so-called 'rational conversion' to single judgments of fact made possible by the appropriation of the criteria of the virtually unconditioned fits very neatly next to the rational level of consciousness, and gives us a corresponding conversion for each level of consciousness.

Second, since each level of consciousness has its own intentional question, this would mean that each conversion would require a corresponding change in criterion for answering that question. Intellectual conversion requires asking, 'what is it?' and not merely meaning, 'what

does it look like?', or 'how can I imagine it?' Moral conversion entails asking, 'what will I do?' and using value rather than satisfaction as a criterion for that action. And, religious conversion entails asking, 'what would you have me do?' and having no limitation or restriction about doing it. 'Rational Conversion', then would entail the movement from asking, 'is it so?' and meaning, 'are the conditions for its being true fulfilled?', rather than asking, 'how does this fit into a comprehensive-coherent whole without which one would know nothing?'

These might seem like cogent points that mean that we need to make room for a fourth type of conversion, namely, rational conversion. However, the movement from the criterion of comprehensive-coherence to the virtually unconditioned does not require a change of course and direction, but an appropriation of proportionate being, absolute objectivity, and the principal notion of objectivity. Lonergan differentiates being from proportionate being by pointing out that human knowing is also experienced. He says, "In its full sweep, being is whatever is to be known by intelligent grasp and reasonable affirmation. But being that is proportionate to human knowing is not only to be understood and affirmed but also is to be experienced. So proportionate being may be defined as whatever is to be known by human experience, intelligent grasp, and reasonable affirmation" (*Insight*, 416). Lonergan explains that being 'in its full sweep' is whatever is to be known by intelligent grasp and reasonable affirmation, but proportionate being includes the addition of human experience. "Because the relativist fails to distinguish between the formally and the virtually unconditioned, he demands a complete explanation of everything before passing any judgment on anything (*ibid.*, 612). Absolute idealism has attained the absolute idea of what it would mean to know everything about everything, which is for what the unrestricted and disinterested desire to know is constantly striving. This is, in fact, the way that the level of understanding functions—we are constantly

trying to digest new insights into a comprehensive and coherent whole. As Lonergan asserts, “it is a matter of supreme importance to metaphysics that here and now one reject all obscurantism and so accept in all its implications the effort for complete explanation” (ibid., 508).

Comprehensive coherence is not a criterion of reality that is left behind, in other words, or an orientation that one turns away from; on the contrary, comprehensive coherence is the goal of the unrestricted desire to know. It is only the contextualizing this goal within cognitional theory, the objectification of the way the subject relates to this object, or absolute idea, that results in an understanding that one need not know everything in order to know anything, for the virtually unconditioned is a *de facto* absolute insofar its conditions are fulfilled. A formally unconditioned would have no conditions and therefore be necessarily absolute. The principal notion of objectivity and the remote criterion of truth require that we understand a suitable constellation of judgments, but the absolute objectivity of the single judgment as single is, in fact, absolute insofar as the conditions for its being true are fulfilled (ibid., 402). The understanding of absolute objectivity requires that we verify whether the conditions are in fact fulfilled, which means that description is necessary for verification and is the object of knowledge just as much as things among themselves (ibid., 369). Now we can understand how single judgments of fact are affirmed in light of other judgments of fact, made, not just by an individual, but by a community, and how this self-correcting process that not only turns, but rolls along, gives us knowledge of proportionate being.

However, perhaps Hegel can help us further. Hegel’s philosophy is determinate and necessary; therefore, conversion as Lonergan discusses it is impossible within Hegel’s dialectic, but as Lonergan says that his own argument in *Insight* takes on the form of Hegel’s triadic dialectical process, let us use this heuristic to discuss the moments of intellectual conversion in

its unfolding. Prior to the intellectual appropriation that is the first moment of intellectual conversion—the overturning of the myth that knowing is like taking a look—it is merely assumed without reflection that being is what is seen. This fits the form of in itself for it is without reflection. Hegel’s leap to the ideal of comprehensive coherence is a true conversion insofar as it is not the development of knowing as looking, but a complete upheaval. This fits the form of the for itself because it is the negation of the prior moment. Lonergan’s account of the virtually unconditioned, proportionate being, and absolute objectivity requires a second leap, but not a second conversion. This fits the form of the in and for itself. Lonergan is sublating the prior moment without destroying it. There truly is a leap here that allows for understanding the criterion for understanding proportionate being incrementally, but there is no destruction of the ideal of comprehensive coherence. To put intellectual conversion into the form of a Hegelian dialectic movement of moments, reconciles the seeming contradiction that intellectual conversion is at once a radical change in development, and also a prolonged process. It also allows us to account for how Lonergan’s appropriation of the virtually unconditioned is a further leap and different moment of intellectual conversion without making that moment itself a further conversion.

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