Towards Functional Interpretations of Generalized Empirical Method by James Gerard Duffy

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James Gerard Duffy
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Generalized empirical method operates on a combination of both the data of sense and the data of consciousness: it does not treat of objects without taking into account the corresponding subject; it does not treat of the subject’s operations without taking into account the corresponding object.[1]

The generalized empirical method (GEM) formula appears in the essay “Religious Knowledge,” the second of three lectures on religious studies and theology delivered by Lonergan at Queen’s University, Kingston, Ontario, on March 2, 3 and 4, 1976.[2] What follows is a first step towards interpreting the formula, taking as a guide the four-step program of understanding object, words, author, and oneself described in Method in Theology chapter 7 “Interpretation,” with an occasional consideration of Insight17.3 “The Truth of Interpretation.”

Immediately I ask myself why name these forty-six words a “formula”? Why not call them a “directive,” “mandate,” “fantasy,” or “X-way”? The question points to the rather hairy issue of what I am about here, typing away on this fine Saturday afternoon in the month of May. What is a “formula” for me as I type? What meaning does “formula” have for you, my reader? Are we not already into the deep A-B-C-D-E, A’-B’-C’-D’-E’, A”-B”-C”-D”-E” waters of ever-shifting audiences, the limitations of our commons sense and the historical sense, and the fantastic hermeneutics-as-science discovery of “some method of conceiving and determining the habitual development of all audiences,” not to mention an invention of “some technique by which its expression escapes relativity to particular and incidental audiences”? [3]

I will begin with a “let” -- while entertaining the strong possibility that the can(n)on-blast of the universal viewpoint has not fired, that the interpreter (c’est moi) is not beginning from the universal viewpoint, and that there is indeed a relativity of the interpreter to you, my reader, and a relativity of both of us to a time and place, a tribe, a sect, or a little philosophical school: Let “formula” mean the forty-six words written (or spoken), already-out-there at the top of page 141 staring me in the face. On the other hand, let “formulation” mean a personal achievement, in this case Lonergan’s achievement of out-going meaning in March of 1976, which he expressed in a flow of words. The formula is in the public domain, while the formulation is Lonergan’s.

1. Understanding the Object

I have chosen forty-six words from one of fifteen essays that appear in A Third Collection. What is the object being treated in my chosen text? The formula tells me that the object is a “method,” a procedure, a way of doing something, one that is “general” and “empirical.” A second observation about the object GEM is that it does (operates) two things at a time. It is not like a date in which I treat you today and you pick up the tab tomorrow. It is more like a double-Dutch date, a double-treating: “treating of objects” and “treating of subjects.” Already things are
getting strange: the object of my understanding is not ‘just an object,’ but a tandem treating of both objects and subjects that involves distinct and related kinds of data.

Obviously, the more I know about this method, the better position I am in to interpret the formula. “[T]he wider the interpreter’s experience, the deeper and fuller the development of his understanding, the better balanced his judgment, the greater likelihood that he will discover just what the author meant.”[4] So I ask myself: “James, have you done the double-treating described in the formula? When? Where? Have you written about it? Talked about it? Has it affected your way of reading? Has it changed your way of teaching? Has the double-treating mediated and/or been mediated by a desire to tongue forth integral, baby-laughed or baby-uttered words?”

2. Understanding the Words

The meaning of the forty-six word GEM formula, so the author tells us, is “an intentional entity” and “a unity that is unfolded through parts, sections, chapters, paragraphs, sentences, words.”[5] The formula appears in the fourth paragraph of the fifth section of the second of a three lectures delivered in 1976. In the second paragraph of section five Lonergan writes that GEM is “a normative pattern of related and recurrent operations that yield ongoing and cumulative results,” and in the third paragraph he adds that GEM “envisages all data.”[6] Was he joking? Apparently not, for he went on to say in the paragraph that follows the forty-six words that GEM wants to go behind the diversity that separates the experimental method of the natural sciences and the quite diverse procedures of hermeneutics and of history. It would discover their common core and thereby prepare the way for their harmonious combination in human studies.[7]

It would appear that Lonergan had something big in mind as he tongued and typed his forty-six word formula.

How do I go about understanding GEM? As interpreter I “spiral into the meaning of the whole” formula in a process of learning in which I note, perhaps with the help of a guide or teacher, my failures to clearly understand. For example, I might read “data of sense” and initially interpret what most people mean by sense-data – imagined colors, sounds, textures, tastes, etc. This common meaning does not include real stacks of real journals in real libraries as part of this data. The oversight is doubly-tricky, for the real journals in real libraries are no more imaginatively already-out-there than are real feelings already-in-here. So much for the bogus “bridge-problem” that shackles most of us in a half-animal, half-human position somewhere between materialism and idealism, AND that prevents us from understanding the words.[8]

3. Understanding the Author

In chapter 7 of Method in Theology the author writes that the problem of understanding the author (!) is one of “understanding the author himself, his nation, language, time, culture, way of life, and cast of mind.”[9] The context is the common sense task of understanding another person’s common sense, or what Lonergan calls “becoming a scholar.” What are we to make of Lonergan’s common sense as he typed-out or tongued-out the forty-six words?
Now, it might appear less harsh to inquire about understanding Lonergan’s common sense than to inquire about understanding his freakish uncommon sense, but understanding the common sense of the formulator of GEM could very well be an elusive thing. Did his 1976 cast of mind include an uncommon appreciation of the “dramatic component” of “ordinary human living”? \[10\] Was the drama of his ordinary living agonized by a “labor to persuade people” and “to undo the mischief brought about by alienation and ideology”? \[11\] Did his 1976 cast of mind embrace the 1959 mind-casting “to move into the practical pattern of experience without contracting one’s horizon presupposes perfect charity,” \[12\] or the later mind-castings about “the need to speak effectively to undifferentiated consciousness,” \[13\] systematic theology being “a homely affair” and communication theology presupposing “that preachers and teachers enlarge their horizons to include an accurate and intimate understanding of the culture of the language of the people they address”? \[15\]

Suppose that Lonergan’s 1976 cast of mind included his 1968 concern, while typing chapter 7 “Interpretation” in *Method in Theology*, with the correctness of one’s interpretation, a concern that found him admonishing his readers to be mindful that “the context of the paragraph is the chapter. The context of the chapter is the book. The context of the book is the author’s *opera omnia* … his problems, prospective readers, scope and aim.” \[16\] Instead of fast-forwarding from *Method in Theology* to the lecture “Religious Knowledge,” rewind to what Lonergan had written in *Insight*:

> But it also follows that new meanings can be expressed only by transforming old modes of expression, that the greater the novelty, the less prepared the audience, the less malleable the previous mode of the expression, then the greater will be the initial gap between meaning and expression and the more prolonged will be the period of experimentation in which the new ideas are forging the tools for their own exteriorization. \[17\]

If we assume that GEM is something of a great (greater? greatest?) novelty, an intentional entity in the double-Dutch dating scene of higher and lower education in the twenty-second century, how did the problematic “gap between meaning and expression” play upon and play out in Lonergan’s writing for a less prepared prospective audience of readers?

4. Understanding Oneself

If my initial understanding of the object GEM, the words of Lonergan, his nation, language, time, culture, way of life, and cast of mind is inadequate, then in order to interpret GEM, I will need to change, grow and develop, and possibly undergo a revolution in my outlook. “This is the existential dimension of the problem of hermeneutics.” \[18\]

As I ponder (i) the object that is a tandem treating of objects and subjects; (ii) the forty-six words nested in the second of three essays on religious studies and theology; and (iii) Lonergan’s problems, way of life, scope and aim, and 1976 cast of mind, it is fairly evident that correctly understanding the formula would indeed be quite an existential achievement. Why is this? First, twofold attention requires study of some object, be it water-flows (hydrodynamics), or basic and surplus flows of goods and services (economic dynamics). This is the “scaffolding” for understanding and affirming understanding and affirming. \[19\] A familiarity with the symbols
H₂O or \( \frac{d^2s}{dt} \), or the so-called “transcendental precepts,” like a familiarity with the rules of logic, “can be obtained by a very modest effort and in a very short time,” while a change in my thinking, teaching and living emanating from “notable progress in cognitional analysis” is a whole other thing-ing.[20]

Secondly, GEM states that notable progress is to be mutually mediating. I would carry out object studies in careful self-attention to a myriad of operations – tasting, seeing, patiently loving and living the questions themselves,[21] understanding, formulating, diagramming, jumping to conclusions, reading, tongue-ing forth words in workshops, reading, writing in a diary, for an e-seminar on a blog spot, or perhaps even for publication in a journal: around and around I go, in a “slow, repetitious, circular labor of going over and over the data,” where “data” now means both sets of data – sense and consciousness.

For example, if my interest is linguistics, according to the formula I would not treat uttered or signed words, the dramatic story of Helen Keller ‘getting’ the word “water,” or the volumes of journals and books written in the area of linguistics, without taking into account myself as operating subject ‘getting’ the word “water”, i.e. ‘getting’ myself ‘getting’ the word “water”; nor would I treat of myself as operating subject without taking into account the spoken, written or signed word “water,” and the written words about written or signed words awaiting my perusal in the stacks at the library. If my interest is hydrodynamics rather than linguistics, then according to the formula my attention is still twofold. For example, I would not treat my study of water flows in physics 201 without taking into account myself as operating subject; nor would I treat myself as operating subject without taking into account the object “water” while reading hydrodynamic journals. It (GEM) would be the same two-fold method, the same praxis, if one were to go on to write a non-truncated high school hydrostatics textbook, or even a non-truncated high school economics textbook contributing to the emergence of macrodynamic economics as a science in the next one hundred years or so, and to the effective and literal delivery of sane economics “into the hills of Ghats and onto the banks of the Godavari.”[22]

Now whether I am splashing with Archimedes towards a GEMlike and un-hurried reading of the relatively simple object “displacement” on the bottom of page one of Insight,[23] struggling with the watery object “kitten” of chapter 8 of Insight, inventing “appropriate symbolic images of the relevant chemical and physical processes” of the watery plant in chapter 15, climbing at a high altitude towards a compact symbolic expression of the watery object “satire and humor” in chapter 18, or fantasizing writing high school textbooks in and for a double poise, GEM is structurally and dynamically the same.

The challenge is to read something like \( f \left( p_1 ; c_j ; b_k ; z_1 ; u_m ; r_n \right) \)[24] into my interpretation of Insight – or any other text -- so as not to miss the objects of my reading. This meta-word (W1) is convenient in so far as it helps me not to dis-embody and neuter the watery kitten or the watery satirist. Aha, “so this is what this book is about.”[25]

In order to manage the complexity of GEMly twofold attention to spoken, written or signed words as objects and the corresponding operations of subjects, we might consider some such convenient symbolism:

\[ V\{W(p_1 ; c_j ; b_k ; z_1 ; u_m ; r_n ) \} > HS \{p_1 ; c_j ; b_k ; z_1 ; u_m ; r_n \} \] [26]
This complex symbol (W2) refers to the correlating that is the extremely complex reality of human beings operating as subjects while writing, speaking or otherwise making signs. It is convenient in the sense of helping me to think-in-order-to-understand what is happening while reading, writing, or tongue-ing forth words such as “water,” “money,” or “charity.”[27] \( W(p; c; b; z; u; r) \) symbolizes the written, spoken or signed word “water” as the actuation of a capacity to write or tongue-forth that is a higher integration of lower physical, chemical, biological manifolds in the very strange human thing. > symbolizes the fact that outer written, spoken or signed words of the strange human thing, which are part of the data of sense – like the words staring you in the face as you read --, point to inner words, inner achievements, which are also actuations of a capacity that is a higher integration of lower manifolds in the strange human thing. \( H \) symbolizes the pointed-to inner words as emergent in history, while \( S \) refers to ‘the sum of things historical’ as possibly, probably or actually recurring.[28]

What would happen if I replace the object “water” with the object GEM? Now the object being treated is not the (long[29]) struggle to speak adequately about water, but rather the (long) struggle to speak adequately about a twofold method that pivots on other (long) struggles, including the struggle to speak adequately about water, sensibility and the watery sensibility of the kitten. Thus the interpretation of the GEM formula “would not be possible without the prior development of the sciences and the long clarification of more general issues by philosophic inquiries and debates.”[30] GEM is a form of double-whatting that is to be discovered in an “ongoing genesis of methods” in which GEM is experimental and “the experiment is conducted not by any individual, not by any generation, but by the historical process itself.”[31] As GEMly understanding the object “water,” “circle,” “film making,” “beer making,” “love making,” or “x” is on the move, ipso facto understanding the object GEM is emerging as well. In any and all cases, philosophical talk about subjective operations and the data of consciousness that is not mediated by knowledge of film-making, beer making, or of some other “x,” is a mockery of methodological decency.

As part of this ongoing genesis of methods, some few will self-digesting-ly[32] repeat the historical breakthrough of systematics of water in order to luminously sort out the historical sequence of water-talkings. This is not an easy task, since “the adequate sorter must know his or her stuff: understand the fully developed subject, which means the subject thus far developed, the incomplete genetic systematics of an open-ended search.”[33] The “baton pass” of this adequate sorter will eventually circle around to the interpreter in the ongoing revisions of the acquis of the dream team Cosmopolis, and since understanding of the object GEM is to emerge in an open-ended search for the sensibility of the watery kitten or watery beer making, the ongoing revisions of the acquis will yield better functional interpretations of GEM, i.e. methodological “cumulative and progressive results.” Go figure.

Final Comments

I have attempted to interpret GEM to a reader-friend. Such a listening-speaking is a very strange daily-experienced-to-be-understood, symbolized by duplicating W2 -- Jack and Jill, or James and Janet, invisible face to invisible face, double-double-treating in a double-Dutch dating that is biography meeting biography in history and her-story. Normatively speaking, the reality of teachers lovingly interpreting their students is one such double mutual-mediation. The Childout Principle, a gem of a precept, reads: “When teaching children geometry one is teaching children
We could and probably should add that “the children are teaching teachers teachers as well.” Adequate speaking and listening in kontext would be quite a sophisticated achievement, as would the “scientific collaboration, scientific control and scientific advance towards commonly accepted results” that “escapes the relativity of a manifold of interpretations to a manifold of audiences.”

Correctly interpreting the forty-six words at the top of page 141 of A Third Collection, i.e. digesting them sufficiently to achieve an appreciation of Lonergan’s inner achievement, would make all forty-six words disappear into the thin air of a post-Merleau-Ponty luminosity regarding the is-ting of concrete extensions and durations. Is this a bizarre way to think about hermeneutics, or am I merely trying to meet and cherish my friend who typed the forty-six words, biography meeting biography in history? Of course it is possible to memorize the formula and cover up not having sweatingly climbed much or at all to meet and greet my friend, nor having encouraged my students to climb thusly towards such meeting and greeting. Such memorizing and covering-up is the monster of our daily academic daze.

AND, yes, if it is any consolation to you dear reader, as I type I am sweating about a “what’s-to-be-done?” In August I will teach a course with the title “Modernity and Postmodernity.” The course syllabus includes readings from Nietzsche, Heidegger, Habermas, Foucault, Lyotard, Derrida and Lonergan, among others. My inclination is to scrap the course syllabus – which I designed five years ago!!! – and instead do simple water exercises so as to “promote the self-appropriation that cuts to the root of philosophic differences” and to “distinguish, relate, ground several realms of meaning and, no less, ground the methods of sciences and so promote their unification.” Does my crazy inclination provide an image of an axial challenge in/of/for our axial selves, oh-so neurotically hiding behind pseudo interpretations of Nietzsche, Heidegger, Lonergan et al, to get the X-show (Cosmopolis) on the road? ¡Aguas!*

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[8] “Empiricism, idealism, and realism name three totally different horizons with no common identical objects. An idealist never means what an empiricist means, and a realist never means what either of them means.” Method in Theology, p. 239.
In this section Lonergan is considering stages in the development of meaning. GEM might belong to a stage in the development of meaning that has not (yet) “become propagated and established in a cultural milieu” (611). How do we read into the “scope and aim” of GEM what thirty-three years earlier, in January of 1935 Lonergan wrote in a letter that the Catholic philosopher “always tends to express his thought in the form of a demonstration by arguing that opposed views involve a contradiction. The method is sheer make-believe but to attack a method is a grand scale operation calling for a few volumes.” Letter to Henry Keane, January 22, 1935. Archives of the Lonergan Research Institute, Toronto.

See Introduction to Insight CWL 3:20.

The reference is to Insight CWL 3:598, with a bow to the earlier chapter 8 “Things.” Also relevant is the remark by Lonergan about learning physics without understanding the calculus: “It clutters the mind.” CWL 10:145.

“You are so young, so before all beginning, and I want to beg you, as much as I can, to be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue.” Rilke on Love and Other Difficulties, trans. by John J.L. Mood, New York, W.W. Norton, 1975, 25.


McShane has written up one such slow reading in Cantower XXVII “Atoms in Motion,” http://www.philipmcshane.ca/cantower27.pdf


In the epilogue of Insight, Lonergan points to some such convenient symbolism: “The advent of absolutely supernatural solution to man’s problem of evil adds to man’s biological,
psychic, and intellectual levels of development a fourth level that includes the higher conjugate forms of faith, hope, and charity.” CWL 3:762.

[28] BHT, 120-121.

[29] The object “sensibility” is, in a sense (!), on the move, if I am “thinking of the long human struggle to understand sensibility, to mediate its possibilities in people, cultures, history, to appreciate the chrysalis of its pilgrim meaning and anticipate its eschatological glory.” Phil McShane, “Interpretation: Method 7 lifted into Canons and Collaboration II,” http://www.philipmcshane.ca/fusion-12.pdf at page 9. The same thing is true of any object “x”, be it beer making or film-making. “So, if you want to talk about the operations of film-making intelligently, you do it in the style of the new culture by being competent both in the film-making business and being competent in operations-talk: AND the competencies are a matter of mutual mediation.” Cantower 11, “Lonergan: Interpretation and History,” http://www.philipmcshane.ca/cantower11.pdf at page 13.


[32] Please, pretty please, do not be put off by the word “self-digesting-ly,” which merely points to the first half of the formula: “it does not treat of objects without taking into account the corresponding subject.”


[34] See Phil McShane, Cantower 41 “Functional Policy” http://www.philipmcshane.ca/cantower41.pdf McShane writes that reading and writing are to be luminous to the teenagers in the third stage of meaning if we can somehow make operative this Principle from womb through grade one and beyond. See Fusion 18 “Sorting Out the Second Canon of Hermeneutics” http://www.philipmcshane.ca/fusion-18.pdf at note #16.

[35] Insight CWL 3:609. The context is the canon of explanation for methodical hermeneutics. In a related context McShane writes about imaginary first and second year courses “Fusion 101” and “Fusion 201”: “Listening and speaking in context is a sophisticated achievement, and its understanding - the layered, objective of Fusion - is and was quite beyond the first year effort of tasting the fundamental orientations in oneself. With a full year course, one might get as far as noting the general problem of what I call effective telling, meeting each other, biography in history.” Phil McShane, SURF 12, “Tackling Lonergan on Interpretation,” http://www.philipmcshane.ca/SURF-12.pdf at pages 3-4.


[37] Method, 95. Another common failure, a manifestation of being shackled in and by longly cycled common sense philosophy and theology pretending to be efficient and “with it,” is to read Lonergan’s description primary and secondary function of philosophy as continuous with traditional divisions of courses, conferences, journals, seminars, and workshops. In the preface to the three lectures on religious studies and theology Lonergan explicitly states that Method in Theology was “conceived on interdisciplinary lines” (3C:113). Part of the rub of GEM is that “pure philosophy” and “pure theology” simply to do not cut it, where “cutting it” refers to the
intervention of Cosmopolis in healing our sad, unlivable lives. “From moral theorists we have to demand, along with their various other forms of wisdom and prudence, specifically economic precepts that arise out of economic process itself and promote its proper functioning.” “Healing and Creating in History,” *Macroeconomic Dynamics: An Essay in Circulation Analysis*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 199, CWL 15, 105. The university, at present, is failing in its mission to treat “this ridiculous situation” as conceived by José Ortega and Gasset: “It is a question of life and death for Europe to put this ridiculous situation to rights. And if this is to be done the university must intervene, as the university, in current affairs, treating the great themes of the day from its own point of view: cultural, professional, and scientific..... The university must assert itself as a major spiritual power, higher than the press, standing for serenity in the midst of frenzy, for seriousness and the grasp of intellect in the face of frivolity and unashamed stupidity. @ J. Ortega y Gasset, *Mission of the University*, translated with an Introduction by Howard Lee Nostrand, Princeton University Press, 1944, 98-99. Quoted in Phil McShane, “Arriving in Cosmopolis,” at page 4.

[38] “Aguas” is Spanish for “waters,” and when shouted it means “Be careful!”

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