Introduction

Turn to the Subject

Philosophy has always shown an interest not only in the objective world in which we live but also in the subject who is doing the inspecting. The Ancient Greeks referred to the Delphic Oracle, which advised each wise person "to know thyself." In the *Apology,* Plato, through the mouth of Socrates, espouses this aphorism as well as the famous admonition, "The unexamined life is not worth living." Thus, Socrates looked into himself and saw his own ignorance, but he also saw the struggle between vice and virtue, between sense and intelligence, and between the one and the many.

Augustine was wonderfully articulate in describing his own searching mind in his *Confessions*: his struggle with Manichean materialism and the existence of God; his struggle with sin, guilt, and his conversion to Christianity; and his struggle with the imagination and understanding. He was able to describe how his memory was a storehouse of images and ideas. His inner explorations helped him to understand how through illumination, one arrives at truth, and by analogy with the processes of the human mind, one can arrive at some understanding of the procession of the Word and the Trinity itself.

Jumping to the modern period, Descartes has been credited with a decisive "turn to the subject" in establishing the starting point of philosophy in the cryptic, "I think, therefore I am." Surely, here we find an indubitable foundation for a philosophy independent of religion, church, authority, or tradition. He turned philosophy in the direction of the human mind and its power and limits in knowing reality, and that has been the focus of much of philosophy ever since. The classical empiricists described in detail the activity of thinking, the conscious mind at work, the role of images and ideas, simple and complex ideas, laws of association, habits of the mind,

and the limits of knowledge. Kant had a more complex theory of the human mind imposing a priori ideas on reality in the spheres of sensibility, understanding, and reason. He faced head-on the critical problem of whether we can know objective reality. Can we escape from subjectivity to objectivity? What are the a priori conditions for the possibility of human knowing? Existentialists were more interested in the subjects' feelings, in choice, in the drama and tragedy of human life, in angst, in boredom, in absurdity, and in meaninglessness. Phenomenology was motivated by a desire to return "to the things themselves" as Husserl famously put it, to start without presuppositions, to describe precisely and objectively the phenomena, to imagine variations, and to intuit essences. In contemporary times, postmodern philosophers espouse an "incredulity" regarding any grand projects or "metanarratives" as Lyotard famously called them. Content with the diversity of specific particular entities, they are suspicious of any truth claims whatever, and sensitive to hidden motivations (especially the lust for power).

How can we describe the spirit of our age? We are at home with subjectivity but with a wide variety of views about the ability of the subject to know. We have a multitude of theories about human knowing. We are familiar with the notions of consciousness, interiority, intentionality, interpretation, perception, and hidden motivations. The hermeneutics of suspicion usually trumps the hermeneutic of recovery. We revel in diversity. Fascinated by the particular, we are not interested in the abstract. We prioritize a spirit of universal tolerance. We also value self-fulfillment, self-transcendence, self-affirmation, and self-discovery. We are divided into contrary positions and incommensurable theories about human knowing. After two and a half millennia of the attention to the subject, we are still conflicted about how and what that subject can know about objective reality. Our turn to the subject is incomplete, truncated, conflicted, and fraught with misunderstanding. The aim in this text is to complete this turn to the subject and to move from authentic subjectivity to genuine objectivity.

Completing the Turn to the Subject

Subjectivity and objectivity are often seen as polar opposites. On the one hand, subjectivity is to be eliminated because it represents bias, personal opinions, twisted feelings, and ideology. On the other hand, objectivity is sought after because it represents truth, balance, solidity, and something we can all agree upon. I seek to use these terms in quite a different way in which they are viewed as reciprocal or complementary notions. There are good and bad elements in both subjectivity and objectivity. For example,

subjectivity depicts the subject as conscious, as feeling, as desiring, as thinking, as knowing, as believing, as criticizing, as valuing, as aspiring to higher things, as deciding, as loving, and perhaps more. At the same time, subjectivity implies bias, prejudice, ignorance, lust for power, lies, fraud, crooked arguments, unconscious motivations, hidden agendas, laziness, and much more. There is a similar duality in the term "objectivity."

My approach, then, is to include the totality of the elements of subjectivity and to discriminate between the beneficial and the harmful elements. I will describe the activities that promote full human understanding and the elements that tend to help or hinder that noble endeavor. A phenomenology of human understanding means, first of all, a full, detailed, precise, verifiable, and intelligent description of the process of human understanding, beginning with concrete examples and then moving on to an analysis and an identification of the common structure of all acts of human understanding.

By all means, we can learn about human understanding from epistemologists of the past and present: from cognitive psychologists, or from biographies and autobiographies of great scientists and philosophers that reveal how they made their discoveries. But in the end, the only way we know about human knowing is by introspection: by evaluating our own experience, by becoming aware of the processes of understanding as they unfold in our own minds. Studying frogs requires hands-on experience with frogs. Similarly, a study of human understanding begins with assembling individual examples of understanding. Unfortunately, I do not have access to the workings of the minds of other people, but I do have access to my own mind where the details, characteristics, and forces producing understanding can be identified. Contrary to common opinion, such introspection is not private and unverifiable, but rather, can and should be communicable and verifiable. Thus, I am proposing a journey of self-discovery, exploring and identifying the capacities of the human mind.

In the end, I suggest that this is the way to genuine objectivity. It does not lock us into subjectivity but reveals precisely the way to judgments of truth, and hence, the path to an objective, real world. The end result is a platform from which to expand into metaphysics, ethics, and a philosophy of God, and to develop understanding in common sense, in the sciences and practical applications on a firm foundation.

Advantages and Contributions of this Approach

The term "understanding" can be used in many senses with a variety of nuances. Studies of these specialized meanings in particular contexts and in

specific detail can be very valuable. However, this text focuses on the core philosophical meaning of understanding, from the broadest and deepest point of view, to reveal its structure and role in knowing. Here I will outline some of the advantages of such a general approach.

1. *Understanding "Understanding."* In order to teach a course, it is not enough for the educator to personally understand the material; the educator must also comprehend how to communicate the material to others. To do that it helps to understand "understanding." We all have little eureka moments when we move from being puzzled to seeing the solution. We know vaguely what understanding is, but we need to identify the details, conditions, characteristics, and implications of this most basic act of human intelligence. My approach will identify individual acts of human understanding and analyze the structure that is common to all acts of human understanding. Then, I will differentiate types of acts of understanding as I identify direct insights, inverse insights, higher viewpoints, reflective, and deliberative insights. My goal is to move from a vague notion of understanding to a precise and explicit identification of its characteristics and types.

2. *Method.* As a result of grasping the process of understanding, I will be able to suggest an appropriate method and criterion for coming to correct conclusions in all areas of the search for truth. Understanding is central to common sense, science, philosophy, and technology. Is there any discipline in kindergarten, grade school, high school, or the university that does not involve understanding? If I can show precisely what understanding is, surely I can make a contribution to progress in all of these disciplines and all other areas of specialization. Understanding and the method of understanding underpins everything.

3. *Personal Foundations.* I propose this as a journey of self-discovery, an invitation to take possession of one's own mind, and to recognize the power and limits of the mind. Through this journey, I believe we can learn to understand ourselves. The evidence for all that is asserted in this text is our own minds and our experiences of understanding or misunderstanding. My position is based on this personal self-appropriation of how we actually understand and know. I do not propose this as an exercise in abstract analysis and synthesis, or in logic, scholarship, or the history of philosophy. Nor does this account of human understanding rely on political correctness, the latest ideas from French intellectuals, the authority of a tradition, or from admittedly great minds like Kant or Lonergan. Because we can understand for ourselves the source and basis for all human knowing, we have a standpoint from which we can criticize and evaluate every other position put before us. Hence, the aim of this book is to help readers to be in a position to confront many skeptical trends in contemporary culture and sort out the

authentic from the inauthentic. Most of these contemporary trends arise from a misunderstanding of the process of human knowing. If we acquire a personal grasp of understanding and its proper unfolding, we will also be in a position to identify the source of such misunderstanding.

4. *Diversity and Unity.* Nowadays, it is common to stress the diversity of mentalities, cultures, and philosophies. That is fine. In many cases diversity is an enrichment. But underlying such diversity lies the other side of the coin: what we have in common in the basic human act of understanding. Human understanding has a common structure and process. From Socrates to Sartre, from America to Japan, from young to old, and from male to female understanding involves a question, attending to data, the emergence of an idea, and expressing that idea. It involves a critique of the proposition or hypothesis and a conclusion that is affirmed based on evidence and arguments. In many cases of understanding, there is often a further question of value that arises and is answered after deliberation in a judgment of value. This is the common substructure of what it is to be an intelligent human person. Diversity does not mean irreducible chaos. There is diversity, but underlying all the diversity of human cultures lies a common factor of human understanding, from which all of these various positions have emerged.

5. *Common Source.* Understanding is such a primordial human activity that it is relevant to all things human. It is the source of language, culture, social institutions, common sense, science, philosophy, history, progress, economics, and so on. In addition to understanding operating in the spheres of truth and value, forms of intelligence are in operation in sports, art, music, poetry, conversation, dialogue, comedy, communication, literature, prayer and worship, and in so many other daily activities. It is imperative to understand what this basis is.

6. *Higher Viewpoint.* Every individual act of understanding unifies and organizes that which is understood. For example, if a person is reading a detective story, upon discovering the true perpetrator near the end of the book, every clue and red herring in the story falls into place. The whole story becomes clear—the distractions, the false alibis, and the reason for everything. If the reader does not understand the plot, the story will be a very confused tale of murder and mayhem; with understanding, however, it all falls into place. Or once an individual understands that chemical elements are distinguished from one another by their atomic weight, the person can now comprehend the unfolding of the periodic table and where every element in the universe fits into that table and why. Or if one is watching a game of football and does not understand the rules, then it will all seem to be a pointless exercise. But once the spectator understands the rules, it can become meaningful, dramatic, and even exciting and sophisticated.

Likewise, if we understand "understanding," then we have something that unifies and organizes the whole process of all human knowing. We can then unify and organize all that is to be known. We can attain a kind of universal viewpoint that sees from one perspective how all of the parts are related in the one whole of human life in an evolving world.

7. *Philosophy.* This text is intended to be a contribution to philosophy, not psychology. Empirical science is a much envied discipline because it seems to have found a method that produces cumulative and progressive results. There is more or less unanimity among scientists worldwide about their methods, their terminology, what they have achieved, and what remains to be discovered. It keeps advancing not just in theory but in the technology made possible by scientific discoveries. Scientists from all countries of the world can collaborate on projects like the International Space Station or the Large Hadron Collider. Philosophy, by contrast, does not seem to have a commonly accepted method. It does not have a commonly accepted terminology. It is characterized by verbal disputes, mutual incomprehension, conflicts, and spirited disagreements. It is very hard for philosophers to collaborate on any project. By chapter 9, I will have presented a common base for all philosophies and whether they represent a deeper understanding or a misguided misunderstanding.

8. *Verifiability.* This text promises to deliver a method for philosophy that should yield cumulative and progressive results. Scientists discovered a method of formulating theories that could be verified by reference to empirical data. Philosophers must use the same method, but instead of applying it to the data of the senses, they must apply it to the data of consciousness. Epistemologists must turn to the introspective data on the experience of asking questions, thinking, conceiving, understanding, formulating, criticizing, judging, and evaluating. They must verify their theories with reference to what actually happens when we understand and know. If epistemology can be verifiable, a metaphysics that flows from it will also be verifiable. Philosophy is subject to a criterion of verification just as the empirical sciences. What this text is promising is a verifiable epistemology followed by a critical philosophy that yields cumulative and progressive results!

Sources

The reader is entitled to ask from what background or tradition this text emerges. Where do these extraordinary claims come from? The context is really two-fold: Bernard Lonergan and the phenomenological tradition. Bernard Lonergan, SJ (1904–1984) was trained in the Scholastic tradition

with roots in Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas. He wrote a series of articles on the epistemology of Aquinas, which were published in *Theological Studies* and then in book form as *Verbum, Word and Idea in Aquinas*. Having discovered a complete, detailed, and accurate metaphysical account of knowing in Aquinas, he thought that it would be a good idea to make this available for contemporary culture. As a result, from 1949 to 1953 he wrote a little book entitled *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*. This was a transposition of the metaphysical categories of Aristotle and Aquinas into the psychological categories of the present day. He identified the meaning of the metaphysical terms in reference to the subject's experience of the activity of knowing. He is not normally associated with phenomenology and has his own critique of Husserl in that text.

However, in part one of *Insight,* Lonergan provides a phenomenological description of the process of knowing. The first part is called "Insight as Activity" and answers the question: what are we doing when we are knowing? In those 400 pages he is doing nothing more than accurately describing, in detail and with many examples, the activities involved in human understanding, including the conditions, characteristics, and implications of these activities. The authority for all of his statements is the subject's own experience of asking questions, struggling to arrive at the solution, finally grasping the point, and expressing this in a definition or a judgment.

I will make few explicit references to Lonergan in this text. However, my work is profoundly influenced by the ideas, method, and terminology of *Insight*. I am not claiming credit for these insights for myself. Most of this text is entirely derivative; it is an exercise in communication rather than original thinking. Lonergan himself said that the point of reaching up to the mind of Aquinas in his own life profoundly changed him. Likewise, my own efforts to reach up to the mind of Lonergan since 1961 has profoundly changed me.

The second influence is phenomenology, which specializes in descriptions of subjective states. This tradition has produced a phenomenology of perception,[1] a phenomenology of spirit,[2] a phenomenology of the person,[3] a phenomenology of jealousy,[4] a phenomenology of literature,[5] a phenomenology of visiting the zoo,[6] and so on. It is time for a *Phenomenology of*

1. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception.*
2. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit.*
3. Sokolowski, *A Phenomenology of the Human Person.*
4. Giorgi, *The Descriptive Phenomenological Method in Psychology.*
5. Natanson, *The Erotic Bird.*
6. Garrett, *Why Do We Go to the Zoo?*

Human Understanding! Understanding is such an integral part of our cognitive experience that it deserves more attention. Phenomenology allows one to perform qualitative and interpretive studies; the study of human understanding is both of these. Phenomenologists are at home with subjectivity and objectivity, intentionality, consciousness, introspection, and limiting one's conclusions to what is warranted by the data. Lonergan, similarly, is at home with these terms, and seems to have been doing what phenomenologists could have been doing from the beginning.

By phenomenology, I simply mean an accurate description of the phenomenon of understanding from the subject's point of view. I do not want to get involved in disputes over phenomenological method or transcendental reductions. I do not presume any of the other positions of the phenomenological tradition. It is a tradition in which everyone seems to add his or her own individual twist. I hope I will be extended the same latitude. I do want to offer accurate, rich, verifiable, and detailed descriptions of every aspect or stage in the unfolding of human understanding. Is there a structure and pattern common to all acts of understanding? That is what I am looking for. I will use any available and useful sources for the study of human understanding: biographies and autobiographies describing how new discoveries actually occur; psychological research and reports on intelligence, insight and genius; and philosophical theories about the scope and limits of human understanding. Above all, I will depend on my own experience of the act of human understanding. From description, I will move to analysis and synthesis.

What Kind of a Book Is This?

This text is not a demonstration of deep scholarship or a show of erudition. There is a place for demonstrating one's expertise and detailed familiarity with a writer or a period, but that is not my aim. It is not about the history of philosophy. After all the history has been done, there is a time for the philosopher to be a philosopher and to take a stand on the basic questions of philosophy, namely, the reality of the world, the limits and possibility of our knowing, distinguishing true and false, or distinguishing good and bad. That is real philosophy for which the history is merely a preparation.

Consider this text as a map of the mind. A map guides one along the right path, identifies what is to the right and left, and explains which way to turn when one reaches a crossroads. Without a map, everything appears to be chaos, and one can easily get lost. The mind is also a seeming chaos, but with a map one can name and identify what is on the right or left and

determine what road to take and what to expect. The human mind is the terrain and the point of reference. This book is about discovering the power of the human mind to inquire, to understand, to judge, and to reach objective reality. It may seem simple from that point of view, but it is difficult to describe the processes of the human mind. It is easy to focus on frogs or trees or stones but it is more difficult to focus on ideas emerging from images in one's own understanding. As the argument unfolds in each chapter, I will lay out a sequence of steps, the appeal to the evidence, and the clarification of terms. I keep it as clear and focused as possible. For more detail or depth, I defer to Lonergan's *Insight*. I have been teaching this approach for 35 years and know how it can transform lives. I can only hope that the reader is ready for the journey into self-discovery as a knower, in order to produce an examined life that is the springboard to cumulative and progressive results in philosophy.

Book Summary

Chapter 1 searches for a method by which we might systematically study the power and limits of the human mind to know truth and value. I argue that whatever way we look, in the end, the only method for studying human understanding has to be an introspective methodology. I consider the history of this much maligned method of introspection and the difficulties and dangers involved. I suggest that anyone who has written about the human mind has either implicitly or explicitly been using this method. I call it "self-appropriation" in order to confer the idea of self-discovery, taking possession and control of one's knowing capacity.

In chapter 2, I embark on the journey of self-discovery. The first distinction is relatively easy to grasp: that between the experience of being conscious (as opposed to being unconscious) and the experience of cognitional activities such as classifying, defining, questioning, understanding, expressing, criticizing, evaluating, judging, and verifying. The term "consciousness" is used in so many vague and confusing senses in various disciplines. I use it as the abstract noun derived from the simple experience of being conscious. To be conscious means to be aware, awake, alert, attentive; usually we are attentive to what we are doing, what we are seeing, who we are talking to. But our attention can be turned to our own feelings and thinking and knowing, and even focus on our experience of self. I introduce a simple, necessary distinction between consciousness and the conscious activities of questioning and understanding so that we can concentrate on these latter activities.

Chapter 3 and 4 make up the heart of my inquiry: a description and analysis of the basic human act of understanding. I start with the role of questioning, a somewhat neglected starting point of the act of understanding. Then, I try to identify the passive and active elements of understanding, the conditions of study and concentration, and the nature of insight, which comes suddenly and unexpectedly. Understanding differs from sensing in that it is not immediate, not simple, not direct, and not automatic. The key moment of understanding is when an idea emerges from an image. In colloquial terms, we refer to this by saying we get it, the light goes on, it all makes sense at last, or we find the solution. This is the oft-mentioned eureka moment. We do not forget these illuminations and they gradually transform our minds.

Human understanding develops in many ways that I explore in chapter 5. It becomes broader, becomes deeper, is formulated into language, moves from common sense to theory, and discovers ever higher viewpoints. Simply compare and contrast the mind of the infant, the adolescent, the university student, the PhD graduate, the specialist, the professor, and the wise and mature old person. The dynamic is the questioning; solutions to one problem only lead to further questions about related matters. The process is ongoing and the expansion is exponential and never ending.

Insights only give us bright ideas; insights are a dime a dozen. Insight is not yet knowledge. In chapter 6, I identify the act of critical understanding, which produces judgments of truth. Hypotheses or bright ideas are always followed by the question: is it true, is it correct, will it work? The brainstorming mode leads to the critical mode. The mind analyzes what justifies this affirmation that a proposition is true. I conclude that we know something is true if we have sufficient evidence and the evidence entails the conclusion.

Usually a discovery, an invention, or a verified theory will be open to many uses and abuses, applications, adaptations, and implications. What is it worth? What is it for? What can we do with this? I explore the question of value in chapter 7. The question of value naturally and spontaneously arises. How do we deal with it? Can we answer it truthfully? I conclude that the mind performs such evaluations most of the time and usually performs them quite well. Judgments of value neither come from arbitrary preferences nor from choices, nor from emotions, but from an act of deliberative understanding. People in Western societies constantly talk about values yet are often quite inarticulate in answering the question: what is a value? This chapter clearly explains where they come from and how to distinguish responsible from irresponsible judgments of value.

At this point in chapter 8, I place all the discoveries about the process of human understanding together into a diagram. This makes clear how the sequence of activities that constitute human knowing and valuing unfolds.

I identify four levels of operation, each with its own characteristic products that parallel the other levels. I define each activity in relation to the other activities in the diagram and offer an explanation of the process of knowing. Many dynamic parts constitute one whole.

If I am correct in this account of understanding, I should be able to shed some light on misunderstanding. In chapter 9, I speculate as to why there are so many fundamental disagreements and conflicts between philosophers, especially about human knowing. Surely such intelligent people should be able to talk over their differences, correct what is wrong, and come to an agreement as to what is right. But it is not so in the real world; thus, I consider the deep source of misunderstanding in the unstated imaginative assumptions and feelings of philosophers.

All of the above comprises what is a phenomenology of human understanding, that is, an accurate description of the act of understanding from the point of view of the subject. But some might dismiss this as folk psychology and of no relevance to real philosophy. However, if I have discovered the power and limits of human knowing, then we can embark on a journey of using that power to know. Hence, I shift the point of view in order to posit three strategic judgments that are the foundation of a critical realist epistemology and philosophy (chapter 10).

The default position of many philosophers is that we cannot know objective reality. I disagree with this view on the basis of these three judgments: I am a knower, this is a tree, and I am not this tree. On this basis, one can affirm the objectivity of what is known. I claim that authentic subjectivity leads to genuine objectivity (chapter 11). I define the meaning of subject and object in contrast to one another, which leads to a realist philosophy based on judgments of truth rather than unstated imaginative assumptions.

Finally, in chapter 12, I sum up what has been accomplished under the title of "the mind recovered." I conclude that I have fully presented a foundational position of human understanding, which can be developed in any specific direction of human science, scholarship or discipline. I have set forth a universal method for common sense, for science, for human science, and for philosophy. It could be the beginning of a philosophical tradition that really yields cumulative and progressive results.