

Book Review

Transforming Conflict through Insight
by Kenneth R. Melchin and Cheryl A. Picard
Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2008



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This book adopts an approach that focuses on conflict resolution as learning. As the authors, both based in Ottawa, put it, ‘resolving conflict leaves us as changed in subtle but important ways’ (p. 4). They ground their approach in the work of the Canadian philosopher Bernard Lonergan, whose work on the structure of cognition emphasises the role that insight plays in the process of human knowing. Like Lonergan, who approaches the subject of knowing from the perspective of the person engaging in the recognisable operations of knowing, the authors approach the topic of conflict and mediation from the perspective of the person and the intersubjective engagement in conversation to resolve conflict. The authors take learning as a process of insight, discovery and shifts in feeling, perspectives and relationships that accompany those experiences and so develop a perspective that seeks insight into situations of conflict and mediation.

The structure of human knowing is a three-step process: experience, understanding and judgement. Experience occurs on the empirical level of consciousness and is an interaction of inner and outer events. We can not only see, hear, smell, taste and touch, imagine, remember, feel and think, but we can also experience ourselves as seeing, hearing, thinking, feeling, remembering and imagining. Sensory data are what we experience but do not yet understand, and so we ask questions. What is this? What does this mean? Answers to such ques-

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tions come in the form of insights, which are in Lonergan's view creative acts of understanding, of grasping and formulating patterns, unities, relationships and explanations in response to questions posed to our experience, as instanced in the act of doing crossword puzzles (p. 51). Insights are common and remain as mere insights until they are tested and verified. So, we move to a new level of the cognition process, where we marshal and weigh evidence and assess its sufficiency through judgement.

Chapter 2 reviews the literature on conflict, for example through the lenses of interest theory and human needs theory, and discusses the role and models of mediation, such as game theory, as a response to conflict. Chapter 3 provides a concise and informative introduction to Lonergan's account of human knowing and focuses particularly on the role of insight. For readers who seek a basic introduction to Lonergan's philosophy that is readable and free from the typically obscure and abstract language that often accompanies summaries of philosophers' work, this chapter is excellent.

Chapter 4 is the central chapter of the book and here the authors apply insight theory to mediation in a very practical way that reflects their own work in the Centre for Conflict Education and Research at Carleton University, Ottawa. Their approach has been well-tested in the field and they demonstrate how it focuses on fruitful conversation between protagonists in conflict. They outline a five-step iterative process: attend to process, broaden understanding, deepen insights, explore possibilities and make decisions. They note that this approach reflects responsive intentionality as conflict resolution is about learning about others' experience and understanding. Hence they place such value on engaging in conversation in order to explore how others experience, understand and judge events around which there is conflict.

Chapter 5 provides two extensive case examples and is followed by a short concluding chapter that explores links between conflict, mediation and democratic life. There are extensive notes, a bibliography and an index.

It is not possible to present the richness of this book in such a short review. While it is a readable book that is aimed at both an academic and a practitioner readership, it is also rich philosophically, reflecting an approach to conflict resolution that is grounded in Lonergan

and which builds links to Habermas on deliberative democracy and Mezirow's transformative learning theory. The authors' closing words provide their sense of the broader context of their work and their ambitions for their work:

Conflict presents challenges for our personal relations, our justice institutions and our involvement in democracy. Citizens play a significant role in resolving these conflicts. We offer these explorations in the hope that learning becomes a topic in the field of conflict studies. We believe that Insight Theory can be helpful in furthering conversations in the field and Insight Mediation can advance democracy's work of transforming conflict through insight (p. 130).

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