CHAPTER THREE: STEWART'S PLATO

1. A THEORY OF INTELLECT

In the summer of 1930, after finishing his degree in London, Lonergan returned to Canada and was assigned to teach at Loyola College, Montreal. In spite of numerous duties, he was able to do some reading and among the books he read was a book on Plato by an Oxford don by the name of J. A. Stewart. It was Plato's influence, mediated by Stewart's work, that began to move him away from nominalism. In 1971 Lonergan wrote:

> As Fr. Bolland had predicted, my nominalism vanished when I read J.A.Stewart's **Plato's Doctrine of Ideas**. In writing this paper I recalled that I had been greatly influenced by a book on Plato's ideas by some Oxford don. I had forgotten his name and the exact title of the book, so I went down to the library, patiently worked through the cards listing books on Plato and, finally, when I got to "S" found my man. I got the book out of the stacks, took it to my room, and found it fascinating reading. It contained much that later I was to work out for myself in a somewhat different context, but at the time it was a great release. My nominalism had been in opposition, not to intelligence or understanding, but to the central role ascribed to universal concepts.[1]

Certain themes in Stewart's book resonated with what Lonergan had learned from Newman. The first of these was the theme of focussing on present personal experience. Stewart felt that many commentators had missed Plato's point in his theory of Ideas because they had not asked the basic question: what human and psychological experience was Plato talking about? They had tended to make Plato's ideas seem fantastic because they had not related them to the facts of present human psychology. Only in this way could the origins of his Plato's theory be discovered.

> The cardinal question is not asked: What has present-day psychology to tell us about the variety of experience which expresses itself in the doctrine of Ideas? The doctrine is treated as if it were a 'past event' in the 'history of philosophy' for determining the true nature of which there is such and such documentary evidence which, if only marshalled in the right way, is in itself conclusive.[2]

To the exegetes of Plato Stewart asks:

> "But," we ask, "**What are the Ideas?**" What were Plato and these other people talking about? Surely about the right way of expressing some experience which they all had in common, and we ourselves still have. Tell us in the language, vernacular or philosophical, of today what that experience is."[3]

The young Lonergan must have responded to such frankness.

It fits in with Newman's emphasis on discerning the concrete events of personal consciousness, on concentrating on things and not just on ideas, on facts instead of notions. Throughout his life this was a common theme in his life: "What in the world are we talking about?"

For Stewart Plato was both a scientist and an artist. Aristotle, however, because of a lack of appreciation for the aesthetic side of Plato, also seriously underestimated the scientific side. As a result he handed on to posterity a simple-minded interpretation of Plato's Ideas as "separate things."

> The doctrine of Ideas, expressing this double experience, has accordingly its two sides, the methodological and the aesthetic. The former side Aristotle misunderstands, and to the latter is entirely blind. If the Ideas are "separate things," as Aristotle maintains, then the doctrine of Ideas can have no methodological significance; for methodology must assume that science works with "concepts," which are not themselves "things" but general points of view from which things, i.e. sensible things - the only "separate things" known to science - are regarded.[4]

In some fragments from the Lonergan archives that appear to be from the early 1930's Lonergan makes reference to Stewart's book and critiques Aristotle's mis-conception of Plato.

> Plato in speaking of the idea as separate or separable... may very well have been no more than

> referring to the idea as such, the abstract idea separate and distinct and entirely different from the pure presentation which it informs. The intellectual place (**noetos topos**) may be no more than a metaphor for what we with other metaphors describe as the intellectual order, the intellectual level, the intellectual plane.[5]

In these early fragments Lonergan speaks of upholding "the theory of intellection as an immanent act" as opposed to the scholastic theory of understanding as "spiritual apprehension." Here he finds the root of Aristotle's mis-conception of Plato.

> If one tries to think of the spiritual apprehension as separate, one gets the ridiculous Aristotelian interpretation of Plato as holding "universalia a parte rei." The very argument Aristotle was against [in] Plato is used in one of Plato's dialogues by Parmenides against "young" Socrates. I.e., Socrates got over that notion in his youth. Cf. **Plato's Theory of Ideas** by Stewart.[6]

Stewart gives an interpretation of Plato's ideas in terms of methodology:

> Explained on these lines, the **eidei**, so far as methodology is concerned, are points of view from which the man of science regards his data. They are the right points of view, and, as such, have the

> "permanence" of phenomena; but only so in the sense that they are the "explanations" as distinguished from the "phenomena explained." They are not "separate **things**"...If we dismiss from our minds the prejudice raised by Aristotle's criticism, we find nothing in the Dialogues of Plato to countenance the view that the Ideas, so far as they have methodological significance, are "known" as statically existent: they are "known" only as dynamically existent - only as performing their function of making **sensibilia** intelligible. It is as true of Kant's categories that without sense they are empty. The Ideas, so far as their methodological significance is concerned, are nothing more than concepts-in-use - the instruments by employing which human understanding performs its work of interpreting the world - this sensible world, not another world beyond.[7]

For Lonergan, at last, this was an account of concepts that related them to the dynamisms of the human mind. They are "points of view" from which the sensible world is interpreted. They structure human questioning in its dynamic search for an understanding of this world. According to Stewart, Plato maintains this view of the function of the Ideas, or Forms, throughout the whole series of his dialogues, but especially in his earliest dialogues. There his object is to find the Forms of

the moral virtues, that is, to **explain** the moral virtues by exhibiting each in its special context. Each Form, such as justice, temperance, etc., is assigned its special place and use in the social system, the system of the "Good." Sense, imagination and desultory thinking, expressing themselves in Rhetoric, present the virtues separately, taking no account of the system in which they inhere. On the other hand, there is the process of "remembering," **anamnesis**, that enables a person to arrive at the natures of things.

> **Anamnesis**, described as **aitias logismos**, connected thinking, stirred by dialectic, works out the special context of each virtue and the relations of that context to other contexts viewed as parts, along with it, of the whole system. "Context grasped," "scientific point of view taken," "**eidos** discovered" - these are equivalent expressions. The **eidos** is not an impression of sense passively received; it is a product of the mind's activity, an instrument constructed by the mind whereby it "makes nature," "moulds environment," so as to serve the purposes of human life.[8]

In the early dialogues Socrates is a figure who keeps asking questions and seeking the definitions of things. "What is justice?' "What is virtue?" Socrates' dialectical method inevitably brings his listeners to moments of confusion and perplexity, and to sometimes admitting that they do not know what

they thought they knew. The Platonic Socrates does not succeed at arriving at a fully systematic viewpoint, but his point is to enlighten people about what they do not know.[9] Gradually, there emerges Plato's doctrine of Ideas:

> the concept in question is no longer made to depend precariously on the few particulars observed, but is determined, shaped all round as it were, by the system which includes it: in the light of that system we come to see it for what it is, and are finally convinced that it "cannot be otherwise': it has become **independent** of the few particulars the observation of which first suggested it.[10]

Plato's early dialogue, the **Meno**, which Lonergan later refers to on several occasions, includes the doctrine or myth of **anamnesis**: the doctrine that true knowledge is not received from without, but rather recollected from within. In the dialogue Socrates illustrates this doctrine to Meno by calling over a slave-boy and asking him the answer to a geometrical question, how to double a four-foot square. The boy at first thinks he knows the answer, that is, by doubling the sides of the square or by adding one foot to the sides. But both solutions are shown to be false, and finally confused, the boy admits that he does not know what he thought was "obvious." Then gradually, under the guidance of Socrates' questioning and by diagramming the diagonal of the four-foot square and constructing a square on that basis, the slave-boy "recollects" the answer. Through such questioning

one moves beyond the knowledge of particulars (**doxa** or opinion) to scientific knowledge (**episteme**) which gives the "Idea," the causal context. Lonergan succinctly summarizes this contextual background needed to define.

> Definitions haven't got a precise meaning unless you have a fundamental set of terms and relations with the terms fixing the relations and the relations fixing the terms and the whole lot verified. Then you can have definitions that mean something. Any deductivist system has to have that to start.[11]

This, of course, is an explanation of Stewart's Plato that Lonergan gave many years later after reading the book. As he summarized his debt, through Stewart, to Plato.

> From Stewart I learnt that Plato was a methodologist, that his ideas were what the scientist seeks to discover, that the scientific or philosophic process towards discovery was one of question and answer.[12]

To be a methodologist is to know how to question. It was Plato that taught Lonergan that every question, when properly formulated, implies the shadowy anticipation of its answer. Otherwise, we would never recognize an answer as <u>the</u> answer. We would never be able to say, "That's it! That's what I've been looking for!" Without the prior question the slave-boy in the **Meno** would never have ***<u>seen</u>*** the answer in the properly aligned diagram.

> I believed in intelligence and I thought concepts were overrated. When I found in Stewart's **Plato's Doctrine of Ideas** that an idea, for Plato, was like Descartes' equation for the circle, I was home. You get the equation of the circle just by understanding.[13]

Concepts then are rooted in "grasping the intelligible in the sensible," as Lonergan would later put it. Stewart found this in Plato:

> The unity of the Idea...consists in its being a single point of view from which the phenomena are regarded, a single point of view taken of that which otherwise is undetermined... Understanding this, we find it easy to dispose of the difficulty about the unity of the Idea being broken up among the particulars: "the Idea of the circle as defined by its equation in the general form, is not itself properly speaking a curve."[14]

Lonergan was indebted to Stewart for a sense of the "heuristic" character of human understanding: the dynamism of the intellectual search for the unknown.[15] In between the concepts, on the one hand, and the sensible data on the other, there is the pre-conceptual dynamism of questioning and understanding.

> Aristotle and Thomas held that you abstracted from phantasm the **eidos**, the **species**, the idea. And my first clue into the idea was when I was reading a book

> by an Oxford don by the name of J. A. Stewart who in 1905 had written on Plato's myths and in 1909 on Plato's doctrine of ideas. And he explained the doctrine of ideas by contending that for Plato an idea was something like the Cartesian formula for a circle, i.e. $(x^2+y^2) = r^2$ and that exemplified an act of understanding to me, and the idea was getting what's in behind the formula for the circle. So you have something in between the concept and the datum or phantasm. And that is the sort of thing that you can't hold and be a naive realist...[16]

In the fragments that seem to be from an early essay that Lonergan wrote about this time there are several references to Plato. In these fragments the young Lonergan is aiming at articulating "the theory of intellect" that he later claimed he got from Plato.

> Plato's expression of the ultimate identity of intelligence and reality is in the myth of recollection (**anamnesis**). Socrates is using his heuristic method upon a slave, who first tends merely to guess but under the pressure of Socrates' questions elicits the acts of understanding necessary for grasping the geometical theorem under discussion. The procedure here...is simply a recognition of the fact that understanding is an immanent act, that the teacher cannot understand in

> public, so to speak, that the best way to get the pupils to understand is by asking them leading questions. The point is not that the slave knew geometry in a prenatal state (for which no evidence is given) but that the slave was able to understand geometry, i.e. to know what was presented, what could not be presented. Strip the imagery off Plato's myth of **anamnesis** and we are left with an assertion of the ultimate identity of intelligence and reality.[17]

Absent from Stewart's book is any sense of nominalism and empiricist phenomenalism. Concepts are rooted in understanding which is itself the release to human questioning. Such concepts, as they develop with the development of human understanding, structure questioning which is itself heuristic: the mind's dynamic anticipation of understanding the natures of things.

We might add that Stewart sees the second dimension of Plato's Ideas, the more contemplative dimension, as not strictly scientific, but as giving rise to art and religion.

> For that experience the "idea" is not a "point of view" taken by the mind in "discourse," but a "real presence" confronting "contemplation"...The "eternal Idea" is revealed in some welcome, some familiar or beautiful, object of sense - literally **in** the object of sense: not as another object which the object of sense "resembles," but as that very object of sense itself

> transfigured, become a wonder. It is not **a** skylark that Shelley hears and sees, but **the** Skylark.[18]

Here again a theme is sounded that can be found in Lonergan's early writings: grasping an intelligibility in a singular sensible or imaginative example.

Lonergan later noted:

> My apprehension, at that time, was not that precise. It was something vaguer that made me devote my free time to reading Plato's early dialogues.[19]

2. A CRITIQUE OF CULTURE

Lonergan never felt that Plato had all the answers. Nevertheless, he thought Plato was the perfect introduction to philosophy, to questioning our human questioning.

> My idea of Plato is that he is the perfect introduction to philosophy. I don't think he has the answers but certainly he can build up interest and start one into serious questions.[20]

From some of his early writings we can surmise that during the early 30's Lonergan read Plato's **Meno**, the **Sophists**, the **Gorgias** and **The Republic.**[21] As he said years later, "In the early thirties I began to delight in Plato, especially the early

dialogues."[22] What will become evident in Lonergan's unpublished writings from the mid-thirties is that Plato gave Lonergan the sense of the normativeness of intelligence in its own right, a normativeness that in Plato becomes **the** means of cultural critique.

In those writings Lonergan states that in Plato philosophy emerged with the assertion of its social significance:

> "Towns and cities will not be happy till philosophers are kings" is the central position of Plato's **Republic**, and the **Republic** is the centre of the dialogues. To Plato, Pericles, the idol of Athenian aspirations, was an idiot; he built docks and brought the fruits of all lands to Athens...but he neglected the one thing necessary, the true happiness of the citizens. For did not the dialectic reveal that no man without self-contradiction could deny that suffering injustice was better than doing injustice, that pain was compatible with happiness, that shame, the interior contradiction, the lie in the soul of a man to himself, was incompatible with happiness.[23]

What was evident to Plato was that a higher control was needed in the governance of society and that higher control was virtue, and that virtue was to be known by human intelligence in its fullest exercise.

The achievement of Platonism lay in its power of

> criticism. The search for a definition of virtue in the earlier dialogues establishes that virtue is a certain something, the emergence of a new light upon experience. This discovery of the idea, of intelligible forms, gave not only dialectic but also the means of social criticism. For it enabled man to express not by symbol but by concept the divine.[24]

In the last years of his life Lonergan would point again to Plato as he recommended the commentaries of Eric Voegelin. For Voegelin, Plato's parable of the cave describes a person being forced against his or her will out of the shadows into the light. It reveals opposite principles at work in human life:

> On the one hand, opinion may lead through reason (**logos**) to the best (**ariston**), and its power is called self-restraint (**sophrosyne**); on the other hand, desire may drag us (**helkein**) towards pleasures and its rule is called excess (**hybris**). Or as Voegelin illustrates the matter, a young man may be drawn to philosophy but by social pressure be diverted to a life of pleasure or to success in politics. But if he follows the second pull, the meaning of his life is not settled for him. The first pull remains and is still experienced as part of his living. Following the second pull does not transform his being into a question-free fact, but into a questionable course. He will sense that the life he

> leads is not his "own and true life."[25]

Speaking of Voegelin's interpretation of Plato, Lonergan noted:

> I had always been given the impression that Plato's dialogues were concerned with the pure intellect until I read Dr. Voegelin and learned that they were concerned with social decline, the break-up of the Greek city-states. It was human reasonableness trying to deal with an objective social, political mess.[26]

The quotes we gave above from Lonergan's early writings shows that he had indeed considered this side of Plato in his early days.

With the reading of Stewart and Plato something major was going on in Lonergan. He later spoke of it as "a great release." Nevertheless, even though in later years Lonergan attributed to Stewart and Plato his break with nominalism, in a letter he wrote to his provincial in 1935 he claimed that after reading Plato his nominalism was still intact.

> I got interested in Plato during regency and came to understand him; this left my nominalism quite intact but gave a theory of intellect as well.[27]

In other words, there would seem to have been an inner conflict in Lonergan at this time: that is, a growing and more

factual awareness of the dynamics of human consciousness along with an underlying philosophical position - nominalism? - in conflict with that developing understanding.[28]

After reading Plato it was only natural that Lonergan would go on to reading the most famous of Christian Platonists, St. Augustine. "I read St. Augustine's earlier works during the summer before theology and found him to be psychologically exact."[29] It was through reading Augustine that Lonergan's definitive break with nominalism took place and from Augustine that he then made his way to the intellectualism of Aristotle and Aquinas.

1. **Second Collection**, 264-265.

2. J.A.Stewart, **Plato's Doctrine of Ideas** (Oxford: 1909) 1.

3. Ibid., 2.

4. Ibid., 3.

5. Fragments of what may be the lost essay on assent from the early 1930's: Lonergan's page number 13. Archives of the Lonergan Research Center, Toronto.

6. Ibid..

7. Stewart, 3.

8. Ibid., 6-7.

9. **Caring About Meaning**: 24: "Socrates introduced definitions, and people who ask for definitions usually are crazy."

10. Stewart, **Plato's Doctrine of Ideas**, 18.

11. **Caring About Meaning**, 24.

12. **Second Collection**, 264.

13. **Caring About Meaning**, 44.

14. Stewart, **Plato's Doctrine of Ideas**, 93. On the circle cf. 57 and 74; also 95: "It is only on the basis of Mathematically exact determination of x by the appropriate A that empirical science is possible."

15. "The reality of the intelligible **A** is constituted by the fact that it performs its function of making the **x** of the sensible world intelligible in the formula **x** is **A**." Ibid., 85.

16. Transcript by Nicholas Graham of discussion from Lonergan Workshop, Boston College, June 19, 1979. Available at Lonergan Research Institute. Toronto.

17. Fragments what may be the lost essay on assent: Lonergan's page number 9. Archives of the Lonergan Research Center, Toronto.

18. Ibid., 11.

19. **Second Collection**, 264.

20. **Caring About Meaning**, 49.

21. Some years later, while a student in Rome in 1935, Lonergan wrote to his provincial that, among the few books he owned, there were four dialogues of Plato. There are also references to these early Platonic dialogues in his notes from the middle 1930's on the philosophy of history. Nevertheless, he did not at the time continue to read Plato. As he said: "I had other fish to fry." **Caring About Meaning**, 48.

22. **Second Collection**, 38.

23. Unpublished **Philosophy of History** notes, available at the Lonergan Research Institute, Toronto. Quoted with permission.

24. Ibid..

25. **Third Collection**, 190. Lonergan refers to Voegelin's "The Gospel and Culture," in **Jesus and Man's Hope**, ed. by Donald G. Miller and Dikran Y. Hadidian, Vol. II (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, 1971), 59-101. Cf. **Caring About Meaning**, 22-23, on Voegelin: "He is a moral man, and he certainly presents conscience, using Plato to do it -- in **The Laws**, the puppeteer. The pull of the golden cord doesn't force you; you have to agree, make the decision. But the jerk of the steel chain, that's what upsets you. The viewpoint is Ignatius and it is the whole ascetic tradition of the discernment of spirits."

26. Quoted in **The Question as Commitment: A Symposium**, ed. E. Cahn and C. Going (Montreal: The Thomas More Institute, 1977) 119.

27. Letter to Provincial, January 22, 1935.

28. Newman speaks of such a conflict between his reason and his imagination regarding the Catholic church. His **Apologia** is a good example of the ongoing conflict between developing reason and an underlying imaginative vision. "Simultaneously with Milner I read Newton **On the Prophecies**, and in consequence became most firmly convinced that the Pope was the Antichrist predicted by St. Paul, and St. John. My imagination was stained by the effects of this doctrine up to the year 1843; it had been eliminated from my reason and judgment at an earlier date; but the thought remained upon me as a sort of false conscience. Hence came that conflict of mind, which so many have felt besides myself; - leading some men to make a compromise between the two ideas, so inconsistent with each other, driving others to beat out the one idea or other from their minds, - and ending in my own case, after many years of intellectual unrest, in the gradual decay and extinction of one of them , - I do not say in its violent death, for why should I have not murdered it sooner, if I murdered it at all." **Apologia pro vita sua**, 7.

29. January 22, 1935 letter to Provincial.