
Christopher W. Hicks

University of Manitoba
Self-Appropriation, Values, and Ethics

It is difficult to argue against the notion that the world and our place in it is changing at a seemingly incomprehensible pace. Access to information, data, images and the speed at which it is available is unprecedented. And, even though much has been said about the impact of heightened exposure of humans to media, the impressions are often vacuous and incomplete. Can a person respond authentically and accurately to a media image or message if it is merely perceived and not understood? Beyond media and in a larger sense, is it possible to respond appropriately to a contemporary moral or ethical problem if one’s foundation of thought and values are compromised by messages that are shaped by the perceptions of others? The question becomes whether people actually understand reality from their own sense of what it is or by what others (people, institutions, governments) say it is. If people are capable of understanding on their own and on their own terms then reality can be understood. If reality can be understood, where do we go from there?

While this is much too daunting a question for this short paper, and since this is a discussion about educational leadership, I will attempt to address it with some parameters. If a case can be made at all for the necessity of ethical foundations and practices in school leadership then it follows that the leaders themselves must have a grasp of their own personal ethics. It may not be enough to rely on the ethics of others, manifested as they usually are by laws, polices, a climate of political correctness, contracts, and in general, politically sensitive environments. These are certainly important but are they enough when leaders confront problems and dilemmas that require judgments and actions not covered by established – and generally democratically derived – codes of operation? At some point a decision is necessary, one that goes beyond what
can be reached by objective rules. In these instances, school leaders will need to rely on something, perhaps an inner sense of moral certitude that resides within rather than without. Perhaps this inner code is what we call ethics.

There are many examples where the integrity of school administrators is tested and I see in this a deeper concern related to the way we think. Our societies have become so dependent on action, and that usually means immediate action, that little attention is given to the core of the thinking involved. We look at the external situation, or object, in a disassociative way, cut off from what the internal workings of the mind are telling us. We rely, certainly in leadership roles, on what is presented before us first rather than what is in us first. We focus on what Bernard Lonergan called “scotomas”, “blind spots that get in the way of understanding what is actually happening” (Glendon, 2007, p. 18). These can be policies, rules, laws, opinions and even erroneous information that is presented in a convincing way. What happens is that the capacity for making values and ethically-based decisions and judgments is compromised, too often forcing one into accepting outcomes that are not necessarily appropriate (Langlois, 2004).

This paper has two purposes. The first purpose is to establish the name of Bernard Lonergan and his idea of human understanding through the notion of what he called “self-appropriation”. Tied to this is a brief examination of his generalised empirical method, what he called “transcendental method”. It is hoped that this will lay the groundwork for the second purpose of this paper which is an exploration of a contemporary challenge I find affecting school leadership: ethical decision-making and what leadership should strive for today. For this I will make an investigation of decision-making in school districts and see how this is treated from the standpoint of ethics but
also from the standpoint of dilemmas and changes that impede progressive educational thought in leadership. By doing this, I hope to make a legitimate connection between Lonergan’s notion of knowledge acquisition and values-based educational leadership. If knowledge is acquired and utilised in this way, perhaps values and ethics are as well and could this be applied to effective administration of schools?

What are the realities in school leadership today? Educationally, the changing dynamics of society (immigration, globalisation, standardization) are clearly present in the schools. Philosophically, the problem speaks to the changing dynamics of human behaviour and attitudes and, therefore, ought to be examined from the perspective of a search for knowledge and understanding. Whether the realities can be understood is a separate but equally pertinent subject because understanding the realities is the key to addressing them. As for what we should be doing in school leadership, the question is how what we have perceived and understood to be realities can be articulated and acted upon. Since much of Bernard Lonergan’s legacy is an analysis of what it means for an individual to know and to understand (in Lonergan, 1997), I see a connection between his ideas and contemporary problems in education and educational leadership. In this sense, according Lonergan himself in *Topics in Education*, “philosophy and education are interdependent. Philosophy is the reflective component, and education is the active component, at the ultimate level of reflection and action in human life” (Lonergan, 1993, p. 5). He adds that as separate entities, philosophy and education are meaningless, but function properly only when the two complement each other. Once the immediate, or empirical, impression has been internalised, reflection becomes the first step in changing the landscape of thinking and the cornerstone of understanding. In educational terms, this
is akin to turning thought into action. If, according to Foster (1986) philosophy’s depiction of beliefs related to a perception of the world is not so far removed from administration, and that “administrators, knowingly or not, put those beliefs into practice” (Foster, p. 19) Then Lonergan’s notion and method of understanding are not so far removed from the modern realities of school leadership and decision-making. Let me now turn to Lonergan and his thought.

It is difficult to classify Bernard Lonergan into a category of thinkers. He does not fit neatly into any category because “his work does not fall into any well-defined school” (Glendon, 2007, p. 17). As Lonergan himself admits “[F]ortunately, I don’t think I come under any single label” (qtd. in Lonergan, 1997, p. 11). It has been fairly well-documented that one of Lonergan’s goals was to guide the Roman Catholic Church toward a closer link with the modern world (Lonergan, 1997; Teevan, 2002). In doing so, he took a long look at the twentieth century and saw it as “marked by an unexpected, bitter, and wide spread disillusionment” (in Lonergan, 1997, p.15). The clash of ideologies and ensuing human and ecological tragedy that has defined the twentieth century has led to a deterioration of common values that people once relied upon. What is worse is that the perceived truth becomes “evidence in favour of error” (in Lonergan, 1997, p. 15). According to Lonergan, the twentieth century was simply the newest moment in the cycle of human decline in which “our self-understanding and our understanding of our common situation have become ever less comprehensive” (in Lonergan, 1997, p. 16). What Lonergan believed was necessary for humanity to counter this decline was “an adequate, up-to-date answer to the question, What is man?” (in
Lonergan, 1997, p. 17). To do this, Lonergan developed a method to pursue self-knowledge that he called ‘self-appropriation’.

Lonergan held that the pursuit of knowledge is a personal one, that one cannot depend on others for true understanding. He describes this as “a breakthrough or insight as situated within the dynamic structure of human cognition: the cumulative processes of experiencing, understanding and judging” (Glendon, 2007, p. 19). From this process we seek the inner workings of our own capacity to understand. It is not enough to understand something; rather, the goal is to “[T]horoughly understand what it is to understand, and not only will you understand the broad lines of all there is to be understood but also you will possess a fixed base, an invariant pattern, opening upon all further developments of understanding” (Creamer, 2007, p. 1 – class handout). If one sees what one is capable of seeing, then knowledge is attainable. It is not important at first to understand objects, only that one understands that they can be understood through the “fixed base” and “invariant pattern” that opens one’s capacity to know.

What is self-appropriation? ‘Appropriation’ refers to the taking possession of or to earmark something for a specific purpose or use (www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary). ‘Self-appropriation’, then, can be viewed as taking possession of oneself and even dedicating oneself to a certain purpose or duty. Perhaps appropriately, this ‘duty’ is to oneself and the search for knowledge.

Lonergan says “seeking knowledge is seeking an unknown” (Lonergan, 1997, p. 341). The simple test of this is that knowing what to look for means not needing to look for it. It is a shift in one’s orientation toward objects. Instead of attending to objects outside of oneself, one establishes a kind of inner relationship to objects (in Lonergan,
The attention moves away from the objects to oneself. The subject of our perception turns to an internal observation of oneself as the subject, which shapes consciously observed acts of trying to know – Lonergan calls these “interior operations” (in Lonergan, 1997, 18). This establishes the concept of subject as subject, the experiences of whom are not acts conveyed to an external object but to the internal and “imperceptible behaviours” (in Lonergan, 1997, p. 18).

Self-appropriation is a process of accepting and taking on oneself as a knower and a doer. Lonergan sought to test what it was that made cognition and morality operate before they were categorised and pondered. This is the attempt to account for the “invariant dynamic structure of conscious intentionality” (in Lonergan, 1997, p. 19) given the criteria of objectivity, truth, reality, and value (p. 19). Further, self-appropriation represents the individual self-possession of oneself prior to external criteria related to knowledge and truth, and even value (p. 19). Self-appropriation encourages not a detachment from externalities. It does not, for example, imply that one separate one’s sensing of a tree to find oneself in relation to it. Rather, self-appropriation holds that one should build on one’s relation to the tree by understanding oneself first operating in cognitive and moral capacities. One’s relation to the tree emerges as a fixed base in one’s capacity to understand. Self-appropriation is a way of looking at or grasping for the possibility of knowledge. Recall Lonergan’s assertion that seeking knowledge is “seeking an unknown”. Looking for knowledge is a “conscious tendency” that involves an intelligent, critical, and deliberate endeavour (Lonergan, 1997, p.342). This is an implicit conceptuality of an ideal of knowledge. The ideal, according to Lonergan, “is myself as intelligent, as asking questions, as requiring intelligible answers” (p. 351).
The key to self-appropriation is to move into oneself as one able to conceptualise, speculate and then judge. The move inward to where the ideal is free of explicitly pre-ordained judgements, concepts, and even labels is self-appropriation. The important thing to imagine as one makes the move inward is “the you that is present . . . the looker, not the looked-at” (p. 352-353). This is beyond introspection because it isn’t about examining oneself, but rather the examining itself that matters. Even beyond the examining is the notion that while the examining is happening, one is present to oneself at the same time (p. 353). One is “self-conscious” in the presence of looking and knowing.

Self-appropriation, then, according to Lonergan, is the individual attending to experiencing, understanding, and judging. It is also, however, a conscious acknowledgment (understanding) of oneself in the process of experiencing, understanding, and judging. This is the self-appropriative notion of how knowledge is determined: the surfacing of experience, understanding, and judging (p. 358). The point of attempting to achieve a sense of self-appropriation is to create one’s own threshold based on one’s own resources. It is not a matter of adopting the resources and approaches of someone else. One must first develop one’s own bases of knowing. Once done, one can move forwards and move beyond into other possibilities.

If self-appropriation reaches into the “realm of ourselves as subjects” (author unknown, 2002, p. 17), how is this realised? How is it applied? What mechanism(s) allows an individual to find this realm? This, according to Lonergan, means to engage in a kind of methodology. “A method is a normative pattern of recurrent and related operations yielding cumulative and progressive results” (Lonergan, 1997, p. 447). This is somewhat different from, say, the application of formalised logic. Where logic may be
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represented by “operations and results”, the difference between logic and Lonergan’s
notion of method is that method is dynamic, cumulative, and progressive. What comes
out of this development of self-appropriation is Lonergan’s notion of “generalised
empirical method” (Creamer, 1996, p. 67) or “transcendental method” (in Lonergan,
1997, p. 22). Essentially, Lonergan’s method is employed as a means to understand the
composition of the “act of understanding; insight being the key to unlocking the basic
pattern whereby the fundamental nature of reality is revealed to human beings” (Creamer,
1996, p. 66). This is what it means to know, or what Lonergan refers to as “conscious
intentionality” (Lonergan, 1997, p. 448).

Human consciousness has, according to Lonergan, four levels. The empirical
level is the level of experience. This is where the individual will sense, perceive and
engage in the world around him or her. The second level, the intellectual level, is where
the individual moves toward understanding and attempts to convey this understanding.
The third level, the rational level, is where the individual examines the evidence and
judges whether truth has been revealed. The fourth level, the responsible level, is where
the individual makes a decision about what action to take based on evaluations that have
been made already (Creamer, 1996; Grace, 1996; Lonergan, 1997; Teevan, 2002).
Lonergan sees this as the “fundamental process of every human inquiry” (Teevan, 2002,
p. 881) and “all the operations on the four levels are intentional and conscious”
(Lonergan, 1997, p. 448). This conscious sense of knowing, if applied properly, then,
becomes a kind of precursor to all methodology because “through intelligent grasp and
reasonable affirmation we know not just the world of appearances but the real” (Teevan,
2002, p. 886). If the transcendental method is internalised authentically, it should be the basis upon which any further methods are developed.

Out of his notion of transcendental method, Lonergan designed what he called “transcendental precepts” (Lonergan, 1997, p. 450) as a way of explaining functions of transcendental method. The transcendental precepts are part of his normative function: “Be attentive, Be intelligent, Be reasonable, Be responsible” (p. 450). These precepts, while having a basis for attending to the world one encounters, must exist first in the human consciousness and are revealed in the human act of choosing. The choices lie between the precepts and their opposites (p. 451). Because Lonergan’s transcendental method (indeed his entire notion of the human state of knowing) implies an internal organisation of personal understanding and intelligence, there seems to be a vulnerability in human choice. In other words, we do not have to act on the impulses generated by the precepts. The fourth level of human consciousness (responsibility) does not compel a person to act responsibly; it merely implies that the internal tools are there for a person to engage. Or, as Creamer puts it, “[W]e can choose to be inattentive, unintelligent, unreasonable, and irresponsible” (1996, p. 70). Can we, however, choose not to choose? This is where I think that Lonergan’s insights lead: to the inevitable revelation of the uniquely human issues and concerns of morality and values.

Now that a nominal sketch of Lonergan’s notions of self-appropriation and transcendental method, has been made, I attempt now to illustrate some of Lonergan’s thinking in this manner to problems faced by school leaders. My example is Lyse Langlois’ (2004) “Responding Ethically: Complex Decision-Making by School District Superintendents” as an example of how in the area of school leadership, “we are in the
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midst of an epochal shift in the control of meaning” (in Lonergan, 1997, p.24) and that our reliance upon external explanations of truths and reality are not sufficient in a modern sense. They belong to a classical age or at least our perception of it. Lonergan’s goal was to devise a “new conceptuality… to make decisions freely and responsibly”, to promote progress “and to articulate a new mode of controlling meaning proportionate to the demands of our age” (in Lonergan p. 24-25). The individual who is aware and authentic in his or her thinking and is confident in the choice he or she makes in action and decision must be allowed the freedom to do so.

Langlois’ study reveals a conflict inherent in the ability of a school administrator to make conscious decisions based on values. Faced with immeasurable external variables (laws, policies, rules) leaders find themselves unable to act with discretion and individual judgement. In a way, school leaders find themselves caught in the milieu of a crisis of direction: one way suggests to acquaint oneself with oneself; the other way to adhere to external authorities and corruptive forces. When Lonergan asserts that the modern world is on the verge of a new age (the old one that defined our place in it being gone), he suggests that the new age has not even been conceived let alone emerged.

William Foster (2004) referred to these external forces (via Foucault) as “technologies of thought”, which impose a kind of systematic influence on one’s thought processes and are implemented through leadership. “A technology, in this way of thinking, is the application of a systematic procedure toward a particular end” (p. 177). The technologies are authoritative (not “authentic”, to recall Lonergan) and convey a form of control. Foster (2004) highlights three main technologies of thought and that are particularly prevalent in schools: 1) Numeracy, 2) Information, and 3) Language (p.
Numeracy is controlled in the way statistics are manipulated to secure political power. While they have the potential to serve a useful purpose, to, say, encourage a meaningful appropriation towards understanding, they are mostly hoisted as data to inform the public about shortcomings in the system. The second technology, information, is controlled and manipulated as one would expect. Computers, and their devices, represent the ideal mechanism for control simply because of our reliance on them. Again, the potential is clear. Information is something to experience, understand, and judge but only if one is capable of internalizing oneself as the first subject of knowing. The blatant external control of information, however, narrows the parameters of free thinking and, therefore, establishes itself as the primary object of observation.

The third technology, language, is a vastly more complex concept for not only is language both “a mechanism of conveying thought and a means for legitimizing relations of power” (Foster, 2004, p.178), it is the platform for Lonergan’s responsible action. For educational administrators, the power of language is both their greatest asset and their worst enemy. In terms of making appropriate decisions, the type of discourse is often dependent on the stakeholders but also bound by the external modalities about which the decision is confined. In other words, very often an administrator is unable to speak (and act) from the heart.

Foster’s (2004) analysis works between Lonergan and Langlois because of its expression of concern for lost values. He asserts that school leaders are in the midst of a decline of the local school community where its purpose is no longer seeking to achieve “social goals deemed important to a particular period but the development of a productive and employable citizen” (p. 186). The technologies of thought which exert inauthentic
control are the basis for a parallel decline in the ability of school leaders to make meaningful decisions based on conscience and personal judgement, thus devaluing the legitimate pursuit of responsible action. This is at odds with Starratt’s (1991) observation that the political climate may be “encouraging educators to re-structure schools” (p. 188) because of the prediction that ‘re-structure’ will mean greater local autonomy and a freeing of the constraints that come with being in a systematic bureaucracy. Regardless, Starratt’s hope is for “an ongoing effort [for the school community] to govern itself” (p.188) and, like Foster, looks for a moral purpose in educational administration.

Langlois (2004) points to a great paradox in school administration. While it is generally understood that administrators are sought primarily for their ability to make decisions, the reality is that the codification of language in school organizations makes decision-making meaningless (p. 78). The impairment of personal judgement reflects the way Lonergan would say data is conceptualized first externally instead of internally. Instead of focusing on what’s out there as the only knowable ideal, school leaders ought to first look inward and experience, understand, judge and decide what is in them.

Langlois (2004) reveals the qualitative results of a study conducted on school district superintendents in order to comprehend the problem-solving process they employed in difficult and complex situations. As she admits, “[R]esolving complexity requires a specific skill set and deep reflection” (p.79) which is too often compromised by the external forces that Foster (2004) says exist. Langlois’ study (2004) asks questions about situations in which school administrators find themselves and how decisions were derived and then acted upon. What this has done is to “open our eyes to the universe of moral dilemmas and the role of judgement” which in turn shows how “the
intimate world of moral reflection begins to reveal itself” (p. 79). The body of research cited highlights that while there are positive dimensions of ethical thought and practice (justice, care and critique), rarely are all these dimensions employed in solving a complex problem (p. 80). In fact, Langlois cites research where “unintentional and unethical decision-making” is prevalent: “prejudice, bias, conflict of interest, and an overt tendency to claim credit” (p. 80). This represents what Lonergan posited about conscious intentionality, where humans have the capacity to fullfill a moral standard but only if they choose to do so. While abiding by professional standards may claim a moral or ethical highground, it is debatable that doing so is an authentic practice if one betrays one’s own conscious notions of personal moral intelligence and awareness.

The study is a survey of responses to questions around situations that require complex decision-making. The questions themselves did not use words like ‘ethical’, ‘moral’ or ‘value’. These appeared in the responses. The goal, however, was to assess the “role of judgement while taking into account the daily experience of school administrators” (p. 81). It is hard to imagine a significant stretch of time in a typical day of a school administrator where judgement is unnecessary. Langlois’ findings reveal that the desire on the part of the subjects to use ethical judgement is too often at odds with the administrative constraints that impede ethical judgement.

According to Langlois, “authenticity and a sense of responsibility” act as the “moral compass” that guides them through complex decision-making situations (p. 86). The sense is that there exists a drive to remain “consistent with their values and beliefs” and to act legitimately with what they believe to be right and true. Lonergan might suggest this is as it should be but it isn’t because of the distraction of having to focus on
The externalities of the problems and dilemmas. These are the perils that school leaders face even though their desire is to view difficult situations from the standpoint of conscious.

The question, then, becomes whether making decisions really involves an ethical perspective. Clearly the term ‘ethics’ is diminished when confronted with criteria that are normal in the functioning of an organization – teacher contracts, policies, laws, regulations – but the term can be distinguished in that “ethics require self-discipline on the part of individuals rather than on external control factors” (Langlois, 2004, p.87). If school leaders employ ethics in that regard it is because their values and attention to their own sense of authentic understanding make an impact on their day to day work. Further, if ethical thinking and practice are important, then there must exist, Canto-Sperber suggests, “a thought process which often requires precise knowledge and rational methods and procedures for which there are no ready-made answers” (Canto-Sperber qtd. in Langlois, 2004, p.88). Ethics, therefore, go beyond the wanting to do something. There also has to be an inner understanding of what one knows and a way to evaluate and determine a course of action. In this way, Lonergan’s notion of being able to comprehend one’s own knowledge of how one perceives situations is critical to a values-based, responsible approach to action.

Langlois’ study is important in another way in that it raises questions about the importance of personal morals - an individual sense of right and wrong - in school leadership and even in modern societies. As Langlois points out, the fact that “[P]ractically no research in educational administration and management has been conducted on the role of moral judgement” (p. 89) suggests that there is no need to
pursue what does not exist. Note that this corresponds to Lonergan’s idea that seeking knowledge, in his view a natural component of human desire, is seeking an unknown (If you know what you’re looking for, why look for it). In a sense, it is as if school leaders, in terms of ethical and moral judgment, are resigned to experiencing and judging the outward activities and examples set by others. The inner composition of the subject as oneself is missing. All that is left for our ethical approach to decision-making is school leadership is external logic based on artificial and impersonal realities.

Conclusion

The act of knowing is a complicated process. As the discussion on Bernard Lonergan shows, the pursuit of knowledge begins with the knower and not the outward object of the knowing. The notion of self-appropriation is a concept that attempts to allow the knower to realize his or her place as the primary subject of knowledge and not the perceived object on the outside. The goal is to experience first-hand what it means to know. This is applicable, then, to every experience of knowing that follows. The generalized empirical method (transcendental method) of engaging this process of understanding seeks to establish the normative pattern for which inquiry can turn to responsible action. Lonergan’s ideas here require an authentic approach to perceiving and, in a sense, living the experiences that are derived from knowing and understanding this understanding. The goal here was to incorporate some of these ideas into the problematic world of school leadership. The modern world movement toward external forces, attitudes, and concepts that shape and exert control over organizations places heavy burden on school leaders. Lyse Langlois’ study, though exposing troubling trends,
at least reveals that leaders, while not always able to put them into action, are conscious of their personal values and morals in decision-making situations.

In the beginning, I wondered about the nature of reality and what should we be doing. Within the framework of this paper, the nature of reality may be one’s possession of oneself and authentic understanding of one’s potential for knowing. As for what we should be doing, school leaders need to combat the artificial objectivity that distorts experience, understanding, and judgement in their pursuit of a moral purpose with an attending to what is innermost in their thinking and morality. As educational administrators and leaders - as individuals - do we need to do anything different?
References


Living with other people. (2007). (*Note: I have no record of where this came from. I took it from a website that did not follow the printing)*.

