

What Does Bernard Lonergan Mean by 'Conversion'?

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My understanding is that a course is being launched with this lecture that some of you will be involved in, a course that is meant to be an introduction to the work of Bernard Lonergan. The introduction is specifically oriented to people who are relative beginners in Lonergan's work. I am happy to be invited to present this opening lecture to an audience that includes but also extends beyond those who will be taking the course. I hope the lecture will be helpful in getting the course off to a good start.

My presentation is divided into the following points: (1) Authenticity, Self-transcendence, and Conversion; (2) General Points on Conversion; (3) Conversion as Religious, Moral, Intellectual, and Psychic; (4) Conversion *from* and Conversion *to*; (5) Religious Conversion *from* and *to*; (6) Moral Conversion *from* and *to*; (7) Intellectual Conversion *from* and *to*; and (8) A Word about Psychic Conversion.

1 Authenticity, Self-transcendence, and Conversion

The organizers of the course chose the topic of this opening lecture wisely, since the answer to the question, What does Lonergan mean by conversion? touches on the most important elements in his work. In particular, there are three closely interrelated notions that are basic to Lonergan's thought: authenticity, self-transcendence, and conversion. It was with this in mind that I suggested to the organizers that they distribute to you Lonergan's lecture 'Self-transcendence: Intellectual, Moral, Religious.'¹ That lecture has become for me the first item in Lonergan's

work that I recommend to people who ask, Where should I begin? What should I read first?

1 Bernard Lonergan, 'Self-transcendence: Intellectual, Moral, Religious,' in *Philosophical and Theological Papers 1965-1980*, ed. Robert M. Doran and Robert C. Croken (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005) xxx-xx.

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Now, while what is meant by these words 'authenticity,' 'self-transcendence,' and 'conversion' is central to all of Lonergan's work from beginning to end, it was only gradually that he came to *concentrate* his thought around the realities named by these words and to use these words on a regular basis. But in retrospect we can see that they organize even the earlier themes in his work, themes such as the basic positions on knowing, being, and objectivity, which we will see when we discuss intellectual conversion.

The relations between authenticity, self-transcendence, and conversion may be briefly stated in the following terms, which we can perhaps take as a sort of guiding orientation for this presentation: *Authenticity is achieved in self-transcendence, and consistent self-transcendence is reached only by conversion.*

In other words, what makes a person an authentic human being is that he or she is consistently self-transcending, and consistent self-transcendence requires that one undergo a multiple and ongoing process of conversion. The process moves causally, if you wish, from conversion to self-transcendence, and from self-transcendence to authenticity. In that sense, then, the choice of conversion as the topic for the opening lecture gets to the heart of things quickly.

2 General Points on Conversion

what you don't even know exists to be known. There can be much within your horizon that you don't know but want to know. I may have no knowledge of differential calculus but I may want to learn it, and if that is the case it is within my horizon, within my field of interest. But beyond my horizon is the great realm of what I don't even care about knowing, of what I pay no attention to, of what if it is called to my attention I simply disregard.

Horizons can be related in different ways. Doctors, lawyers, engineers, musicians, artists, teachers, ministers of religion have different horizons, but they are complementary horizons. Each recognizes the others, and acknowledges that different complementary horizons are essential for the well-being of the social order. Again, I may not know anything about calculus, but if I get interested and take a course, I am expanding my horizon, and in this case my horizon before I learned calculus and my horizon after I learned calculus are related genetically. But conversion entails a radical shift in horizon. Conversion is not learning, like learning calculus. Conversion is the kind of movement into a new horizon that entails an about-face. It comes out of the old by repudiating characteristic features of the old. It begins a new sequence of events in

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one's life that set one's life on a radically different course. This type of relation between horizons Lonergan calls dialectical.

The genetic relation involved, for instance, in learning calculus is a development, but it usually does not entail a conversion. Conversion is also a development, but it entails the contradictory relations of moving from the false to the true, from the evil to the good. It is an about-face.

Now it is possible, of course, that an opposite kind of about-face can take place in one's living, a shift to a new sequence of events that cannot be called a conversion but rather a

breakdown. The new sequence limits rather than expands one's horizon, closes one's mind or heart to dimensions of reality, blinds one to the relevance of certain further questions. What makes the difference?

Basically, conversion is a shift of one's fundamental orientation, an about-face, from self-absorption or self-enclosure to self-transcendence in a particular domain of one's operations as a human being. For the most part and usually the shift, the about-face that we are talking about, is in fact a process. It usually takes place not all at once but in steps. It has some notably dramatic moments for some, but for most of us it is a continual, slow, and unobtrusive movement beyond the isolation of the subject, beyond a constantly self-referential horizon, to self-transcendence. And for almost all of us it has to be continually renewed.

3 Conversion as Religious, Moral, Intellectual, and Psychic

Conversion for Lonergan takes three forms, the same three forms as are mentioned in the title of the lecture on self-transcendence: intellectual, moral, and religious. From a causal point of view, he says, the first and most basic form is what he calls religious conversion, the second is moral conversion, and the third is intellectual conversion. Usually, though not always, they will occur in one's life in this order. I have suggested that we may add to these three what I have called a psychic dimension of conversion that I think can occur at any point in one's life, and I'm happy

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to say that Lonergan indicated his own fundamental agreement with this suggestion. So I will be talking for the remainder of this lecture about religious conversion, moral conversion, intellectual conversion, and psychic conversion.

Again, conversion is a process. Almost always it occurs in incremental steps. Thus, what Lonergan calls religious conversion is not mystical prayer. It is a process of ever deepening withdrawal from ignoring the realm of transcendence in which God is known and loved, and of ever deeper entrance into that realm. It may lead one to mystical prayer, but again it may not.

Again, moral conversion is not moral perfection, but it is a process of withdrawal from self-enclosure to self-transcendence in one's decisions. Slowly and over time, it may approach consistent moral integrity; but on the other hand it may be a continual matter of picking oneself up and starting over. Consistent moral integrity entails an ever greater humility regarding one's potential or actual moral shortcomings.

The term 'intellectual conversion' has several meanings. Lonergan's usual meaning has to do with an explicit philosophical position, but there are also a couple of forms of intellectual conversion that are realized when I judge and decide that I cannot continue to run away from asking questions, because it is only by raising and answering questions that I will arrive at truth. Even in its philosophic form, intellectual conversion is not the firm and quiet possession of a correct philosophy, but the effort to reach cognitive integrity in one's intellectual positions.

Psychic conversion, finally, does not mean affective self-fulfillment. It is a matter of establishing the connections in consciousness between one's waking orientation as a cognitive, moral, and religious being and the underlying movement of life with its affective and imaginal components. The psyche is the flow of sensations, memories, images, affects, conations, spontaneous intersubjective responses, and so on, that accompany our intellectual and moral activities. If you are asking a question, there is an affective dimension to that experience, not just an intellectual component. If you arrive at a satisfactory answer to your question, there is a change in you that is not only intellectual but also affective; you feel differently from the way

you felt while you were confused and asking questions. There are factors, however, in our

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modern cultures that can easily lead us to lose touch with this psychic flow, with the pulsing flow of life, the movement of life. Psychic conversion re-establishes that connection. And the reason for establishing or re-establishing that connection, in terms of authenticity, is that affective self-transcendence is frequently required if we are going to be self-transcendent in the intellectual, moral, and religious dimensions of our living.

So if we are going to understand what Lonergan means by conversion, we are going to have to ask several questions: What is religious self-transcendence? What characterizes moral self-transcendence? What is the meaning of cognitional or intellectual self-transcendence? And what is affective self-transcendence?

4 Conversion *from* and Conversion *to*

The basis of distinguishing the varieties of conversion lies in what Lonergan calls the different levels of consciousness: experience, understanding, judgment, decision, love. Intellectual conversion has something to do with understanding and judgment, moral conversion with decision, religious conversion with love, and psychic conversion with the empirical consciousness that penetrates all these other dimensions and that is changed as we move from one level to another.

One of the best ways of answering these questions is to begin by asking what one is converted *from* in each of these dimensions. That is, if self-transcendence is the goal, the end point, the point *to* which one moves through conversion, there must be a starting point, a point

from which one starts. In general, if *self-transcendence* is the goal of the process, then the starting point, that *from* which one is converted so as to move toward self-transcendence, must be some form or degree of 'self-absorption' or 'self-enclosure.'

Let's start with religious conversion. For many people today, and with good reason, the word 'religion' has a negative connotation. One of the great students of the world's religions in the past century, a person whose work Lonergan respected and who respected Lonergan's work,

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Wilfred Cantwell Smith, argued that the centrality of the word 'religion' is a nineteenth-century introduction, and he has made a fervent plea that we replace the term 'religion' with the term 'faith' in a great deal of our language. That suggestion is helpful for understanding what Lonergan is really getting at when he speaks of religious conversion. For Lonergan, faith is the eye of religious love. It is the knowledge that is born of being in love in an unrestricted fashion, and that being in love in an unrestricted fashion is the genuine meaning, the only genuine meaning, of the term 'religion.' What Lonergan calls religious conversion, then, is a process that frees one from the self-enclosure that Lonergan calls radical lovelessness. God is love, our scriptures tell us, and whoever abides in love abides in God, whether one acknowledges this or not. This process, more often than not, is mediated by participation in some religious community. But profound religious inauthenticity can also be mediated by participation in a religious community. And so religious conversion or religious authenticity is not guaranteed by belonging to a religious community. Religious authenticity is rather the self-transcendence of unqualified loving, and that self-transcendence is possible only because one has been consciously on the receiving end of God's unqualified love, whether one acknowledges this as coming from God or not. Religious conversion is the twofold process of being loved unconditionally and responding

to that radical gift by cooperating in the process whereby one's own loving becomes unconditional.

I'm going to suggest that this relationship between being loved and loving in return that is the heart of the process of what Lonergan calls religious conversion is also the key to understanding the other dimensions of conversion. That's why I'm beginning with religious conversion.

Religious conversion, Lonergan says, leads to moral conversion, and he defines moral conversion as the transformation of the criteria of one's decisions from satisfactions to values. He places the differential between satisfactions and values in self-transcendence. But what propels one beyond taking satisfaction as the criterion of one's decisions to accepting value as

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the criterion, if it is not that one is being freed from self-absorption, radical lovelessness or self-enclosure, into self-transcendence?

Radical lovelessness also distorts one's cognitional performance, in that it closes or narrows the horizon, the range of one's interests and concerns, the range of what one will even ask questions about in the first place. Intellectual conversion in its basic form will open that horizon of questions. It will transform one's cognitional life so that questions regarding meaning and truth are pursued for their own sake, and not for utilitarian and narrowly pragmatic purposes. Lonergan uses terms such as 'detached' and 'unrestricted' to refer to this attitude. But what moves one beyond a utilitarian and purely pragmatic intellectual life, which after all is self-absorbed, self-enclosed, self-referential, except the freedom from self-absorption that comes from a radical and unconditional falling in love, genuine religious conversion?

In its philosophical form, intellectual conversion will effect a shift in the criterion of

truth, just as moral conversion has effected a shift in the criterion of decisions. The shift in the criterion of truth will be from regarding knowledge along the analogy of taking a really good look at what is already out there now to regarding knowledge as a matter of raising and answering questions. In the order of knowledge of fact, there are two kinds of questions: questions such as 'What is it?' addressed to the data of experience, and questions such as 'Is that really so?' addressed to the formulation of one's answer to the first question. And what is the difference? The 'what is it' questions cannot be answered 'yes' or 'no,' while the 'is that really so' questions can. In the latter case, the answer 'yes' or 'no' is the judgment in which the real is known. Finally, with affective self-transcendence we are back to the issue of radical lovelessness, but now with a further purpose, namely, to gain familiarity with the twists and turns of our psychic, affective life, so that we may become ever more familiar with the inclinations of affectivity that lead to self-transcendence and those that, however genuine they may appear, propel us back into self-absorption in one way or another. It is in this sense of opening communication between our conscious orientation and the underlying neural and psychic

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manifolds that I have spoken of a psychic conversion. And let me add that many years after I first suggested the notion of psychic conversion as a way of talking about gaining this familiarity, I have become convinced that many of the twists and turns that lead away from self-transcendence are matters of the infected mimesis that is spoken of in the work of René Girard, and so I would connect my thinking about psychic conversion very closely with Girard's work.

Let me expand a bit on each of the starting points, the points *from* which, and the end points, the points *to* which, in the different forms of conversion.

5 Religious Conversion *from* and *to*

I indicated that, in general terms, the point *from* which religious conversion moves us, converts us, Lonergan calls a radical lovelessness. God is love, and so being without God is being without love, and conversely being without love is being without God. Love takes the three forms of the love of intimacy that tends to become love in the family, love in the human community, and the love of God. These three, while distinct, are not separate, and in fact the strength and solidity of the first two forms of love (love in the family and love in the community) are in direct proportion to the extent to which what Lonergan calls being in love with God is operative in one's living. But one can be in love with God without knowing that one is in love with God, and conversely one can belong to a religious community and use all kinds of God language without being in love with God. Being in love with God is being in love without qualifications, reservations, hesitations, limitations. One who is in this state may or may not realize that he or she is in such a state, and even more one may not realize that being in this state is in fact being in love with God. In this sense, there are many people who are very close to God who don't know it. Being in love is a conscious dynamic state that governs everything in their lives, but that state can be conscious without being known.

It may become known in a couple of ways, but for our purposes it is probably enough to say that for most people the conscious dynamic state of being in love with God becomes known

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as such because of a word that comes from God. There has been the revelation of God's love that occurs in Israel and especially in the mission of the divine Son in the Incarnation of the Word in

Jesus of Nazareth. Genuine Christian conversion is conversion to the Word made flesh as the revelation of divine love. But the gift of divine love is prior to the word about the gift. For Christians it is understood as the gift of the Holy Spirit. And the gift of the Holy Spirit is offered to all men and women at every time and place and is responded to positively by many of the same people, independently of whether the word of revelation has ever been available to them. Moreover, the faith that is the knowledge born of religious love has flowed from the gift and has become stronger as the gift has been accepted. That faith is not the same thing as explicit belief in the doctrines of the Christian community. It is prior to those beliefs, and it is present in the lives of many who have never been educated in those beliefs. Lonergan would express that universalist faith in something like the following terms (and this is not a direct quotation, but is based on the section 'Faith' in his chapter on religion in *Method in Theology* at 116-18). As I read this set of statements, I invite you to sense what a difference they make in the human world as they come to be shared by many. They express the movement *from* lovelessness *to* being in love. All other values are placed in the light and the shadow of transcendent value, which is supreme and incomparable and which links itself to all other values to transform, magnify, and glorify them. Thus the originating value is not human intelligence and responsibility but divine light and love, and the terminal value is not the human good we can bring about but the whole universe. Human development is not limited to skills and virtues but extends to holiness. The power of God's love brings forth a new energy and efficacy in all goodness. The limit of human expectation ceases to be the grave. The world is the fruit of God's self-transcendence, the expression and manifestation of God's benevolence and beneficence, God's glory. God made us in the divine image, and so our authenticity consists in being like

God, origins of value in true love. In particular, God calls us to the higher authenticity that

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overcomes evil with good. We can do this only because faith, the knowledge born of religious love, places human efforts in a friendly universe, revealing an ultimate significance in human achievement and strengthening new undertakings with confidence. That higher authenticity that overcomes evil with good enters with religious faith, unwavering hope, and self-sacrificing charity into a world that inflicts on individuals the social, economic, and psychological pressures that for human frailty amount to determinism; a world that multiplies and heaps up the abuses and absurdities that breed resentment, hatred, anger, violence; a world that houses people in ideological prisons; a world that dooms people to the vast pressures of social decay. The gift of God's love awakens a knowledge of our sinfulness and of our real guilt, a firm purpose of amendment of our ways, and a confidence that the one who bestowed the gift of love is, despite our sinfulness and unworthiness, everlasting mercy and forgiveness.

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It is only to the extent that the gift of God's love has been received and accepted into one's living, whether simply consciously or also knowingly, that the radical lovelessness to which we are consigned without the gift of love is definitively removed or broken. And it is precisely a *gift*. It is given to us without any previous cause, that is, independently of anything we have known, or decided, or done. 'It is,' writes Lonergan, 'as if a room were filled with music though one can have no sure knowledge of its source. There is in the world, as it were, a charged field of love and meaning; here and there it reaches a notable intensity; but it is ever unobtrusive, hidden, inviting each of us to join. And join we must if we are to perceive it, for our perceiving is

through our own loving.²

Lovelessness in general Lonergan in one place calls, quite simply, 'the isolation of the individual.'³ Love establishes human consciousness, the consciousness of the individual, precisely as interpersonal. Those whom you love are constitutive of your self-presence. Your

²Lonergan, *Method in Theology* 290. ³

Find reference.

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very conscious being is a being in love. You are no longer alone. What breaks the isolation of the individual is falling in love and being in love. If you are really in love, the one with whom you are in love enters into the very constitution of your consciousness, even if you are not physically together with that person. Your very self-presence is a 'being-with.' And if you are in love in an unqualified fashion, you are, whether you know it or not, in love with God, who dwells in you through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

It is religious conversion that establishes us precisely as being in love without reservations, qualifications, conditions, hesitations. And that particular form and intensity of being in love Lonergan sets over against, not just any lack of love, but a *radical* lovelessness, a state in which one is persuaded that, in the last analysis and even if one has human companionship, one is finally alone in this universe, with no ultimate connection. *Radical* lovelessness is probably a constant temptation even for the greatest saints, who are tempted especially through the trials and sufferings that they must endure to surrender the desire to live in union with God. But surrendering that desire is surrendering, in the last analysis, to radical lovelessness.

How Do Cognitive Biases Work?

A cognitive bias is a type of error in thinking that occurs when people are processing and interpreting information in the world around them. The human brain is powerful but subject to limitations. Cognitive biases are often a result of your brain's attempt to simplify information processing. They are rules of thumb that help you make sense of the world and reach decisions with relative speed.

When you are making judgments and decisions about the world around you, you like to think that you are objective, logical, and capable of taking in and evaluating all the information that is available to you. Unfortunately, these biases sometimes trip us up, leading to poor decisions and bad judgments.

Causes

If you had to think about every possible option when making a decision, it would probably take a lot of time to make even the simplest choice. Because of the sheer complexity of the world around you and the amount of information in the environment, it is necessary sometimes to rely on some mental shortcuts that allow you to act quickly.

Cognitive biases can be caused by a number of different things, but it is these mental shortcuts, known as **heuristics**, that often play a major contributing role. While they can often be surprisingly accurate, they can also lead to errors in thinking. Social pressures, individual motivations, emotions, and limits on the mind's ability to process information can also contribute to these biases.

How Heuristics Help You Make Quick Decisions or Biases

These biases are not necessarily all bad, however. Psychologists believe that many of these biases serve an adaptive purpose—they allow us to reach decisions quickly. This can be vital if we are facing a dangerous or threatening situation. If you are walking down a dark alley and spot a dark shadow that seems to be following you, a cognitive bias might lead you to assume that it is a mugger and that you need to exit the alley as quickly as possible. The dark shadow may have simply been caused by a flag waving in the breeze, but relying on mental shortcuts can often get you out of the way of danger in situations where decisions need to be made quickly.

Types

Learn more about a few of the most common types of cognitive biases that can distort your thinking.

Confirmation Bias: This is favoring information that conforms to your existing beliefs and discounting evidence that does not conform.

Availability Heuristic: This is placing greater value on information that comes to your mind quickly. You give greater credence to this information and tend to overestimate the probability and likelihood of similar things happening in the future.

Halo Effect: Your overall impression of a person influences how you feel and think about his or her character. This especially applies to physical attractiveness influencing how you rate their other qualities.

Self-Serving Bias: This is the tendency to blame external forces when bad things happen and give yourself credit when good things happen. When you win a poker hand it is due to your skill at reading the other players and knowing the odds, while when you lose it is due to getting dealt a poor hand.

Attentional Bias: This is the tendency to pay attention to some things while simultaneously ignoring others. When making a decision on which car to buy, you may pay attention to the look and feel of the exterior and interior, but ignore the safety record and gas mileage.

Actor-Observer Bias: This is the tendency to attribute your own actions to external causes while attributing other people's behaviors to internal causes. You attribute your high cholesterol level to genetics while you consider others to have a high level due to poor diet and lack of exercise.

Functional Fixedness: This is the tendency to see objects as only working in a particular way. If you don't have a hammer, you never consider that a big wrench can also be used to drive a nail into the wall. You may think you don't need thumbtacks because you have no corkboard on which to tack things, but not consider their other uses. This could extend to people's functions, such as not realizing a personal assistant has skills to be in a leadership role.

Anchoring Bias: This is the tendency to rely too heavily on the very first piece of information you learn. If you learn the average price for a car is a certain value, you will think any amount below that is a good deal, perhaps not searching for better deals. You can use this bias to

set the expectations of others by putting the first information on the table for consideration.

Misinformation Effect: This is the tendency for post-event information to interfere with the memory of the original event. It is easy to have your memory influenced by what you hear about the event from others. Knowledge of this effect has led to a mistrust of eyewitness information.

False Consensus Effect: This is the tendency to overestimate how much other people agree with you.

Optimism Bias: This bias leads you to believe that you are less likely to suffer from misfortune and more likely to attain success than your peers.