

A Genuinely Scientific Psychology based on Lonergan's Analysis of Consciousness

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Abstract

Since its inception, modern psychology has struggled to be a genuine science. The impressive natural sciences set the standard; and especially in the era of behaviorism, psychology tried to match them. But things human are much more subtle, complicated, variable, even mysterious, compared to physics and chemistry. Besides, an even greater challenge looms: Psychology also suffers from the pervasive postmodern dilemma: creeping skepticism and cultural relativism. They now not only befog academia but also fragment and confound our communities, nations, and world. With "false news" and "alternative facts," the problem has become popular, not just academic. There exists no consensus on the meaning of truth and goodness or on the means to know them. Bernard Lonergan offers a solution to these challenges.

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Introduction

Our society faces a crisis of epistemology and ethics. "The most famous American contributor to postmodernist philosophy, Rorty argued that knowledge is simply whatever the verification procedures of a society say it is" [1 p. 85]. The relativism of cultural embeddedness reigns. Describing the situation in psychology, Osbeck [2] wrote, "The discipline of psychology as practiced looks less like a robust and constructive pluralism than it does a patchwork of separate, sometimes hostile encampments, with psychologists from different backgrounds and with different convictions tending principally to their respective fires, citing epistemological incompatibility or incommensurability as a reason to avoid collaboration toward a common goal" (p. x).

Into this situation comes Bernard J. F. Lonergan [3,4], offering a solution to these fundamental philosophical issues. His life's work was the study of human consciousness. The result has been a theory that far outstrips all others in clarify, coherence, and detail and it is empirically grounded [5-7].

Consciousness, the All-Telling Consideration

Most theories model consciousness on perception or sensation and define it as the "awareness of something." This understanding proposes a subject-object engagement, which is called "intentionality"—not in the popular and psychotherapeutic

sense of deliberate, considered, or purposeful, but in the etymological Latin sense (in+tendere=to stretch toward). But this pervasive modeling of consciousness on perception misses the distinctive and constitutive feature of human consciousness. As well as being intentional, directed toward some object, human consciousness is simultaneously and concomitantly conscious, present "to" itself—not as if reflecting on itself as "I" on "me," but by identity as "I" being itself, "I," a subject. That is, in one mode we are present to the object of concern; but in a concomitant mode we are also present "to" ourselves as experiencing the object of concern. (The quotation marks around the "to" indicate a peculiar usage; in this case the preposition has no object but merely serves to indicate identity, a non-objectified self-presence.) Human consciousness is this peculiar bimodal reality. Contrary to most other theorizing, the conscious mode is logically—not chronologically—the prior and primary mode. It determines the distinctiveness of human consciousness. It is experienced in the present and only later can be articulated. For example, when I say, "I was looking at the book's Index," I am reporting an activity to which I was not attending. My attention was on the index, yet, to say that I was looking at it, I must have had some experience of my looking even while attending to the index. I was present "to" myself while I was present to the index. I was conscious of my intentionality. As a result, I can pull up that experience; I can objectify it, formulate it, and say what I was doing. Consciousness is bimodal. But it is precisely the conscious mode, the mode most ignored in the West although well known

in Eastern thought, that allows us—unless in dreamless sleep or coma—to experience ourselves in our every doing and later, if we wish, to report our subjective experience in that doing. The point is that we can come to know ourselves. We can come to know the workings of our mind. We can even come to know the workings of consciousness, that unique dimension of the human mind.

The Intentional Structure of Human Consciousness

To attend to those workings of consciousness is exactly what Lonergan did. In his own mind—and accessing the reports of Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, Kant, Hegel, and so on—he discerned four interrelated conscious activities, which metaphorically he calls “levels.”

- First, when we encounter something new, we have experience. On this first level, consciousness provides data on the thing encountered. Data are mere givens, something that could be understood. There is no knowledge via mere perceptual experience. Human knowing requires two further activities.
- Second, in the active mind a question spontaneously arises, “What is it?” and on a second level consciousness eventually generates an insight, a proposed understanding of the data, a hypothesis, which gets conceptualized and formulated.
- Third, facing this proposed explanation, consciousness spontaneously proposes another question, “Is it so?” “Have I understood correctly?” The operation on this third level advances pondering and weighs the proposed understanding against the evidence, the data. If the answer is “No,” I must revert to the prior levels either to find more data on the matter or to generate a different hypothesis to be again subjected to judgment. If the realization is “Yes, it all fits; there are no loose ends,” then my understanding is correct. I know something. I have achieved a fact, a sliver of knowledge. Knowledge is a composite of experience, understanding, and judgment. Notice that this account squares with the textbook account of scientific method: observation, hypothesis, and confirmation.
- But fourth, new knowledge provokes another, an existential, question, “What am I going to do about it?” This question moves the process from knowing to doing, from thinking to acting. The question in this case is ethical. The good to be done is that which accords with what is known and progresses in such a way as to best keep this open system advancing. As one interactive whole, consciousness urges consistency, integrity. In contrast, whatever hampers or curtails this dynamic unfolding of consciousness is evil.

In sum, dynamic human consciousness sets the criteria for truth and goodness.

The Dynamism and Innate Normativity of Consciousness

Lonergan’s analysis shows that consciousness is dynamic. It is an open-ended dimension of human minds geared to the

universe, to all reality, to knowledge and love of everything that exists. It is the impetus behind the child’s incessant “Why?” It is the engine that drives the scientist’s endless pursuit of understanding. In contrast, consciousness is not that so-often-touted mere “awareness of something,” an almost passive process that ends where it begins [8]. This dynamic consciousness does not function haphazardly. Its happy unfolding presupposes that it function as it ought, according to its nature, achieving its innate purpose, governed—as Lonergan [4] phrased it—by “the native spontaneities and inevitabilities of our consciousness” (p. 18). Therefore, the respective operations on the four levels entail their own requisites. These can be formulated.

- If a first level regards experience of data, be attentive.
- If a second level seeks understanding, be intelligent.
- If a third level aims toward verified knowledge, be reasonable.
- If a fourth level intends the good, be responsible.

Lonergan [4] calls these four “the transcendental precepts”. They apply across the board to every human activity. When a project is pursued attentively, intelligently, reasonably, and responsibly, success is the likely outcome. In contrast, when any of these requirements is missing, the project is hobbled, doomed to inevitable failure. The transcendental precepts not only characterize the four levels of consciousness; they are also existential requisites for us, innate requirements of our makeup. They make or break us as humans. To the extent that a person is faithful to the precepts, that person is an authentic person, genuinely human. That person is acting as humans are made to act. Peculiarly and ironically, however, precisely because of human consciousness, the human species has the unique capacity to act against its nature. Any such action, especially if habitual, is debilitating, progressively dehumanizing. It shuts down the open-ended reach of dynamic human consciousness. The habitual liar, it is said, cannot even see the truth. Unfortunately, too, to some extent we are all inauthentic. The quest for authenticity is an unending individual and collective human pursuit.

Analyzing human consciousness, Lonergan has provided an epistemology and an ethics in primordial form. Thus, he has provided psychology with the solid philosophical base that is lacking, not only to psychology, but to the whole postmodern world. It supplies a basis to unite the sciences and all knowing. Concomitantly, he has outlined the essential characteristics of genuine humanity. He has presented a universally valid, normative account of a human being: the authentic person [9].

The Empirical Basis of Lonergan’s Theory

These conclusions are no mere creative suggestions or clever musings. They are grounded in the evidence of consciousness. They have empirical authority. They can be confirmed by anyone willing to attend to his or her own conscious experience. Does Lonergan’s four-level analysis match what you find happening in your own mind? Or again, how could that analysis be discredited?

One would have to find overlooked evidence, or else come up with a different interpretation of the evidence, or come to the judgment of some oversight in the argument. In each case, however, one would be engaging in the conscious activities that Lonergan discerned: experience, understanding, judgment. That is, the attempt to disprove the analysis would supply behavioral evidence that supports it; one would, in deed, be doing what one was, in word, denying. One's own behavior would belie one's statement. The self-contradiction would discredit the argument.

Apparently, Lonergan has spelled out what human knowing means. It is intellectual rather than perceptual. It deals in understanding and judgment, not in images, metaphors, or models, which has been called "picture thinking." Then granted that human consciousness is consistent across our species, his analysis applies to all humanity. Disconcertingly, stunningly, even unbelievably in the face of postmodern agnosticism, it seems impossible to discredit Lonergan's analysis. There is no way around it—except to reject intelligence and rationality. Lonergan's theory overcomes postmodern skepticism and relativism.

There exists a process of knowing that is natural to our minds. It pertains to any instance in any application to any reality. Lonergan calls it "transcendental method" [4, pp. 13-20] or more descriptively "generalized empirical method" [3, pp. 95-96]—*method* because it is "a normative pattern of recurrent and related operations yielding cumulative and progressive results" [4, p. 4]; *empirical* because it requires that every claim to knowledge rest on evidence; and *generalized* because, validating the data of consciousness in addition to natural science's data of the senses, it applies to every pursuit of knowledge. Specifically, granted the legitimacy of the data of consciousness, this *ur-method* legitimates a science of the mind as valid as any other sciences. Validated understanding grounded in evidence, science, applies beyond material realities. Accordingly, with the inclusion of Lonergan's theory, psychology can become a full-fledged science: credibly explanatory and reliably prescriptive—even as his analysis of consciousness already meets these criteria. Without discrediting human diversity, psychology can transcend the cultural embeddedness that currently bedevils the field and, like every mature science does in its respective field, elaborate the components, mechanisms, processes, and interactions that essentially constitute humanity, that underlie every culturally specific expression of humanity.

A Second Dimension of Human Mentality: Psyche

I have presented consciousness in its pure form, that ideal scientific formulation that concrete realities never match perfectly. It is not that consciousness itself gets distorted in practice but that it is dependent on other facets of a person for its operation—a living body, a working brain, other dimensions of mentality. These others include emotion, memory, imagery, and conations. Lonergan subsumes them under the name *psyche*. It is that aspect of mentality that humans share with other species, I would argue. To be sure, *psyche* does influence the workings of consciousness,

but only extrinsically. Positively, for example, *psyche* provides data that consciousness experiences and understands in order to know physical reality. Negatively, however, *psyche* is the source of biases that skew, mislead, or even prevent the operations of consciousness. The Freudian defense mechanisms conveniently exemplify ways in which psychological needs obscure reality and bias one's living. Simply said, for example, emotions cloud clear thinking. Thus, effective psychotherapy is a primary tool for advancing human authenticity.

The distinction—not a separation, for they are wholly interactive—between consciousness and *psyche* suggests that the standard bipartite model of the human—"body and mind" or in religion "body and soul"—needs to be refined as a tripartite model: organism, *psyche*, and consciousness. In this case, the precision of Lonergan's account of human consciousness in contrast to *psyche* opens a promising path for understanding humanity better (the science of psychology) and for treating mental issues (the application of the science in psychotherapy).

The error of thoroughgoing materialism

In addition to requiring a tripartite model of the human, Lonergan's analyses clarify another key issue. Consciousness deals in meaning, understandings, judgments, and values. These are not material. Moreover, consciousness produces concepts that can be universal in their application as can, similarly, explanations such as a Pythagoras's Theorem or an Einstein's equations. In their generalizations, these achievements transcend space and time, applying equally to an array of particular instances (reminiscent of Plato's "ideal forms"). Again, these matters are not material. Rather, "spiritual" is the term that applies, and Lonergan frequently speaks of consciousness as "human spirit," "spiritual," or "human spiritual reality" [3, pp. 372, 394, 538-543; 4, pp. 13, 210, 302, 352]. It was this usage that inspired me to develop a psychology of spirituality based on human spirit, free from appeal to religion, God, or other supposed non-human entities, although still open to theism [10,11,5]; it, as well as my treatment of human sexuality [10,12], exemplifies the potential of Lonergan's theory.

This insistence on the reality of human spirit seriously challenges the materialism that has characterized much of current human science. Consciousness is a spiritual reality, and genuinely human knowing is similarly so. Because Lonergan was a Roman Catholic Jesuit priest and also a theologian, some scholars dismiss his theory as Catholic and "faith-based" [13]. As demonstrated here, it is nothing of the kind. Dealing explicitly with the human mind as such, his theory is and ought to be an integral aspect of empirical psychology.

Conclusion

Psychology attempts to be a science as hard as physics or chemistry. This effort is blocked by the complexity and patent non-materiality of mentality and by the lack of an epistemology

applicable to all human knowing, physical as well as non-material. The suggestion is that Lonergan's theory has addressed these postmodern problems and offers a solution to them.

Therefore, psychologists should give more attention to Lonergan's theory. That account of human consciousness—conscious as well as intentional—should be integrated into fundamental psychological understanding; and Lonergan's epistemology should increasingly replace commonplace picture-thinking in psychological theory and practice. His clear distinction between consciousness and what he calls "psyche" would clarify the actual nature of humanity and offer guidance in addressing it with increased accuracy and nuance—not least by normalizing the tripartite model of the human. The transcendental precepts inherent in human makeup should become the standard for determining health and welfare. By specifying what constitutes authentic humanity, the precepts would allow psychology to transcend cultural embeddedness and achieve a universal normativity. Psychologists—and, indeed, all people—should attune themselves to the criteria of authentic humanity and, thus, be more effective in their theorizing and psychotherapy. As the religions are in decline—at least in Euro-American society—psychology should become a trusted source for advancing humanistic spiritual concerns in secular society. In the big picture, the future of humanity is at stake in this discussion. The incorporation of Lonergan's empirically grounded theory into current psychology would mightily advance psychology toward becoming a thoroughly genuine science. Then psychology could play a major role in directing the movement of history toward a positive future.

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