

## METHOD IN THEOLOGY

Topic: "The Subject" Revisited

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In "The Subject," the 1968 Aquinas Lecture at Marquette University, Bernard Lonergan explained the fundamental differences between the major schools of modern philosophical thought on the basis of their distinct (though often unthematized) ways of construing the subject. The early modern philosophers elaborated a truncated version of the subject; the idealists rendered the subject immanent; the masters of suspicion saw it as fundamentally alienated; and the naïve realists simply neglected it. Lonergan defended critical realism as the only philosophical approach capable of yielding an account of the subject that is adequate and verifiable. The task the members of the group took up at this year's convention was to explore the degree to which Lonergan's analysis, so illuminating with respect to the state of the question thirty years ago, remains valid and applicable in our own context, when the very notion of the subject has come under attack by the champions of postmodernism. Fred Lawrence launched our discussion with a presentation he entitled "The Subject as Other: Lonergan and Postmodern Concerns."

Lawrence began by stating a thesis: that postmodernism has its origins in Heidegger's critique of "ontotheology" and its attendant idealist or naïve-realist understandings of the subject. Ontotheology has its source in the tendency to conceive of reality as a collection of "already-out-there-now" (*vorhandene*) substances or objects, and of God as the supreme substance or object, endowed with all perfections. (Lawrence gave a quick sketch of the dominance of ontotheology from Suarez to Kant and of its unmasking by Nietzsche and Heidegger.) Adherence to this essentially imaginal notion of God tends to promote a similar view of human subjects, namely, as imagined instances of "already-out-there-now"—or better, "already-in-here-now"—objects endowed with consciousness. Within this framework, consciousness is regarded exclusively as consciousness of objects situated either outside or inside the subject. Insofar as the subject comes to know itself, it does so by reflecting on itself as an object.

In his remarks Lawrence argued that both naïve realism (as represented by, e.g., Descartes, Locke, or the neoscholastics) and idealism (especially all forms of Kantianism) are unable to escape this object-oriented understanding of consciousness because both are captive to an unacknowledged controlling image of consciousness as a closed container located within the subject. As a result, both see the basic problem of knowledge as figuring out how to bridge the apparently primordial gap between the subject "in here" and the object "out there." Both see sensation or sense perception as providing the only way across the gap (per-

ceptualism): naïve realism claims that concepts abstracted from sensible data yield objective knowledge of reality, while idealism maintains that, precisely because sense perception does not extend to things-in-themselves, we can have objective knowledge only of things as they appear to us. In addition, both positions give accounts of human knowing that emphasize the role of concepts but evince little or no recognition of the activity of understanding (conceptualism). Hence, although the two approaches differ with regard to the starting point of knowledge—naïve realism begins with the object “out there,” idealism with consciousness “in here”—what is more important is the assumptions they share.

Lawrence went on to show how the postmodern critiques of the subject are, for the most part, valid criticisms of this shared field of assumptions and the pathological consequences that flow from them. The “totalizing thought” that postmodernists find such an objectionable feature of the so-called foundationalist epistemologies, for example, stems from the inability of either naïve realism or idealism to explain the connection between sensible particulars and universal concepts other than by relating them logically: particulars are subsumed under universals. The tendency to understand relations of all kinds—especially relations between persons—solely in terms of this subsumption model has the effect of diminishing, subjugating, or eradicating “the other.” In general, Lawrence maintained, the postmodernists’ contention that the subject-as-object is isolated, punctual, disengaged, and unencumbered is right on target. At the same time, however, most of the authors of these critiques—including the later Wittgenstein, Gadamer, Voegelin, Ricoeur, MacIntyre, Taylor, Levinas, and Marion—are still entangled in perspectivist, relativist, or historicist versions of idealism. Others, like Derrida, Rorty, and Foucault, influenced more by Nietzsche than by Kant, operate from a fundamental stance of alienation. Thus, while the postmodernists have succeeded in deconstructing the notion of the subject-as-object, they have not provided us with an alternative notion that would reveal the subject in the totality of its normative integrity and dynamic complexity.

In the concluding segment of his talk, Lawrence indicated that Lonergan has pointed the way toward an integral understanding of the subject as other—an understanding that is neither naïve-realist, nor idealist, nor alienated. The subject for Lonergan is other partly because it transcends itself through its sensitive, cognitive, and loving openness to the concrete universe of being. Every instance of real questioning, every increment of understanding or knowledge, every act of love given or received, makes us other than what we were. This is particularly the case when the subject, wounded and distorted by cultural, social, and personal sin, undergoes conversion. Conversion is a radical reorientation and reorganization of consciousness, and particularly of our imaginations. Lawrence underscored the fact that breaking free of the imaginal biases of naïve realism and idealism—the core of what Lonergan refers to as “intellectual conversion”—is a particularly crucial aspect of this revolution. Finally, he noted, for Lonergan the primary reason the subject is other is that it is a subject and not an object. We are conscious of—in the sense of aware of and present to—ourselves

precisely as subjects in the very activity of our questioning, knowing, deliberating, and choosing. We are present to ourselves in this prior sense even when the object of our questioning, knowing, deliberating, and choosing is our own questioning, knowing, deliberating, and choosing. Moreover, the roots of the subject's authenticity—the basic openness or closedness with which it confronts the world—always remain at least partially obscure. Hence, the subject as subject always defies complete objectification.

Lawrence's talk sparked questions and conversation on a variety of topics. We began by touching on the fact that what is irreducible about the subject could probably best be described as the term of a web of relationships. This was followed by a discussion about the conditions for effective social criticism. The point was made that such criticism can be undertaken only by a community that has undergone conversion and is truly repentant; otherwise, it will likely take the low road of self-congratulatory moral indignation (in contrast to moral conversion) and the manipulative use of power in order to get what it wants—the replacement of one alienating situation with another more to its liking. The names of Mary Parker Follett and Hannah Arendt surfaced in connection with the issue of the right use of power. Next came a question about how to resist the contemporary tendency to conceive human beings primarily in economic terms. This led to a discussion of the need to reorient the human sciences generally, especially by freeing them from the images connected with Hobbes's or Locke's account of the state of nature, and to reconceive economic theory in a way that does justice to what is right about both capitalism and socialism. One of the participants suggested that, while it is important to acknowledge the crucial role of relationships in constituting the subject, in our own day it may be just as important to acknowledge the need for people to spend time in solitude—time devoted to study, reflection, and prayer—precisely so they can develop as authentic subjects. The session ended with a discussion about the possible avenues by which university education might promote conversion in individuals and communities.

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