

What it means to be human: Taking charge of your living

Kevin Liston

Mind and brain are not the same thing

This is about how our minds work – or how we use our minds. The brain is the biological organ inside our skulls. A healthy brain is required for conscious human experiencing, sensing, feeling, memory, imagining, etc. Our minds go beyond just experiencing.¹

The focus here is not on what we are thinking or deciding about (the objects), but on ourselves as agents (or subjects) of those operations. For example: What are you doing when you are knowing? This differs from the See-Judge-Act approach which is generally related to an objective situation. However, my approach parallels Cardijn's method in that both are based on patterns of experience, knowing and deciding but Cardijn's focus is on the exterior while mine is interior.

This paper is based on Bernard Lonergan's position on the pattern of our mental operations or activities what we are doing when we engage in thinking, knowing, evaluating, and deciding.² My aim is to provide a non-academic outline of the primary features of the pattern. Understanding this may require some patience, reflection and introspection and a lot of mindfulness. Grasping the full implications of the process takes effort but is highly rewarding.

The mind at work.

In broad terms, there is a pattern or structure in how our minds work (or how we work our minds). For example: How do we get from feeling pain to doing something about it?

- Experiencing. I feel a pain in my knee.
- Understanding. I look for an explanation, an insight into what is causing the pain and come up with several possible ideas. (Brainstroming)
- Judging. For each possible idea, I check the experience. Does the idea really explain the cause of the pain? I judge one idea to be the correct one. Then I know.
- Deciding. What will I do about it? I consider various courses of action and decide on one. This completes the sequence or pattern of interior operations.

¹ I use the terms 'mind' and 'mental activity' instead of Lonergan's term, 'consciousness' in this paper. Consciousness has been used in recent decades by various writers with a range of meanings different from that intended by Lonergan in the 1960-70s.

² Bernard Lonergan (1904 – 1984) was a Canadian [Jesuit](#) priest, [philosopher](#), and [theologian](#) regarded by many as one of the most important thinkers of the 20th century. His best known books are *Insight: A study in human understanding* and *Method in Theology*.

The entire sequence consists in four levels of activity – experience, understanding, judging and deciding. Each level is made up of many elements but is distinguished in terms of the key features of each level. Together the four levels constitute the overall pattern of experiencing, thinking and deciding. This pattern underpins all we do though we seldom follow it in a linear fashion in our everyday living

1. Experiencing

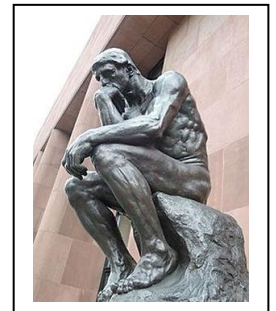
The foundation level for all mental activity is experiencing. We notice things, behaviour and events. We are mindful. Our attention is drawn to both sensory experience (see a falling building, hear a statement, touch a hot stove) and inner experience (feelings, images, memories). These are data that we attend to, are mindful of. But they have no meaning in themselves; we are just noticing them. They are just dumb data.



We spontaneously look for meaning in what we perceive. Experiences give rise to questions for us: *What is this? Why? How? What is happening?* These open questions take us to a new level of operations.

2. Understanding

Questions are answered by the “aha” moment of understanding of the data. We begin to make sense of the events the events when we have insights and interpretations. We form concepts or hypotheses. Now we have a theory to explain what we have just seen, heard or felt or as often happens, several ideas or explanations. We are being intelligent, moving into the world of meaning.

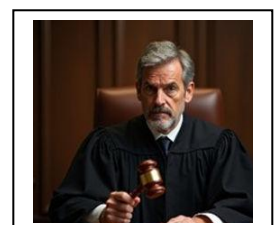


When we realise there are many possible theories or ideas that could explain the experience, another question emerges: Is there sufficient evidence for this or that theory, idea or hypothesis – closed questions looking for a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer. This requires a different kind of mental activity and moving to a new level.

3. Judging

We reflect critically on how we came to this idea. Check the evidence. Does the hypothesis explain the facts? We conclude by judging the evidence to be sufficient, affirming the truth of the idea or the correctness of the explanation – or otherwise. This is being reasonable.

With an affirmation at this level, we know. The process of knowing has come to a conclusion.



However, humans are more than knowers. We are also doers. Knowing gives rise to the question: What do we do with what we know? To answer, we must move to a fourth level and another kind of activity.

4. Deciding

Here our interior operations become existential and ethical, not merely cognitive. We are faced with options about what to do. We work out what is worthwhile, what is of value for us. Feelings, emerging from the psyche, promote often-overlooked values. We make decisions and choices that shape our lives and affect others. While our decisions are most obvious in external, observable actions, they also change and form our character over time, making us the people we are. Such choices and commitments create the one and only version of ourselves that ever will be.



EXAMPLES TO ILLUSTRATE THE PATTERN

1. A Doctor Diagnosing an Illness

Experiencing: A patient reports symptoms - fever, cough, fatigue. The doctor observes breathing, temperature, and medical history.

Understanding: The doctor asks himself, “*What could explain these symptoms?*” Possible insights arise: influenza, pneumonia, COVID-19.

Judging: After reviewing test results and evidence, the doctor concludes: “*The most probable diagnosis is pneumonia.*”

Deciding: The doctor prescribes antibiotics and a treatment plan.

2. You Hear a Strange Noise at Night

Experiencing: You hear a loud noise in the kitchen.

Understanding: You wonder: “*What caused that?*” Perhaps the cat knocked something over, or a window blew open.

Judging: You check the kitchen, see a fallen pan and conclude: ‘*The cat caused it.*’

Deciding: You move the pan and close the cupboard so it cannot happen again.

3. A Moral Decision

Experiencing: You notice a colleague being unfairly criticised in a meeting.

Understanding: You ask yourself: “*What is happening here?*” You realise the criticism is based on misinformation.

Judging: You conclude that the accusation is unfair.

Deciding: You speak up to clarify the facts and defend the colleague.

Rules of thumb.

The rules inherent in each level are:

- Be attentive
- Be intelligent
- Be reasonable
- Be responsible

The pattern forms a structure. Success on one level leads to questions that can be resolved only on a higher level. Operations on each level build on the lower level. They inter-relate and work together for the positive functioning of the whole person. The pattern is intentional in that it articulates and implements direction in our lives. It is oriented towards the full flourishing of human potential.

Mind and spirit

With insight, understanding, conceptualising, we enter the world of the non-material. Concepts, ideas and decisions are real. They exist but are not tangible. They cannot be found in the brain. This is the realm of spirit. We need a brain in order to understand and form concepts. Brain activity is related to mental activity but it is the necessary infrastructure, not the mind itself.

Over time, consciously and unconsciously, through the mental activities described above and feelings of love and hate, attraction and fear, bonding and care, etc. We form and develop our minds and our selves until we become the persons we are now: spirit-body humans.

Structure and intentionality

Our human-ness expands as we move from one level to another. In experiencing we are aware of ourselves as sentient beings, vulnerable to events beyond our control. With insight, we discover ideas and concepts about who we are. As we make reasonable judgements, we affirm ourselves as knowers. Finally, with discernment, decisions and commitment, we form and become conscious of ourselves as mature, responsible persons. This is what it means to be human.

Understanding the operations of consciousness provides a structure that facilitates reflection on the patterns, quality and effectiveness of our living and feelings that prompt worthwhile values.

Self-making

This pattern of conscious operations is not just a theory to be understood and conceptualised but a real structure that is open to being observed in the operations of each one of us. To appreciate the full value of the system, we must pay attention to how it works in us - attend to our mind's functions and identify them as we perform them. This requires mindfulness and takes practice. Keep your focus on what you, the agent, are doing, not on the matter you are dealing with. Having an insight or 'getting it' is one thing; knowing what is happening as you 'get it' is something else. These are real events happening in real time in real people – you and me. without paying attention to the experience of, for instance insight, understanding it and affirming it with evidence – your own inner experience - as real, it remains a theory. Choosing it as a value in your living, makes it is consciously existential for you.

Conclusion

Appreciation of the structure of your mind is not about me. It is about you, the reader. Understanding, affirming what it is to be the person you are, means identifying the activities and operations that make you human – then living what you know. Self-reflection is required and you are the only person with direct access to your self.

Spirituality in our times is more personal and individuated than ever. As the credibility and authority of institutions, including the church, weakens, becoming familiar with our interior functioning offers a foundation and direction. The pattern of operations of our minds reveals an orientation and intentionality towards the fulfillment of human potential that points beyond the human as, for the open-minded, there is no limit to human aspiration. We are in the realm of an unrestricted horizon and open to God.

Questions for reflection

1. How have you noticed how you operate on the four levels of mental activities (experiencing, understanding, judging, deciding) in a concrete situation in your own life, and what did that reveal about how you actually come to know and choose?
2. In what ways do Lonergan's imperatives "Be attentive, Be intelligent, Be reasonable, Be responsible" affirm, challenge, or expand the way you usually approach moral or spiritual decisions?
3. As institutions lose some of their authority in shaping our spirituality, how might paying closer attention to your interior operations offer you a more personal, credible path in finding criteria or guides for personal growth and your relationship with God or your sense of ultimate meaning?

Further questions: What it means to be human - Applying these concepts

- How does being aware of these mental **patterns** enable you to be more intentional? How does it affect your sense of agency?
- What has been going on in **your mind** as you read or reflect on this paper?
- What is the difference between **seeing** something and **understanding** it?
- When you struggled with a problem and suddenly said, '**Aha, I get it?**' What changed in that moment of insight?
- What is the link between a) the mind or mental activity and b) spirituality and theology?