

# Critical Realism and the Question of Being in Bernard Lonergan

Karol Shirima<sup>1</sup>, Nyambedha Josephine Apiyo<sup>2</sup>, Sabas Kimani<sup>3</sup>

Department of Philosophy, The Catholic University of Eastern Africa, Nairobi, Kenya

Email: [shirima704\[at\]gmail.com](mailto:shirima704[at]gmail.com)

**Abstract:** *This study examines Bernard Lonergan's critical realism and its implications for the question of being. It explores how Lonergan reformulates the traditional question of being through cognitional theory by asking not merely what being is, but how being is known. The study employs Lonergan's transcendental method and cognitional theory to analyze the relationship between epistemology and metaphysics. It argues that Lonergan offers a critically realistic understanding of being that preserves objectivity while acknowledging the mediating role of consciousness. The study concludes that this framework remains relevant for addressing philosophical challenges arising from pluralism, relativism, and technologically mediated contemporary societies.*

**Keywords:** Bernard Lonergan; Critical Realism; Cognitional Theory; Question of Being; Transcendental Method; Metaphysics; Epistemology

## 1. Introduction

This article examines Bernard Lonergan's critical realism as a distinctive response to enduring questions about the nature of being and the possibility of objective knowledge. Situated against the backdrop of scientific positivism and postmodern scepticism, it explores how Lonergan relocates metaphysics within a careful analysis of human cognitional operations, experiencing, understanding, judging, and deciding. Drawing on his transcendental method and cognitional theory, this study argues that Lonergan offers a nuanced account of being. It safeguards objectivity while acknowledging the historically and culturally mediated nature of human knowing. This makes it a promising framework for philosophical reflection in today's pluralist and technologically mediated world.

## 2. Background of the Problem

Bernard Lonergan develops a form of critical realism that responds to major tensions in modern and contemporary philosophy. On the one hand, scientific positivism tends to reduce knowledge to what is empirically observable and quantifiable. On the other hand, postmodern scepticism questions the very possibility of objective knowledge. These opposed tendencies risk either erasing the role of the knowing subject or dissolving reality into discourse and perspective (Walker, 2017, pp. 111-127).

The study is therefore set against the wider background of debates in modern philosophy about realism. It demonstrates how Lonergan's critical realism offers a mediating alternative in these debates. It proposes a rigorous, self-correcting method that integrates epistemology and metaphysics and aspires to provide transcultural foundations for knowledge in pluralist, technologically mediated contexts.

## 3. Statement of the Problem

Within this polarized landscape of positivism and postmodern scepticism, traditional metaphysical questions about being risk either being dismissed as unscientific or being dissolved into analyses of language, culture, and discourse. This situation generates a twofold problem. First, there is a lack of

a widely accepted account of being that can affirm the independence and intelligibility of reality while acknowledging that all human knowing is mediated by the operations of consciousness. Second, there is an urgent need for a framework that can respond adequately to relativism and scepticism without reverting to naïve realism or dogmatic foundationalism. The existing approaches either eliminate the subject's role in knowing or overemphasize subjectivity, language, and context. This can obscure the complexity of cognitive mediation and make the concept of objective truth seem questionable.

The study addresses the problem of a lack of a clearly articulated and critically realistic account of being. It aims to preserve objectivity and intelligibility while acknowledging the mediating role of the knowing subject in contemporary pluralist and technologically mediated contexts. The study specifically aims to explore whether and how Lonergan's cognitional theory and transcendental method can provide such an account. It seeks to integrate epistemology and metaphysics, counter relativism and scepticism and offer transcultural foundations for knowledge while remaining dynamically open to the historical development of inquiry.

## 4. Methodology

This study used a qualitative, philosophical approach rooted in Bernard Lonergan's transcendental method and cognitional theory. The study progressed through critical analysis, conceptual clarification and reflective self-appropriation of the processes of knowing. Lonergan's transcendental method was ideal for this study because it grounds metaphysics in concrete human knowing: experiencing, understanding, judging, and deciding. This affirms both the objectivity of reality and the mediating role of the subject. This makes it especially apt for responding to contemporary tensions between scientific positivism and postmodern scepticism when addressing the question of being.

## 5. Critical Realism Between Positivism and Postmodernism

Critical realism posits that being is objective yet accessible through human consciousness. Drawing on Wulf's interpretation of Lonergan, it can be defined as the belief that reality is what is truly known through the structured and self-critical process of experiencing understanding and reasonably affirming in judgement (Wulf, 2000). Lonergan's cognitional theory encapsulates the view that knowledge is not merely intuition or passive reception; it is a structured sequence of operations culminating in rational affirmation.

On this account, the subject's mediating role does not undermine objectivity. Instead, when a subject is attentive, intelligent, reasonable and responsible, their subjectivity becomes the very foundation for genuine objectivity (Lonergan, 1992, p. 401). Lonergan's critical realism rejects both naïve realism, which overlooks mediation, and idealism, which dissolves reality into thought structures. Considering Lonergan's conception of critical realism, the next step is to explore how this perspective resolves the tensions between positivist and postmodern approaches to reality and knowledge.

Critical realism bridges the gap between scientific positivism and postmodern scepticism regarding objectivity. Scientific positivism reduces knowledge to observable and quantifiable facts, treating theoretical constructs as mere tools. In contrast, postmodern currents often question or deny the existence of objective reality. They emphasise the contingency of discourse power and perspective. Lonergan's critical realism is a mediating alternative that affirms that being exists independently of human cognition. It insists that being is also intelligible and knowable through a properly structured inquiry. (Lonergan, 1992, p. 23). Critical realism upheld the position that reality is independent while acknowledging that access to it is always mediated through the subject's cognitional processes.

This position by Lonergan is not without criticism. Postmodern thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Jean-François Lyotard, George Hans Gadamer and Martin Heidegger might challenge Lonergan's confidence in objective truth, even when it is carefully mediated. This is because it seems to overlook the radical contingency and historicity of language, meaning, and subjectivity. We concede to this position, yet we do not say there is no truth; rather, it is mediated, fallible, and progressive. Critical realism articulates the structure of knowing and affirms that when we obey the norms of intelligent, reasonable, and responsible inquiry, we can attain real but revisable knowledge of the world.

## 6. Restating the Question of Being: Intentionality and Knowing

Classical metaphysics, particularly in Aristotle and Aquinas, often approaches being through the question "What is being?" This question is typically answered by identifying being with a set of abstract categories or concepts. Lonergan restates the question of being by shifting attention from the content of being to the process by which being is known. Instead of

beginning with a deductive system grounded in first principles, he starts from cognitional theory and epistemology (Beards, 2008, p. 5).

According to Lonergan, the decisive question is not "What is being?" but "How do we know being?" With this restatement, metaphysics is relocated within a reflective analysis of the subject's own operations. Just as metaphysics can exist only in a mind, so it can begin only in actually existing minds and proceed from their "texture and complexion" (Lonergan, 1992, p. 421). The starting point of metaphysics is thus not an abstract notion of being but the concrete conditions that make knowing being possible. Having shown how Lonergan restates the traditional question of being as a question about the process of knowing, it becomes necessary to examine the underlying structure of this knowing itself, particularly the intentional character of consciousness that gives primacy to acts of knowing.

Lonergan's restatement of the question of being presupposes the phenomenological thesis that all mental acts are intentional (Moran, 2000, p. 46). Franz Brentano observes that every mental phenomenon includes something as an object: in experience, we experience something; in understanding, we understand something and so forth (Ogaba, 2021, p. 12).

In Lonergan's framework, the object intended in knowing is being. The question of being is therefore rearticulated as a question about the structure and operations of knowing. Redefining being in relation to knowing lifts philosophy beyond abstract speculation about a putative reality "in itself" and centres inquiry on the process of knowing and the conditions of human understanding. In this way, the question of being remains anchored in concrete experience and cognition (Lonergan, 1992). With the intentional structure of consciousness clarified, we can now consider how Lonergan uses it to confront scepticism and relativism.

Lonergan's orientation addresses some contemporary challenges to scepticism and relativism. Relativism suggests knowledge is always relative to the knower's circumstances, while scepticism doubts knowledge's very possibility. It emphasises the variability of perspective and questions whether any claim can be adequately justified. His analysis of cognitional structure demonstrates how subjective processes can produce objective knowledge when performed correctly. By observing the transition from experience to insight and ultimately to reasonable judgement, he identifies a process linking subjective experience to objective truth (Lonergan, 1964). Critical realism neither collapses truth into perspective nor indefinitely suspends judgement. Instead, it specifies the conditions under which judgements about being are justified.

### 6.1 The Dynamic Method: Mind, Knowledge, and Scientific Progress

Method is not an external set of rules but the intelligible pattern of conscious activities through which knowledge develops. Lonergan's method and the dynamism of the human mind must be taken together. The activities of experiencing, understanding, and judging are dynamic: they

unfold historically as the mind encounters new data, and prior conclusions must be revised.

Beards (2008) demonstrates that the human mind generates, refines, revises, accepts, modifies, and ultimately rejects logical systems, scientific theories, historical narratives, and everyday opinions. (p. 21). Method, in this context, rests on the flexibility and adaptability of consciousness. As new data emerges, existing understandings are questioned and potentially revised. This dynamic nature is essential for both scientific and metaphysical inquiry. (Lonergan, 1992; Wulf, 2000). The mutual influence of method and content is perhaps most evident in the evolution of scientific theories.

The history of science has shown that there is a close relationship between method and content, resulting in a product. When the method changes, the content changes as well. The same method will always result in similar content or results. According to Popper, scientific progress occurs in context through conjectures and refutations (Popper, 1959). Theories must be falsifiable and are refined in the face of counterevidence. Hence, from a Lonerganian standpoint, such development reflects the ongoing operations of the human mind in response to data, the formation of hypotheses, and judgment.

Method and content, therefore, affect each other mutually (Lonergan, 1992, p. 421). When the method changes, the results also change. To understand being differently, we need to change our method of approach to being. As novel realities constantly emerge, relying on outdated methods risks becoming irrelevant. This prompts a fresh question about where metaphysics should begin to remain relevant to the historical development of knowledge. Therefore from this account of method's dynamism, we can turn to Lonergan's proposal regarding the appropriate point of departure for metaphysical inquiry

## 6.2 Metaphysics from the Subject: Consciousness, Data, and Context

Lonergan argues that metaphysics is not simply a collection of propositions found in books but a structured cognitional achievement. It exists only within a mind and can only be created by that mind. (Lonergan, 1992, p. 421). Accordingly, metaphysics must begin from the actual nature and structure of active human consciousness. It is a journey towards self-knowledge.

This journey towards self-knowledge involves attentiveness to experience, intelligent questioning, and reasonable judgement. Rather than starting with an abstract ontology, Lonergan lets metaphysics develop from the subject's sustained self-appropriation of its own cognitions. If metaphysics arises within the subject, the next question concerns how consciousness attends to data and how contextual factors enter into this cognitional activity.

Reality is understood when objects present themselves to our senses and our minds process the data. However, mere sensation is not enough; conscious attention is needed to engage in activities such as seeing, imagining, inquiring, understanding, and judging. Therefore, metaphysics begins

with the active, conscious subject attending to both sensory and conscious data (Lonergan, 1992).

This emphasis on consciousness does not ignore historical, social, and linguistic contexts. These shape the data to which subjects are attentive and the questions they pose. Yet, for Lonergan, such contexts are integrated into the subject's ongoing operations of experiencing, understanding, and judging. The mind and its contents are inseparable, and contextual factors are mediated through cognitional activity. Nonetheless, the role of consciousness cannot be fully understood without examining its relation to language games and scientific paradigms, themes developed by Ludwig Wittgenstein and Thomas Kuhn.

### 6.2.1 Replies to Ludwig Wittgenstein and Thomas Kuhn

Lonergan's focus on the subject, viewed through the lenses of Wittgenstein and Kuhn, might seem one-sided. Wittgenstein emphasizes that philosophical problems stem from the misuse of language and that meaning is woven into forms of life and language games. Kuhn emphasises the importance of paradigms and scientific communities, arguing that knowledge cannot be confined to individual cognition. "Scientific knowledge, like language, is intrinsically a common property of a group" (Kuhn, 1962, p. 210).

Lonergan acknowledges the significance of language, culture, and paradigms but argues that they are well-established aspects of cognitional processes. These are not external additions but are mediated within the subject's cognitive structure (Wulf, 2000). By concentrating on the operations of consciousness, Lonergan provides a framework that recognises contextual influences while simultaneously anchoring knowledge within the dynamic, self-correcting activities of the subject. Having outlined Lonergan's responses to Wittgenstein and Kuhn, we can now turn to his explicit formulation of the question of being through the transcendental method.

### 6.2.2 The Transcendental Method and the Question of Being

Lonergan employs a transcendental method, though it differs from Kant's in both its purpose and result. This method aims to clarify the conditions necessary for knowing being. Rather than constructing pre-existing categories imposed by the mind on experience, Lonergan examines the mind's operations as it endeavours to understand reality.

The human mind naturally yearns to understand being in its entirety, echoing Aristotle's view of metaphysics as the science of being, and by nature, all people desire to know it. However, Lonergan argues that while we cannot fully grasp being as a whole, we can discern its parts since the whole is made up of parts. When all parts are grasped, the whole being will be grasped (Lonergan, 1964). Metaphysics, therefore, aims not to provide a complete knowledge of being but rather to explain how we perceive specific realities within the framework of being to know all that is in reality. To clarify these conditions more concretely, Lonergan formulates his transcendental method as a process of self-appropriation

Lonergan's transcendental method is personal and reflexive. It consists in attending to one's own operations and

recognizing that authentic knowing requires fidelity to transcendental precepts: be attentive, be intelligent, be reasonable, be responsible (Lonergan, 1992, p. 22). The question of being thus becomes inseparable from the subject's process of self-appropriation.

Objectivity is not achieved by erasing the subject but through their commitment to authenticity in their cognitive and moral actions. By embracing their own knowing processes, the subject discovers they are oriented towards being and that being is the intelligible and affirmable core of successful inquiry. This account of transcendental method as self-appropriation naturally leads to a further question: what does such knowing demand of the knower as a responsible subject.

### 6.3 The Question of Being as a Journey to Self-Knowledge

Lonergan asserts that metaphysics cannot be done for someone else. No one can truly understand or judge on behalf of another; such actions are inherently personal. (Lonergan, 1992, p. 421). Metaphysical knowledge requires personal responsibility for our cognitive processes. This responsibility involves careful attention to experience, asking pertinent questions, seeking understanding and refusing to accept claims lacking sufficient evidence. Consequently, metaphysics transcends mere theory, becoming an existential commitment to authentic knowledge. Once such responsibility in knowing is assumed, what comes into view is not only the objects known but the knower itself as a central content of metaphysical reflection.

Reflecting on its experiences, understanding, and judgment, the subject arrives at a form of self-knowledge that transcends mere psychology and becomes metaphysical. The subject discovers itself as an empirically, intellectually and rationally conscious being whose actions are directed towards being (Lonergan, 1992, p. 421). Accordingly, the content of metaphysics is not only an account of entities and categories but also the self-affirmation of the subject as a knower of being. Metaphysics becomes inseparable from the subject's discovery of itself as a subject-in-relation-to-being. On the basis of this self-affirmation of the subject as knower, several key strengths of Lonergan's account of being can be identified.

## 7. Strengths of Lonergan's Approach to the Question of Being

### 7.1 Verifiability in Cognitive Acts

Lonergan's metaphysics is verifiable in the cognitive processes rather than purely abstract concepts. Experiencing, understanding and judging are accessible to anyone through self-appropriation. This unified process allows for revisiting, revising, and correcting (Lonergan, 1992, p. 5). Understanding that Lonergan's metaphysics arises from a generalised empirical method, an empirical approach that incorporates both the data of sense and the data of consciousness, its claims can be checked against the operations that subjects actually perform (Lonergan, 1964, p. 530–542). This stands in contrast to purely deductive systems which begin from axioms and do not return to experience for verification. In Lonergan's framework, metaphysical claims

remain in principle open to further scrutiny in light of experience and reflection.

### 7.2 Integration of Epistemology and Metaphysics

Another strength lies in the integration of epistemology and metaphysics. Lear (1988) observes that in Aristotle, questions about knowledge are woven into metaphysics, psychology and science (p. 11). Early modern philosophy sharply distinguished between epistemology and metaphysics. Thinkers like Descartes and Kant prioritised epistemology, sometimes at the expense of metaphysical inquiry.

Lonergan's doctrine of isomorphism bridges this divide. By revealing the structure of knowing, epistemology simultaneously discloses the structure of being. This careful account of how knowing actually occurs leads to a genuine realism (Lonergan, 1964). Thus, for Lonergan, "genuine objectivity arises from authentic subjectivity" (Lonergan, 1992). This unified framework addresses the longstanding conflicts between subjectivism and objectivism and between mind and body. Some critics may argue that Lonergan's approach suggests a refined yet still Western viewpoint. We advise these critics to examine their own acts of knowing and discover whether this structure is fitting or unfitting. If it does fit, then that is not Western but human.

### 7.3 Transcultural Foundations of Knowledge

Lonergan's approach creates a transcultural foundation for knowledge. He tackles global pluralism by anchoring knowledge in cognitive structure rather than specific cultural content. (Walmsley, 2008, p. 205). While different cultures develop unique horizons and knowledge systems, the core processes of experiencing, understanding, and judging remain the same.

Lonergan's approach bases knowledge in cognitive processes, rather than in specific cultural artefacts, sidesteps both relativism and absolutism. Relativism denies any shared basis for knowledge, while absolutism claims that a single culture or tradition holds a monopoly on complete and final truth. Lonergan's transcendental precepts and cognitive structure provide a common base for dialogue. However, their revisable and developmental nature acknowledges genuine plurality. (Lonergan, 1964).

The claim to offer transcultural foundations for knowledge is seen by some as a revival of universalism. The distinction must be made between the contents of knowing and the structure of knowing. It is true that the contents of knowledge are historical and culturally determined. But the structure of knowing is invariant in all cultures and history. Transcultural, then, is the basic methodological structure (how we come to know). It is identified and verified in diverse cultures through self-appropriation.

### 7.4 A Rigorous and Self-Correcting Method

Lonergan's method is rigorous, demanding attention to data and evidence while explicitly rejecting speculative and ungrounded theorising. (Doran, 1994) stresses that

Loneragan's approach aims to avoid mere abstraction and instead maintain a close connection with the concrete operations of consciousness. The method is self-correcting. When subjects realize they haven't been fully attentive, intelligent, or reasonable, they can revisit the relevant data, reconsider their insights, and revise their judgements. (Wulf, 2000).

Formulated at a high level of generality, this method applies across a wide range of disciplines. In any field of study, the need to focus on data, seek insights and avoid premature conclusions fosters systematic self-critique and continuous revision. Consequently, mistakes become opportunities for deeper understanding rather than final failures.

### 7.5 Beyond Conceptualism: Concepts and Reality

Loneragan has occasionally been interpreted as a conceptualist or even an idealist due to his focus on the subject and insight in concept formation. Conceptualism, in this context, holds that reality is merely a product of thought rather than an independent entity. Lonergan's analysis demonstrates that concepts are not arbitrary mental constructs but genuine acts of understanding triggered by data of experience (Loneragan, 1992, p. 32).

Concepts don't appear out of nowhere; they develop within the context of thinking, hypothesising, considering, defining and formulating activities related to data insights (Loneragan, 1992, p. 33). These operations are deliberate: thinking involves considering something, supposing something and so on. Consequently, concept formation remains tethered to the reality presented to the subject. The mind doesn't impose structure from nothing; it poses questions on data to make them comprehensible.

Concept clarification goes beyond linguistic neatness; it demands fidelity to the original acts of understanding and the underlying structure of being they represent. Knowledge is a dynamic process of discovery, not a static collection of concepts. As Wulf (2000) points out, in contexts that often equate knowledge with information and concepts, Lonergan reminds us of the underlying intellectual activity that makes that information meaningful.

### 7.6 Beyond Verbalism: Inner Word, Outer Word, and Objective Reference

Closely related to his account of concepts is Lonergan's treatment of words. Drawing on Augustine and Aquinas, he distinguishes between the "inner word" (*verbum mentale*) and the "outer word" expressed in speech or writing (Loneragan, 1997, p. 17). Concepts are inner words that arise from acts of understanding; outer words are their linguistic expression. The primary correlation of inner words is not with outer words but with reality, which may be analysed in terms of essence and existence.

Words lose their meaning when detached from the understanding that generates them. Lonergan counters logical positivists by arguing that false propositions are not meaningless. Instead, they express a mistaken inner word. A false proposition lacks objective reference not because it

conveys nothing, but because its meaning doesn't align with reality. (Loneragan, 1997, p. 15).

The tendency to treat words without their referent, the act of knowing, has led to endless philosophical debate, amounting to confusion and endless disputes. Doran (1994) argues that controversies often become unnecessarily complicated when terms are used without considering their underlying meanings and the realities they represent. Lonergan's insistence on testing words and concepts against their original insights and objective reference provides a powerful corrective.

## 8. Conclusion

This study has shown that Bernard Lonergan's critical realism offers a compelling response to the contemporary question of being. By shifting attention from what being is to how being is known, Lonergan integrates epistemology and metaphysics within a dynamic and self-correcting framework grounded in human cognitional operations. His approach preserves objectivity while recognizing the historical and contextual dimensions of knowledge. Consequently, Lonergan's philosophy remains a valuable and relevant resource for addressing current debates on realism, truth, and metaphysical inquiry.

## References

- [1] Lonergan, B. (1992). *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*. University of Toronto Press.
- [2] Lonergan, B. (1997). *Verbum: Word and Idea in Aquinas* (Vol. 2). University of Toronto Press.
- [3] Moran, D. (2000). *Introduction to Phenomenology*. Routledge.
- [4] Beards, A. (2008). *Method in Metaphysics: Lonergan and the Future of Analytical Philosophy*. University of Toronto Press.
- [5] Walmsley, G. (2008). *Lonergan on Philosophic Pluralism: The Polymorphism of Consciousness as the Key to Philosophy*. University of Toronto Press.
- [6] Doran, R. M. (1994). *Subject and Psyche: A study in the Foundations of Theology*. Marquette University Press.
- [7] Lear, J. (1988). *Aristotle: The Desire to Understand*. Cambridge University Press.
- [8] Popper, K. R. (1959). *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*. Hutchinson.
- [9] Wulf, V. M. (2000). *Bernard Lonergan's Transcendental Realism* (Publication No. AAI955975) [Doctoral dissertation, Fordham University]. Fordham University Research Commons. <https://research.library.fordham.edu/dissertations/AAI955975>
- [10] Ogaba, I. S. (2021). *An Examination of Brentano's Intentionality and Moore's Sense-data Conception of Reality*. <https://core.ac.uk/download/521882420.pdf>
- [11] Lonergan, B. (1964). *Cognitional Structure. Continuum*, 2(3), 530–542. [https://scholarship.shu.edu/lib\\_pub/157/](https://scholarship.shu.edu/lib_pub/157/)
- [12] Kuhn, T. S. (1962). *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. University of Chicago Press.