

# Bernard Lonergan's Transcendental Realism and Renewal of the Aristotelian-Thomist Quest for Being

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**Abstract:** *This paper examines Bernard Lonergan's transcendental realism as a critical renewal of the Aristotelian-Thomist understanding of being in response to the modern turn to subjectivity. It first outlines the metaphysical orientations of Aristotle and Aquinas before analysing the emergence of modern subjectivism in Descartes and Kant. The study argues that modern philosophy's emphasis on consciousness and phenomena generated a crisis for classical realist metaphysics. In response, Lonergan proposes self-appropriation and transcendental method as a way of integrating critical reflection on subjectivity with a renewed realism. Through an analysis of cognitional structure, the paper shows how objectivity emerges from authentic subjectivity and how being is understood as the unrestricted desire to know. The study concludes that Lonergan offers a persuasive contemporary framework for renewing metaphysics while engaging modern philosophical concerns.*

**Keywords:** Bernard Lonergan; transcendental realism; Aristotelian-Thomist metaphysics; subjectivity; objectivity; metaphysics; cognitional theory

## 1. Statement of the Problem

This paper addresses the problem of sustaining metaphysics in the face of the modern turn to subjectivity. The Aristotelian-Aquinas tradition held that reality is intrinsically intelligible and knowable by the human intellect, yet independent of it. With the turn to the subject, beginning with Descartes and later with Kant, attention shifted from the objective being to the knowing subject. This restricted knowing to consciousness and knowledge to phenomena. While this heightened the self-criticism of knowledge, it generated scepticism about the possibility of objective reality. This has cast doubt on a classical realist position.

The key question is whether Lonergan's approach can dispel this suspicion, revive the Aristotle-Aquinas tradition and recognise modern developments in the subject without succumbing to subjectivism. The paper specifically explores how Lonergan's analysis of cognitive structure and transcendental method supports his claim that objectivity arises from authentic subjectivity. It also examines whether this approach can bridge the gap between naive realism and post-Kantian anti-realism.

## 2. Methodology

This paper uses a qualitative philosophical hermeneutical method grounded in close textual analysis and comparison. It begins by outlining the Aristotle-Thomist perspective on being to clarify the epistemological and metaphysical claims about it. Second, it reconstructs the modern turn to the subject, thereby showing the epistemological shift and the Copernican revolution that created a crisis for traditional metaphysics. Third, it analyses Lonergan's cognitional theory and transcendental method. Fourth, it offers a comparative evaluation of Lonergan's transcendental realism against the Aristotelian-Aquinas tradition and the modern critical turn to the subject. It argues that Lonergan effects a critical renewal

of the traditional quest for being in the modern contemporary horizon,

## 3. Subjectivity and Objectivity

At the heart of the Western metaphysical tradition lies a question of being. It is a question about the nature of reality and how we know it. The traditional approach is based on the conviction that the real is objective. Modern philosophy, on the other hand, undermined this conviction by grounding reality in subjectivity. Jesuit philosopher and theologian Bernard Lonergan entered into these extremes and sought to resolve their tensions.

In an attempt to resolve the tension, Lonergan does not go back to pre-modern abstract metaphysics. At the same time, he does not uncritically repeat modern subjectivism. Instead, he proposes a transcendental method that aims at renewing the traditional question of being by appropriating the turn to the subject. The task is to bring about a contemporary statement and defence of the human mind's ability to know reality (Bernard Lonergan, *Insight*, 1992, p. 413).

The central claim of Lonergan is that careful attention to how we actually know can justify a strong realism. In this view, subjectivity is not to be seen as a negation of objectivity but as its fruit. In *Method in Theology*, Lonergan writes that "Objectivity is the fruit of authentic subjectivity." In this sense, this paper argues that Lonergan, by grounding the quest for being in the transcendental analysis of human subjectivity, accomplishes a renewal of the Aristotelian-Aquinas tradition in the modern and contemporary periods.

We first consider the traditional orientation towards being in Aristotle and Aquinas. Second, we sketch a modern turn towards subjectivity and the resulting crisis for metaphysics. Third, we present Lonergan's analysis of cognitional theory and his formulation of the transcendental method. Fourth, we

show how this position mediates between subjectivism and objectivism. Finally, we consider how Lonergan not only brings the traditional quest for being into dialogue with modern philosophy but also transforms it.

#### 4. The Aristotelian-Thomist Quest of Being

The quest for being began long before Aristotle with Parmenides; however, in the Western Metaphysical tradition, Aristotle is credited with his critical analysis. *Metaphysics* for Aristotle begins with the question about being as being. While other sciences study particular aspects of being, first philosophy, according to Aristotle, studies being as being (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1979, 1003a21-24).

Being is said to be analogous: it is said in more than one way, but primarily as substance (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1028a10). Other aspects of being include accident, potency, act, etc. Substance is that which exists on its own, independent of other things. An accident, unlike a substance, depends on a substance for its existence. While accidents change, substance remains unchangeable. In this way, Aristotle believes that reality is composed of entities with nature (substance and accident) that change without losing their identity as what they are.

The human mind, in the Aristotelian sense, has some natural attraction to reality. It is attracted to the intelligible forms of things. These forms make reality knowable. The human mind abstracts them from the sensory data and formulates universal concepts. (Aristotle, *De Anima*, 1986, 417b-418a). The very possibility of knowledge presupposes that being has intelligible structures and that the mind can, in some ways, become those forms without becoming the things materially. Aristotle's confidence in human knowledge is grounded in the fit between the intellect and the intelligibility of reality.

Aquinas inherited Aristotle's position on being. However, he developed it into a more explicit theological and metaphysical synthesis. Central to Aquinas's *Metaphysics*, which is widely regarded as a unique contribution, is the distinction between essence and existence and the primacy of *esse*—the act of being. According to him, every finite being is a composition of essence (what it is) and existence (that it is) (Thomas Aquinas, *On Being and Essence*, 2007, p. 71-71). By contrast, God, an infinite being, is a pure act of being itself (*Ipsum esse subsistens*) (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theological*, 1981, 1q3a4). In this context, being is not one concept among others but the horizon of all that can be known. The human intellect is ordered toward being as such: whenever we understand or affirm anything, we implicitly relate to being.

Aquinas thus retrieves and radicalises the fact that being and truth are convertible. To be is to be intelligible, and to know is to participate in that intelligibility. Hence, in Aquinas, being is primarily not a substance but a participation. Lonergan later on sees in Aquinas, "Intelligibility is a form of being and the truth of the correspondence of intellect and thing." (Lonergan, *Insight*, 1992, p. 400). Thomist tradition, therefore, is characterised by realism: our cognitive power, though limited and fallible, is capable of knowing reality as it is. *Metaphysics* is not a mere subjective projection of the mind's categories

but an ordered account of the principles and structure of being.

Aristotle and Aquinas, however, while correctly relating being to knowing, do not give a highly developed account of how we know that we know being. Epistemology and the analysis of consciousness remained relatively implicit. There is considerable confidence in the mind's capacity for truth, but no reflection on the operation of how the truth is reached and the conditions under which knowledge is authentic or distorted. These relatively unasked questions became increasingly pressing in the modern period, when scepticism about knowledge and even about the existence of an objective reality became more prominent.

#### 5. The Modern Turn to Subjectivity and the Crisis of Metaphysics

The rise of modern philosophy shifted the focus from being to the knowing subject. It was René Descartes with his methodical doubt who epitomised this shift. He doubted all beliefs that could be doubted and came to discover the indubitable truth that he is a thinking subject (Descartes, René. *Meditations on First Philosophy*, 1996, Med. II). Truth and certainty were no longer in things themselves but in the inner realm of consciousness rather than in a given order of being.

Immanuel Kant, with his Copernican revolution in philosophy, emphasised that knowable objects must conform to the a priori structure of human cognition. Space, time, and the categories of human understanding are not derived from experience but are conditions that make experience possible (Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 1929, BXVI). In this way, objects as knowable are known within this framework, both as they appear to us and as they appear in themselves. Metaphysical knowledge then became irrelevant to sciences and philosophy in the modern period.

Subsequent philosophical developments, such as Idealism, phenomenology, and existentialism, deepened this focus on subjectivity. They all concentrated on various aspects of consciousness, experience, and freedom. Husserl, for example, explores the intentional structure of consciousness. Every act of consciousness is intentional; it intends something (Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations* 1970, p. 552). This attention to experience does not renew the contemporary confidence in metaphysical realism. Instead, it raises questions about the extent to which reality is constituted by subjectivity, the role of language, the historical and cultural horizon that shapes what can appear as real, and the historical and cultural conditioning of all knowledge.

The crisis lies in traditional metaphysics. The Aristotelian-Thomist assertion that being is objective and the mind can perceive it as it truly is has become uncritical or naive in modern times. Thomism stands at a crossroads. It can either remain a pre-critical affirmation of metaphysical principles, neglecting contemporary concerns, or risk adopting some form of modern subjectivism and relativism. We need not relinquish traditional claims but rather recognise the contemporary shift towards subjectivity while critically examining traditional metaphysics.

## 6. Lonergan's Critical Turn to the Subject

Lonergan approached this Thomist dilemma in metaphysics with the conviction that it must be grounded in human knowing. Instead of beginning with the abstract ontological thesis or Descartes' scepticism, Lonergan recommends beginning with the operations of knowing. The question is what actually happens when you come to know anything? Lonergan answers this question in the eleven chapters of his masterpiece, *Insight: The Study of Human Understanding*. He investigates instances of understanding in mathematics, sciences, common sense and philosophy. He thus uncovers the structure and norms of human cognition.

He describes his approach as a turn to the subject, but not in the same manner as Descartes' Cartesian introspection or Kant's subjectivism. He does not invite us to doubt the external world or to treat experience as a self-enclosed realm. Lonergan asks us to attend to the conscious operations when we are knowing: inquiring, understanding, and judging. This reflective attention, Lonergan calls self-appropriation. It is a process by which we affirm ourselves as knowers: rational self-consciousness (Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 1971, p. 14).

From Lonergan's perspective, human knowing is a dynamic, structured process. It involves three distinct but related levels of consciousness (Lonergan, *Insight*, p. 343). Experiencing is the first level, where a subject senses, perceives, imagines, and feels. It is a response to how the surrounding world affects the subject. Understanding is the second level, where we ask questions about the data we receive. We formulate possible explanations or insights. The third level is judging. At this level, the subject weighs the evidence and affirms or denies its truth. After this level, Lonergan later suggested a further level of decision and responsibility. A subject chooses to act in light of what is true and good.

Self-appropriation is becoming aware of these levels of operations. It is not a mere performance but understanding what we are doing when we ask questions, gain insight, and make judgments. This understanding of our own cognitional processes is foundational to responding to epistemological scepticism. Our capacity to ask questions and answer them presupposes a certain structure and orientation of our minds towards truth. Lonergan insists that being is an objective of our pure desire to know. To know is to know what being is, for being is what is known in true judgment.

Unlike the traditional metaphysical approach, which begins with the theory's first principles of reality and later justifies knowledge from them, Lonergan begins with an analysis of knowing and, from there, moves to reality. This path responds to modern demands for critical reflection on the subject. He thus preserves the traditional orientations towards being while engaging in dialogue with modern subjectivism (Lonergan, *Insight*, 1992, p. 374).

## 7. Transcendental Method and the Norms of Cognition

Lonergan developed the transcendental method from the cognitional structure. Method here is not a rigid set of rules

and precepts, but an ordered pattern of operations directed towards an end (Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, p. 4). A transcendental refers to what reflects the invariant, a priori feature of human inquiry, those elements that are always at work whenever we seriously seek to know, regardless of the specific field of study (Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 1971, p. 4-5).

Lonergan outlines this method through four transcendental precepts: attentiveness, intelligence, reasonableness and responsibility (Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 1971, p. 4). These are not externally imposed. Rather, they are immanent in our operations of knowing. We are attentive when we attend to the data from our senses as presented to us. We are intelligent when we ask questions and pursue a possible explanation. And we are reasonable when we examine our insight, considering the evidence, and decide whether a proposed answer is correct. Lastly, we are responsible when we take ownership of the ethical and practical implications of what we have deemed true.

In Lonergan's perspective, these precepts express the inner dynamism of the human spirit. They describe what we must do if we are to know anything and act well. They implicitly reveal our orientation towards what is true and good. Conversely, when we are inattentive, unintelligent, and unreasonable or irresponsible, we fail to live up to our own nature as inquiring, rational and moral subjects. Our cognitional and moral authenticity, or lack thereof, thus has direct bearing on the objectivity of our knowledge and the integrity of our actions. Lonergan succinctly states that "genuine objectivity is the fruit of authentic subjectivity." (Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 1971, p. 292).

The transcendental method, then, is an approach that grounds philosophy and theology in a careful appropriation of the normative structure of human subjectivity. It acknowledges the turn to the subject by making the operations and norms of consciousness explicit, but it does so to move beyond subjectivism. For if we can show that genuine knowing involves a structured pattern of operations governed by immanent norms, we may be able to argue that the knowledge thereby achieved is truly knowledge of reality, not merely a projection of our own subjectivity.

## 8. From Cognitional Structure to Transcendental Realism

The notion of transcendental realism in Lonergan arises from the analysis of cognitional structure and method. Realism in general is the view that we can know reality as it is, at least to some extent. Lonergan's realism is distinguished from both naive realism and from critical idealism or subjectivism.

Naive realism, without careful examination, assumes that our perceptions and beliefs give direct access to things exactly as they are. It overlooks the mediating role of understanding and judgment in knowledge. In contrast, modern critical philosophy has emphasised these mediations to the point of calling into question whether we ever reach reality at all. If all that we know is filtered through the structure of consciousness, concepts of language, how can we claim that

our knowledge corresponds to things as they are in themselves?

Lonergan's response is to show that the very structure of our cognitive operations is directed towards being. When we experience something, we encounter data. When we ask questions, we look for understandable patterns, relationships, or explanations. However, insight alone doesn't provide us with knowledge of reality. Reflective judgement is essential. We must consider whether this understanding adequately explains the data, whether there's sufficient evidence and whether alternative explanations have been ruled out. We only claim to know something as true when we reasonably affirm that it's verified.

In Lonergan's account, the object of this compound process, experience, understanding, and judging, is being. He describes this as the pure, unrestricted desire to know, which implicitly intends the universe of being (Lonergan, *Insight*, 1992, p. 372, 423). This desire pushes us beyond any particular question to the horizon of all reality: in every inquiry, we are, in effect, oriented towards everything beyond every limited horizon.

The notion of being is then not a concept we could define straightforwardly. It is a transcendental notion, implicitly operative in all our questioning and knowing. It names the totality of what could be the case. Being is the objective of the unrestricted desire to know. Lonergan writes, "every true judgment is an increment in our knowledge of being." (Lonergan, *Insight*, 1992, p. 425)

Transcendental realism suggests that when we follow the inherent principles of our cognitive structure and remain fully attentive, reasonable, and responsible, our judgements fundamentally concern reality. Objectivity isn't about escaping subjectivity but rather authentically engaging with it. Knowledge doesn't require stepping outside our consciousness; it demands its proper functioning and adherence to its principles. Contrary to popular belief, a critical examination of the subject actually enhances realism. Lonergan succinctly defines it as what intelligent grasp and reasonable affirmation can know (Lonergan, *Insight*, 1992, p. 328).

## 9. Renewing the Aristotelian- Thomist Tradition

Lonergan's transcendental realism is not a rejection of the Aristotelian-Thomist tradition but a renewal of it in modern conditions. At the deepest level, he shares the classical conviction that reality is intelligible and that human intelligence is oriented towards it. His talk of the unrestricted desire to know is, in many ways, a modern reformulation of the idea that the intellect is ordered to being as such. In his later metaphysical reflections, Lonergan also retrieves and reinterprets key Thomistic themes, such as act and potency, essence and existence, and the hierarchical ordering of levels of being.

Yet Lonergan insists that, in the modern context, one cannot merely repeat Thomistic doctrines as if nothing had changed. The critical questions raised by modern philosophy demand an equally critical response. For that reason, he reverses the

traditional order of philosophical exposition. Instead of beginning with metaphysics and then treating knowledge as a derivative topic, he begins with a detailed investigation of knowing and then proceeds to metaphysics. For Lonergan, metaphysics must be methodically grounded in a prior cognitive and epistemological analysis.

This shift from a static system of doctrine to a dynamic method is central to his renewal of Thomism. Scholastic manuals often present Thomistic metaphysics as a closed deductive system. Lonergan emphasises the historical development of understanding. Human knowledge advances through a sequence of insights, corrections and enlargements. There is no single, timeless expression of metaphysical truths: instead, there is a continuous process of appropriation and rearticulation as new questions and data emerge. The human mind he observes is not a finished product but a developing realisation of an unrestricted desire (Lonergan, *Insight*, 1992, p. 747). This historical consciousness distinguishes his project from many earlier forms of Thomism.

Moreover, by highlighting the role of self-appropriation and the transcendental precepts, Lonergan integrates ethical and spiritual dimensions into the pursuit of metaphysical truth. For Aquinas, there was already a relationship between morality and the capacity to know. But Lonergan makes this connection explicit. Authentic knowing requires not only intellectual rigour but also a commitment to honesty, openness and responsibility. In this sense, the quest for being is inseparable from the quest for authenticity. As he writes, "the detached and disinterested, unrestricted desire to know is the origin of both science and philosophy, and its authenticity or inauthenticity is a matter of moral decision (Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 1971, p.104).

## 10. Engaging the Modern Turn to Subjectivity

Lonergan's method can be seen as a mediating position between the classical and modern turns to subjectivity. On the one hand, he fully acknowledges the importance of the subject's critical reflection. He agrees with the modern philosophy that we can not simply assume the reliability of our cognitive faculties or the transparency of reality to the mind. We must examine how we come to know and under what conditions our claims to knowledge are justified. His emphasis on consciousness, interiority and method reflects a profound engagement with modern concerns.

On the other hand, Lonergan resists the move from critical reflection to radical subjectivism or relativism. By carefully analysing the operations of consciousness, he seeks to show that the subject is inherently oriented toward truth and being. The very possibility of asking whether our knowledge is valid presupposes that we are capable, at least in principle, of distinguishing truth from error. In this way, the modern turn to the subject, when carried through reflectively and consistently, leads not to scepticism but to a renewed confidence in the possibility of objective knowledge.

Lonergan's mediating stance places him in conversation with thinkers like Kant and phenomenologists. Similar to Kant, Lonergan is interested in the conditions for knowledge. While Kant believes we're limited to phenomena and can't

know things in themselves, Lonergan argues our cognitional structure, properly understood, grants access to being. Like phenomenology, he emphasises the intentionality and structure of consciousness, but he integrates these insights into a broader realist framework. As he puts it, “the basic intentionality of the human subject is a thrust toward the intelligible, the true, the real and the good.” (Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 1971, p. 104). His transcendental realism thus offers a distinctive contribution to ongoing debates about realism, anti-realism and the status of metaphysics in a post-Kantian world.

## 11. Implications and Conclusion

Lonergan’s transcendental realism has far-reaching implications for philosophy, theology and culture. Philosophically, it proposes rehabilitating metaphysics as a critical, methodologically grounded discipline rather than an unexamined set of doctrines. By rooting metaphysics in a thorough analysis of knowing, it seeks to answer modern scepticism on its own terms. Rather than ignoring the questions raised by the modern turn towards subjectivity, Lonergan embraces them and seeks to show that authentic subjectivity culminates in an ordered grasp of being.

Lonergan’s approach emphasises the ethical and personal dimensions of inquiry. If objectivity arises from authenticity, then the pursuit of knowledge must be intrinsically linked to moral responsibility and personal growth. Bias, self-deception and irresponsibility aren’t just ethical failings; they also obstruct truth. Consequently, the quest for being transcends mere intellectual pursuit, becoming a transformative journey aligning the whole person with transcendental principles.

In conclusion, Bernard Lonergan’s transcendental realism represents a significant contemporary renewal of the Aristotelian-Thomist quest for being. By integrating classical metaphysical realism with modern critical reflection on subjectivity, Lonergan develops a framework in which objectivity emerges through authentic subjectivity. His analysis of cognitional structure and transcendental method offers a persuasive response to modern scepticism while preserving the intelligibility of reality and the human capacity to know it. Consequently, Lonergan not only revitalises metaphysics for the modern age but also demonstrates that the pursuit of being remains central to philosophical inquiry.

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