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**Lonergan and Kant: A Correspondence Course  
Was Lonergan a Kantian?**

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*Introduction*

Bernard Lonergan, S.J. is widely recognized as one of the foremost philosophers of the Twentieth Century. His philosophical investigations were largely in service to Theology and evangelization in the context of Twentieth Century thought. This required that he come to terms with modern scientific thought and philosophical reflection. Nevertheless, his philosophical works stand on their own as a significant contribution to contemporary philosophical thought.

Few have had as wide and penetrating a grasp of science and scientific thinking, in its many and varied forms and specializations, as Lonergan. Likewise, few rival Lonergan in his mastery of the principles of philosophical reflection and the thought of a wide array of philosophers over the course of history. As many have attempted to do, he had to come to terms with the discoveries of modern science and modern scientific thinking and the challenges they present to the received traditions of philosophy. In a special way he had to contend with the thought of Immanuel Kant which has had such a profound influence on modern thinking and perceptions about reality. Indeed, many of the presuppositions of popular thought today are grounded in presuppositions enunciated by Kant.

*What it Means to Know*

Now, whenever I read a paper like this I always want to know if the writer knows what he's talking about. If he seems to, I still ask myself *how* he knows what he's talking about, how he knows what he seems to think he knows? And this inevitably leads to the question, "Well, what does it mean to know something anyway; to know anything at all? *What* is it that we actually know? What do we actually mean when we say that we know something? And *how* do we know it?" By that I don't just mean what the source and evidence for this "knowledge" is, but also, *how* do we know: What is the process of knowing, and how does it work? What is the process by which we come to know anything at all?

These are questions that Lonergan asked, particularly in his magnum opus *Insight*. Asking these questions led him to posit that all knowledge begins with asking questions and ends with drawing conclusions and making decisions about what is true, about what actually is the case with regard to whatever it is that one has been asking questions about. This is a different understanding of knowledge and knowing than Kant arrived at, or one might say than Kant stopped at. Kant located human knowing in intuition, that is in experience, whereas Lonergan concluded that human knowing begins with experience but ultimately resides in human judgments about one's understanding of what one has come to know. And that's a pretty

simple way of identifying the basic difference between Kant and Lonergan's epistemologies, the real subject of this paper.

### *Lonergan and Kant*

The differences between Lonergan and Kant's epistemologies seem subtle enough, but they are real differences that are quite important, as pointed out by various scholars. To make judgments about Kant's epistemology in fairness to Kant, one would have to thoroughly study the *Critique of Pure Reason (KRV)*. To understand what Lonergan is saying about knowing and human knowledge one should really study not just *Insight*, but also *Method in Theology* and what for many is the lesser known and earlier work *Verbum: Word and Idea in Aquinas*. I also recommend the writings of Giovanni B. Sala, S.J., a Lonergan scholar who taught at the University of Munich, and whose *Lonergan and Kant: Five Essays on Human Knowledge* and whose essay "What Use is Kant for Theology" in *Wisdom and Holiness, Science and Scholarship*, edited by Michael Dauphinais and Matthew Levering, much of what I have to say is based on. I should acknowledge that I am not an expert on Kant, but I have studied the relevant excerpts concerning epistemology in the *KRV* cited by Sala and others in relation to my interest in Lonergan's approach.

I titled this paper "A Correspondence Course" because of the importance of one of the central concepts in Lonergan's epistemology that involves making judgments about how what one believes he knows "corresponds" to what really is. This identifies a problem that Kant was preoccupied with, and that has bedeviled philosophers throughout time: How, if it is even possible to do so, do we know whether our subjective understanding, our subjective perceptions correspond to the reality of what we have perceived and conceived of in our minds? Do our perceptions really correspond to "what's out there", or are our perceptions just our perceptions, phantasms as it were, occurring in our minds with no real assurance that they correspond to a reality that is really out there? Do we know only appearances, as it seems Kant would have it? Do we, in fact, and can we know only the subjective perceptions that occur in our minds, or can our understanding reach what actually is objectively and independent of our subjective perceptions, however much we understand and know, and can only understand and know whatever it is that we know, subjectively? That is, although the *manner* of our knowing will always be subjective, can we know and have confidence that what we know subjectively corresponds to what actually is apart from our subjective perceptions and knowing? Lonergan believed that we can, which led him to posit his principle of "authentic subjectivity". He believed that what is understood subjectively can and does adequately represent and cause us to "know" what really is "out there now" beyond our subjective understanding, if the process of gathering the data of sense perception, conceptualizing what has been perceived in the most appropriate and accurate way, making judgments about what has been perceived and conceptualized based upon sound principles of reflective thought and testing of the data, and deciding what this analysis of the data and the concepts it leads to are all engaged in authentically. Real knowing, however, must engage this entire process, and not try to rely on experience or "intuition" alone.

Could this discussion be more contemporary? How often have you heard someone say something like "Well that's your perception of things; that's your understanding of things, and

you're welcome to it, but I have my own perceptions, understandings and beliefs, and mine are just as good as yours, so enjoy yours, but please leave me alone and let me enjoy mine, my own reality, while you enjoy yours, for its all subjective in the end, isn't it?" Notions such as this betray the influence of Kant and his progeny. But Lonergan would say, I believe, "No, it's not all just subjective in the end. It's objective, however much your perceptions and understanding can only be experienced subjectively. But are your subjective perceptions and your subjective understanding authentic? Do they represent perceptions and an understanding of what really is? Do they *correspond* to what really is, or are they just your imaginings about what is or what you might like it to be?" Have you examined, tested, analyzed and made judgments and decisions about your perceptions and the concepts they have led to in your mind authentically, with an unremitting dedication to knowing the truth about what is?

All of this, of course, begs the question of whether or not our subjective understanding *can* reach what really is and understand it accurately, which in Lonergan's terms means to understand it "authentically". This infers not only the accuracy of one's perceptions, but diligence in seeking out and assessing all available data of sense perception and honesty in judging the data and the conclusions they lead one to; accepting as true only what the data and sound assessment of the data, utilizing all of the means the intellect and reason are capable of, lead to. To be convinced and know that what one has concluded about what one now believes to be the truth "corresponds" to "what is really is out there now; to what is." Could these very contemporary questions be any more Kantian? Could the responses suggested be more Lonerganian?

What I would like to do, as much as I can, is to highlight the principal divergences between Kant and Lonergan with respect to epistemology. These divergences have led some to say that Kant simply didn't go far enough in his analysis of human understanding and knowledge, and that his epistemology is therefore flawed in ways that have led to a number of philosophical conundrums that have preoccupied philosophers ever since. Lonergan wants to point to a way out of the intellectual abyss that Kantian analysis seems to lead us into, and open a door to the possibility of a renewed and fully justified confidence in the capacity of human beings to know; to examine the conditions of the possibility of human knowing, and to point out when and how those conditions are fulfilled. Lonergan wanted us to understand how knowing works and what it means to know something with a justifiable confidence that what we have come to believe we know really is what is, and that how we have come to know it really does constitute what it means to know and how knowing "works"; to realize that we can know not just what we "see" in our minds but what truly is "out there already now".

I am persuaded that one of Lonergan's principal contributions goes to the heart of Kant's philosophy as it relates to epistemology. As others have concluded, Lonergan's investigations suggest that Kant did not go far enough in analyzing the processes of human perception, thought, understanding, and knowing. Indeed, as Sala states:

The Kantian epistemology is highly obscure, fragmentary, and even contradictory. One must disagree with Kant in statement after statement of his analysis of knowledge. The significance of the *KRV (Critique of Pure Reason)* lies much more in its setting the problem than in its solving the problem. Its special merit consists in its having opened to philosophical reflection the problem of the *a priori* in all its breadth, and thus having

introduced the study of the role of the subject in human knowledge. One need only think of the importance that modern focus on the subject has for present-day culture to be aware of the epochal significance of Kant's quest of the *a priori*.<sup>1</sup>

Lonergan posits a method that he considered universal and valid for coming to understand anything whatsoever, in whatever field of inquiry one might engage in. This is because he based his method on the cognitional structures and functions involved in human understanding and knowing, structures and functioning that lead one to go to the heart of the matter and grasp the nature of whatever one is asking questions about.

Lonergan's analysis presupposes that things that exist, and things that are inquired into, have a peculiar nature of their own which is capable of being inquired into and understood as and for what they are independently of the inquirer. There really is something out there to be understood, as far as Lonergan is concerned, that is intelligible and capable of being understood by human beings. Its intelligibility to us is not simply a product of the intelligibility, or the intellectual capacities, of the human mind, but reside in the thing itself, however much intelligibility of the thing occurs for us in our minds as a function of the mind's capacity to grasp and represent that intelligibility to us in our perceptions and in our thinking. For those who believe that what we understand, or think, or feel, or believe that we understand is a projection of structures pre-existing or invented in the human mind, Lonergan's presuppositions have no meaning, or at least whatever they mean has nothing to do with reality but only with the intellectual projections of the one who believes it.

Lonergan ended up in a very different place than Kant, even though they may have started with the same kind of presuppositions. In essence, Kant is saying that we only know, and that we *can* only know what we conceive of in our minds; that is, that we only know appearances as they are experienced, conceptualized, and understood subjectively in the human mind; that all we really know are the concepts of our mind, not the reality of what is outside of our interior conceptualizations of what we experience as perceptions through the senses. To a certain extent, one must say with respect to these differences between Kant and Lonergan, "n'er the twain shall meet," absent a forthright and sincere dedication on the part of those who think about such things to engage in unremitting dialogue over these differences and to assent to reasonable conclusions that ought to result from such dialogue.

### *Kant's Epistemology*

Kant did not deny the objective reality of things, but his epistemology deprives us of access to knowledge of the things themselves, confining it to knowledge of appearances. In the end this is because he reduces all human knowledge to intuition. Heidegger formulated Kant's epistemology with extreme precision: "To understand the *KRV* one must, as it were, hammer into one's head the principle: Knowledge is primarily intuition."<sup>2</sup> Kant himself states that "In whatever manner and by whatever means a mode of knowledge may relate to objects, intuition

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<sup>1</sup> G. B. Sala, *Lonergan and Kant: Five Essays on Human Knowledge*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1994, 30-31.

<sup>2</sup> M. Heidegger, *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1965) 29, cited in Sala, *Lonergan and Kant*, Chapter I, p.9.

is that through which it is in immediate relation to them, and to which all thought as a means is directed.”<sup>3</sup> Intuition is for Kant, therefore, the unique means by which we are able to establish an immediate cognitional relation with the object. Since knowledge consists in this relation of subject to object, it must be concluded that knowing is intuition. Kant often says that intuition alone gives us the object, or that intuition alone refers to the object.<sup>4</sup> Positing a twofold structure of knowledge, he formulates the principle that through *Anschauung* the object is given to us, through *Denken* it is thought.

Now, the nouns *Anschauung* and *Anschauung* are often translated “intuition” or “intuiting” in English, and this can be misleading. The English word “intuition” often refers to a vague kind of non-perceptual or supra-perceptual insight. In German these words really mean simply “to look at”. *Denken*, on the other hand, means “thought; to think”. On the basis of various texts in the *KRV*, Sala draws the following conclusions regarding Kant’s epistemology: “There are many activities which contribute to the constitution of our knowledge; but if we ask what constitutes knowledge as knowledge of an object, and then as knowledge at all, we have to answer: It is intuition.”<sup>5</sup> No matter how many mediated relations other activities are able to establish with the object, in order to avoid the nonsense of a series of mediations no one of which reaches the reality to be mediated, it must be said that there is a type of cognitional activity whose very nature consists in setting up a bridge between knower and known, which, as far as Kant is concerned, is intuition. “Knowledge, therefore, is essentially intuition” according to Kant, “and intuition is to be found in all knowledge.”<sup>6</sup>

One must ask, therefore, what constitutes the basis for understanding whatever is “looked at”, what the *a priori* of the mind “sees” and understands - in Kantian terms, the *a priori* of *Verstand* (mind; reason). For Kant it is twofold, residing in his twofold conception of the categories of the human mind. First are the categories as functions of synthetic unity, of a judgment without content. (A 349)<sup>7</sup> The categories of human thought express the spontaneity proper to *Verstand*, by means of which the manifold of pure intuition is “gone through in a certain way, taken up and connected” (A 77/B 102) if it is to rise to the level of human knowing. This occurs through a synthetic activity that the categories exercise on the contents of sensibility, an act of spontaneity of the faculty of representation (B129-30), of representing to the mind and to understanding what has been perceived. As such, the categories are not objective contents, but rather the ability of *Verstand* to add an intelligible content to the sense object by operating a synthesis upon it; the capacity of “making a concept out of any data that may be presented.” (A 239/B 298) It is in this sense, then, that Kant is often understood as saying that our knowledge of things is really a projection of the categories of the mind onto reality, not perception or understanding of the things out there themselves as they are, of the objective reality of what they are. Kant’s tendency was to conceive of the categories as a system of fixed processes, and for that reason Lonergan considered his *a priori* as being too rigid. (*Insight* 423/448).

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<sup>3</sup> *KRV*, A 19/B 33 (A = first edition, B = 2<sup>nd</sup> edition).

<sup>4</sup> For instance, A 16/B 30; A 68/B 93; A 224/B 272; A 239/B 298/ A 271/B 327; A 320/B 3377; A 719/ B747; etc., as cited in Sala, *Lonergan and Kant*, p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> See H. Vaihinger, *Kommentar zur Kants Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., vol. 2 (Stuttgart: Union Deutsche Verlagsgesellschaft, 1922) 103-7.

<sup>6</sup> Sala *Lonergan and Kant* 9.

<sup>7</sup> A = the first edition of *KRV*; B = the second edition.

The insufficiency of Kant's view is even more evident in his second way of looking at the categories, the objective-content or object-constitutive conception. Kant asserted that the understanding introduces a transcendental *content* into its representations by means of the synthetic unity of the manifold in intuition in general, by the same operations by which it produces in concepts, by means of analytical unity, the logical form of a judgment. Because of this, according to Kant, we can call these representations pure concepts of the understanding, and consider them as applying *a priori* to objects. (A79/B 105) In his search for the *a priori*, Kant refers to the traditional theory of the composition of knowledge as the basis of his inquiry in his Introduction to the second edition of *KRV*.

Though all our knowledge begins with experience, it does not follow that it all arises out of experience. For it may well be that even our empirical knowledge is made up of what we receive through impressions and of what our own faculty of knowledge (sensible impressions serving merely as the occasion) supplies from itself. If our faculty of knowledge makes any such addition (*Zusatz*), it may be that we are not in a position to distinguish it from the raw material, until with long practice of attention we have become skilled in separating it. (B 1-2)

Thus, whatever the *a priori* is considered to be, it will in any event be an addition made by the cognitional faculty to the raw material of sense impressions. The context of Kant's writing on this does not permit any other interpretation than that this addition is an objective *content* added to that other objective content, that is, the raw material coming from the senses. The *a priori* is thus an objective content alongside the *a posteriori* objective content. It is, therefore, the formal element in what is known, even though this does not make it any less an object. The entire question of the application of the pure concepts of understanding to a corresponding intuition makes sense only because the pure concept of understanding is precisely a content to be applied. The description of the *a priori* as something which lies ready in the mind (*Gemüt*), or in the *Verstand*, obviously indicates that it is an object. The affirmation that the *a posteriori* of empirical intuition is only the occasion or the opportunity for the mind to draw forth from itself the formal *a priori* elements which it already possesses says the same thing, for as far as a heuristic *a priori* is concerned, the given would obviously be much more than a mere occasion.

Although Kant asserted that "thoughts without content are empty" (A 51/B 75), the prevalence of the intuition principle stands in a relation of tension with the conception of the categories as contents to be added to the *a posteriori* contents of sensibility and also, more generally, with the conception of knowledge as structure, of which the doctrine of the categories is a part. The intuition principle excludes not only the conception of the categories as *a priori* but even as a synthetic activity, *Verstand* in search of an intelligible objective content. In point of fact, as far as the intuition principle is concerned, a content of knowledge is possible only where there is an intuition-like activity. The exclusion of a real objective content, one that is known through the activity of understanding exercised on the data of sense, appears to be what led Kant to maintain an *a priori* content: that is, the pure concepts.

Here, perhaps, is where we can understand why Lonergan and his followers feel that Kant did not go far enough. Certainly all knowledge is based on experience, what translators of Kant refer to as intuition – "seeing what's there". But knowledge itself has to be more than that.

What we refer to as knowledge is arrived at through perception, and the concepts provoked by perception that lead to understanding, and from that understanding to knowledge. It is precisely here, I believe, that Lonergan points out the further operations of cognition that lead from intuition, or experience, to knowledge. Hence, Lonergan's famous expression of the fourfold process involved in acquiring knowledge that is at the heart of his epistemology: Experience (or *insight*), understanding, judgment, and decision.

### *Concluding Thoughts*

I'd like to conclude with two brief thoughts. Kant's doctrine of the categories as *a priori* has led some to questioning whether or not we can know whether or not there really is anything "out there", that is, outside our subjective perceptions and concepts. There are, of course, many common sense ways of casting doubt on the suggestion that there isn't, and you could try one sometime by driving your car into a concrete wall at 60 miles an hour. Aside from anything quite that drastic, however, I would like to suggest something based not on common sense exactly but on experience. Once the mind forms concepts, a visual or representational image of what we perceive (which occurs virtually immediately when something is perceived), it is certainly possible, in fact quite appropriate to ask where those images, those concepts, come from. They do seem to be already there somehow in the mind waiting to encounter and engage the consequences of sensory perception. And they do seem to fit into identifiable categories. But what about perceptions, experiences, we know to be real because we really experience them, that defy conceptualization? Experiences for which there are no pre-existing categories or concepts, or that do not form into concepts immediately or without great effort, or perhaps not at all even with the greatest effort of the greatest minds, but which nevertheless we know to be real perceptions, real experiences? What I'd like to suggest is that the many things that we experience as real, and are quite convinced are real, but which remain shrouded in mystery, may warrant the conclusion (and confidence in the fact) that there is, in fact, something out there now that really exists beyond our subjective experience and conceptualizations, but that we otherwise might not be sure of because we're trapped in our own subjectivity. The inscrutability of some perceptions seem to confirm that there is something out there now, which does include all the things that are intelligible that we do believe we understand and know. The sense that there is something more that we are not quite able to grasp the intelligibility of, however, suggests that it (along with all of those other things) really is already out there now.

Secondly, all of this is really very intellectual, isn't it; very "heady"? We want to understand and we want to know; we want to know what it is that we know, and we want to know what it means to know. But once we know, or least have convinced ourselves that we know what is true, is that really satisfying? It may not end our inquiry, in fact it never does. Indeed to be human, to be mature and honest is to admit that not only have we not exhausted our capacity to know, and all there is to know, it would seem that what there is to know is, in fact, inexhaustible. We're never entirely satisfied with what we believe we've come to know, but does that warrant the conviction that if we just keep at it, eventually we'll know everything there is to know? Or might we want to conclude, rather, that there will always be more to know that we could every possibly know; that reality, that what is is beyond our capacity to ever know it completely? Even at that, however, having arrived at least at some knowledge, and however much knowledge, of what is, of the truth, don't we also thirst for much more than just knowing? What I want to say is that it seems to me that *knowing* what is is a precondition

to *appreciating* what is. And I myself see no other appropriate response to appreciating what is than gratitude: gratitude for what is, certainly, but also gratitude for the mere capacity to experience and to know what is, to participate in the drama of coming to know, but even more so to participate in the privilege of being. For many of us, such gratitude leads necessarily to praise and thanksgiving, if not adoration and worship. But I digress; the underlying subject of this paper is philosophy not theology, so I will restrain myself from wandering any further into fields best left to treatment elsewhere.

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