

**TOWARD SELF-POSSESSION: BEING AT HOME IN
CONSCIOUS PERFORMANCE**

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Teaching Lonergan

For years I have been convinced that Bernard Lonergan's thought has a special relevance for the Church and the world in our time. Neither rigidly conservative nor unthinkingly liberal, Lonergan's work focuses on the dynamics of our thinking and acting, on how we are created to ask questions and to seek the true and the good. That is who in fact we are.

Recently I taught an undergraduate course on Lonergan's thought. Since his work is generally considered quite rigorous, some would regard this effort as foolish. Nevertheless, the experience has confirmed me in the belief that, in Lonergan's words, "Everyone can attain a certain measure of self-appropriation, of knowing just what happens when he is coming to know and coming to choose." At the same time, Lonergan also noted that the most difficult part in teaching any philosophy is "getting people to the starting point," that is, uncovering their fundamental convictions about their own selves and the universe.

We all carry around within us some philosophical view of the world, some vision of "the way things are" and how we are related to them. And that fundamental philosophy—perhaps useful in many commonsense situations—is not usually adequate to the rich complexity of the world that is "the real world." For Lonergan, the problems of philosophy:

... are not problems of exploitation. They are problems of getting people to the starting point, problems of opening up people's minds and bringing them to fundamental truths... When you have got them there, you have practically got them the whole way... The problem in philosophy is to start off from the average naïve realist and bring him on to something that involves a fuller grasp of all the issues and a more profound understanding of what his real basis is.¹

It seems to me that my recent undergraduate class did just that. The class met once a week for several hours and I repeatedly asked the students to reflect on their own personal experiences during the week in the light of the book and to write reflection papers and journal about those experiences. The students were mostly nursing students in their third year—just beginning to do their hospital clinical work. The text we used was not Lonergan's 1957 classic, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, but rather Mark Morelli's recent *Toward Self-Possession: Being at Home in Conscious Performance*. The book is the product of Morelli's teaching career of more than thirty years at Loyola Marymount University. Rather than focusing on the intricacies of Lonergan's philosophy—indeed, with hardly a mention of Lonergan at all—Morelli focusses on a single element in Lonergan's theory: the notion of a "notion."

A notion in Lonergan's sense is not a concept or the product of understanding. It is, rather, the anticipation of meaning, the wonder and questioning that gets us moving intellectually. It is the spark that gets us searching and subsequently validates whether what we have grasped is meaningful, true, and/or valuable. "Yes! That's it! That's what I have been searching for!"

A classic depiction of the notion of meaning is Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" where we discover a questioning that moves us out of the darkness of the Cave into the light of meaning, truth, objectivity, reality, and value. It illustrates the dynamism that keeps us searching and the inner criteria by which we judge whether we have in fact reached these or not. Morelli invites frequent meditation on the dynamism of this notion:

At this moment, I find myself preferring meaning to nonsense. I might not find it, but I am looking for it. This preference of mine is so basic that I can't eliminate it, no matter how hard I try. Even if I were to declare a preference for the meaningless, I would do so only because I find it meaningful to do so now... At this very moment, I find myself committed, without ever having deliberately committed myself, to the pursuit of meaning, objectivity, knowledge, truth, reality, and value.²

Morelli's meditations here aim at what Lonergan's *Insight* aimed at: the self-appropriation of the human subject in his or her conscious activities. But the way, the method, is important. Frequent meditations on one's inner life as the drive to meaning moves us from our conscious experience toward meaning and from meaning toward truth, reality, and the good of value. Morelli illustrates that we cannot get around the basic commitment implicit in these notions.

Morelli's point is that the ancient platonic challenge of self-knowledge goes on along with and beneath the other challenges in the conscious flow of our lives, even in our ordinary, dramatic, day-to-day living. Very helpful on this journey, is what Morelli calls the language of conscious performance analysis (CPA) as we attempt to separate the wheat from the chaff within the flow of our conscious lives. Cultural "sedimentation" rooted in excessive individualism, pragmatism, or our own forms of megalomania easily infect the flow of our conscious living causing us to slip into inattentive, unintelligent, erroneous, and worthless performances that contradict the drive of our being for the meaningful, the true, the real, the valuable. That is, until somewhere within the depths of our being we hear a call of these notions beckoning us to change, to repent, to become true to the deepest level of our being. Morelli's meditations and reflections point to this drive that often comes to the fore when we are quiet and still.

The pedagogy of my course involved regularly reading Morelli's text, journaling, drafting reflection papers that students shared and commented on in the class, as well as two Skype sessions with Morelli

himself. The feedback from my students is the most appropriate evidence for the success of Morelli's method. One student commented:

Classes such as this provide a much-needed reminder that there is more to life than the factual knowledge we as students are attempting to absorb in exorbitant amounts. This constant absorption can ultimately cause us to ignore our spiritual advancement. Loneragan's philosophy is a strange thing in that the things he believes almost seem too simple.... things that, deep down within us, we all know to be true. Yet, we often struggle to take the time to recognize them as pieces of who we are.

Another time this same student wrote:

...Morelli inserted small stories or meditation techniques. At the beginning, these were simply intrusions on my reading—interruptions to what was otherwise an analytical attempt at memorizing the information in the text. As the semester beat on, these side notes as well as the information as a whole became less logical and more spiritual. While logical comprehension of the content was still the end goal of each reading, I began getting lost in the more transcendental aspects of the reading. I allowed myself to get lost in the philosophical understanding rather than just stressing out over my ability to regurgitate the information at the beginning of the next class.

Morelli's meditations and reflections point to this drive for meaning and value that genuinely prophetic people find within themselves when they go into the desert. Such "meaning" is not spatially located in some kind of "mental geography" that we gaze at "out there" or "in here," but it is real. Coming to know oneself is not the result of an "inner look into oneself," but a growing awareness that I am involved in these notions all the time. My students could and wonderfully did recount events from everyday life—little "peak experiences" that Abraham Maslow claimed we have

each day, but disregard for the most part. One student recalled a long drive to school during which she worked out in her mind a problem from one of her classes, so that she hardly adverted to the details of her trip at all.

A number of the students, of course, acknowledged that Morelli's book initially was "over their heads." As one put it early on in the course,

I honestly struggled with the reading for this week. I feel as if Morelli is trying to bring us to a deeper understanding of self-possession that I am not ready for yet. I think this is because I do not practice conscious performance analysis often.

Our two Skype sessions with Mark Morelli helped clarify some of these issues. The students seemed to be honored to speak directly to the author of their textbook and ahead of each session they emailed questions about the text which Morelli handled in the Skype sessions. As one wrote:

I do not know how but it was as if Dr. Morelli's voice brought life to the words of his book, and suddenly everything started to make sense. I started to realize my drive for the basic notions. It was at that moment where I was first able to see my conscious performance unfold, moving from experiential to intellectual to critical and lastly moral operations. And I could not question this unfolding of my mind because questioning it only proved it to be true! I was in shock, but I was also frustrated. I was frustrated with myself because I realized my ignorance and inattentiveness towards my conscious performance. From then on, I vowed to start practicing being my better self by living with the goal of being more "self-possessed" in the end.

Another student reflected on the process of taking an exam in nursing. Rather than rushing into it—she tended to rush into everything—she took a moment to become aware of her immediate experience.

I know I have to begin to critically think and answer the questions, but before I even begin to do that, I take the time to take a breath and calm myself down. As I move up the levels of my mind, the more questions I begin to ask myself and the more aware of everything I start to become. I read the question and the critical thinking process begins: “okay, what is the question asking? What is happening in this particular situation? What is the *priority* of care for this patient?”

Among the topics Morelli treats in his book are the “motifs” of conscious performance: practical, intellectual, aesthetic, dramatic and mystical. Our conscious lives gravitate from one of these “zones” to another as we go through our days. Noteworthy are also the basic “moods” of self-presence: praise, blame, and the basic commitment.

The basic moods may be brought to light by considering how we praise and blame others for their conscious performance. We often praise one another for orderly performance and blame one another for disorderly performance. We approve of those who exhibit their basic commitment to meaning, objectivity, knowledge, truth, reality, and value. We disapprove of those who seem to be straying or violating that commitment either inadvertently or deliberately.³

Morelli’s reflection on praise and blame are reminiscent of C.S. Lewis’s chapter in *Mere Christianity*: “Right and Wrong as a Key to the Nature of the Universe.”⁴ Such praise and blame involve different degrees of personal risk and corresponding levels of courage before others on ever deeper and more refined levels. It takes greater courage to share publicly one’s understanding than one’s experience, one’s judgment than one’s understanding, one’s conviction and decision-making than one’s judging.

Two themes surfaced regularly as students appropriated the notion of meaning: one’s personal vocation and the question of God. Almost inevitably, it seems, the question of “vocation” arose in the class. “What am I going to be? What am I going to do with my life? Is nursing the

right major for me? Should I do something else? Should I become a teacher? I experience fulfillment in teaching—it's wonderful to see look of recognition on students' faces. How do I come to this decision? What are the elements that go into making this decision?"

One student quite clearly recalled the moment when she began to realize her calling to be a nurse. She had been quite sick as a child, exposed to various hospitals, clinics, and doctors' offices. There she observed the many nurses working seriously and she was struck by their intensity.

I remember so distinctly, one specific time, when I was in the waiting room, watching the hustle and bustle of the nurses and doctors. In that moment, an indescribably [sic] "ah-ha" feeling overcame me. It felt as if God had touched me, and instantly I had an urge, a feeling, and the knowledge that this was where I was supposed to be...that I was meant to be a nurse, and hopefully help other people who were scared like I was scared, with the same love and compassion I was given and saw in the nurses around me. It was then that I saw the bigger meaning, perhaps, as to why I was sick. I was sick so I could be someone that may have a glimmer of what it feels like for other patients, and maybe even be able to give them better care because of it.

Another student wrote:

I think this realization of what I truly want from my career encompasses my notions and commitment to what is meaningful for me in my life. Professor Morelli captured this thought rather perfectly in class this past week when he said not to dismiss our interests but rather to follow them and try to uncover what they mean.

Then there was the question of God, a question not always addressed directly, even in a Catholic university. One young woman wrote of it as the question of "fate."

...the most important of the basic notions in this philosophical journey for me is meaning. ...Morelli states that we do not possess the basic notions, but rather that we are possessed by them. ...I have felt the possession of meaning, and it has driven me to seek more. I want to know what fate means. I want to know what it means to the universe and to the world and to the people I love and, most importantly, what it means to my own existence. It can be hard sometimes to think of oneself, as we are taught from such a young age, to not be selfish, but in this I have granted myself permission to be selfish.

Her response reminds me of Newman's line in the *Grammar of Assent*, when he writes "in these matters selfishness is true modesty," and later, "I am what I am or I am nothing." In other specialized classes they have received a lot of textbook answers in various subjects. But on the subject of themselves, much remains to be discovered. As one student put it:

This course has pushed me further and further in that its sole purpose was to take students out of the textbook and to use this textbook knowledge to inspire meaning in our lives—to live deliberately and valuably...

...through this course I learned to think outside of my practical, question-free self-presence and recognize my desire for truth as the basic notion inspiring my actions.

My students' experience of Morelli's text echoes James Marsh's review printed on the back cover: "I found myself wishing...that I was exposed to...something like it in my early undergraduate years. ...[M]y progress in becoming a deeper, more authentic human being, and my discovery of myself as a philosopher, would have been accelerated."

Eventually "the question of God" arose without my intervention. Since Seton Hall is a Catholic university with crucifixes and statues of saints prominently displayed, it was perhaps natural that this question would arise—perhaps especially for the some of the more agnostic students.

Getting in touch with their own inner drive to ask questions quite naturally opened to the “question of God” as a real question. One student wrote that perhaps the notion of God was only a “placeholder” concept for all we do not know about. Another spoke of choosing deliberately not to be confirmed and the difficulty of sharing that with his mother. Some reported periods of oscillating belief and unbelief, the significance of student retreats and the testimony of others, and their breakthroughs to personal belief. In all of this, they were becoming aware of the movements of their own hearts and minds and becoming aware of themselves.

As mentioned earlier, this cultivation of self-awareness was for Lonergan the key issue of modern times: getting people to “the starting point,” opening them up to themselves as questioners open to the infinite.

For those said not to have philosophical talent, I do not desire or prefer different philosophical studies. I would urge better teachers and simplified studies. **Everyone can attain a certain measure of self-appropriation, of knowing just what happens when he is coming to know and coming to choose...**The big block will not be a total absence of philosophical capacity but the novelty of training teachers that (1) can thematize their own conscious activities and (2) help their students to do likewise.⁵

Morelli is clearly an example of the “better teachers” Lonergan calls for and his book, *Toward Self-Possession* is the sort of focused study that enables students to attain “a certain measure of self-appropriation.”

Richard M. Liddy
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Endnotes

- 1 Bernard Lonergan, *Phenomenology and Logic*, vol. 18 *CWL*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 131-132.
- 2 Mark Morelli, *Self-Possession: Being at Home in Conscious Performance*, (Los Angeles: Encanto Editions, 2019), 5.
- 3 Morelli, *Self-Possession*, 130.
- 4 C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, (New York: HarperCollins), 8-23.
- 5 Bernard Lonergan, *Philosophical and Theological Papers 1965-1980*, vol. 17 *CWL*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 372.

