

A Lonerganian Narrative of Political Decline and Retrieval
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In both *Topics in Education*ⁱ and in 'Natural Right and Historical Mindedness'ⁱⁱ Lonergan outlines complementary accounts of the 'dialectic of history'ⁱⁱⁱ that distinguishes between stages, 'plateaus'^{iv} or 'levels of integration'^v in the development of human meaning, and 'differentials' such as progress, decline and redemption that modify the former.^{vi} The criterion of the latter differentials is specified by the notion of nature as an immanent principle of movement and rest, the source and norm, operative prior to objectification, of all social, cultural and personal development.^{vii} According to Lonergan, the way in which individuals apprehend and respond to this orientation to self-transcendence is modified by the development of human meaning in general and by the emergence of four stages, levels or structural achievements in particular.^{viii}

Initially, the ongoing development of practical intelligence or common sense shifts the primitive community's focus from the isolated satisfaction of particular needs to the variety of intelligently-designed 'goods of order' that set the conditions of possibility for the recurring realization and distribution of particular goods.^{ix} Lonergan associates this development of common sense or instrumental reason with the emergence and evolution of society and distinguishes the ongoing development of social meaning from 'reflective' development or the development of culture.^x Lonergan draws a further distinction between pre-reflexive forms of culture constituted by an implicit or non-objectified set of values and meanings^{xi} and superstructural forms whose emergence Lonergan ties to the birth of classical culture, the 'second plateau' correlative with the 'the emergence of individualism,' 'the intellectual pattern of experience' or the 'Greek achievement' c. 500 BCE.^{xii} The emergence of the third stage or plateau in the development of human meaning and consciousness occurs initially in the early modern period as the rise of modern science and the modern 'turn to the subject' shift the

starting point of philosophy from metaphysics to epistemology or from substance to an explicit analysis of consciousness.^{xiii} The fourth development, a subdivision of the third stage or plateau, is associated with the rise of historical consciousness, the shift from a classical to empirical notion of culture and the contemporary exigency to discover an alternative higher level control of meaning in the wake of classical culture's breakdown.^{xiv}

According to Lonergan, the way in which individuals respond to or negotiate these structural developments varies widely.^{xv} Relative recognition of and fidelity to the subject's *a priori* basic horizon provides a criterion for distinguishing positional or authentic from inauthentic or counter-positional expressions or responses. A basic subdivision of counter-positionality arises when one distinguishes between deficiencies in cognitive or existential self-appropriation that underlie otherwise authentic living, and operations that proceed in the absence of moral or religious conversion whose cover-stories may include reference to modified variations of the former. In what little time I have left I would like to develop a selective narrative of what Lonergan calls 'philosophic development,'^{xvi} an exemplification of the dialectic of history whose specific focus can provide tools for comprehending and responding to the irrational character of much contemporary political discourse.^{xvii}

The first stage in my narrative centers on the Augustinian-Aristotelian controversy, the rejection of the Thomistic or medieval synthesis in the aftermath of the condemnations of 1277 and the resulting rise of intuitionism and voluntarism in the work of authors such as Scotus and Ockham. Intuitionism combines two cognitional oversights, an overemphasis on propositional first principles and deductive logic with a naïve realist construal of existential knowledge. The former stems from an inability to identify the intelligent source of concepts in direct insight, an error that confines its proponents to producing conclusions within an excessively abstract and

historically-immobile conceptual system.^{xviii} A useful way to highlight the cultural implications of this neglect of direct insight is to focus on the distinction that Lonergan draws between the classical control of meaning and its subsequent ‘classicist’ degeneration.^{xix} If proponents of the classical ideal and its pejoratively classicist expression both conceive the immanent norm of development in propositional and abstract metaphysical terms,^{xx} the classicist remains constitutionally incapable of responding to the exigencies associated with the rise of probabilistic science and historical consciousness. By conceiving judgment as a tool for the manipulation of concepts, classicists typically compound their inattention to direct insight with a corresponding neglect of reflective insight that reveals a second, complementary dimension to the intuitionist conviction that knowing is analogous to ‘looking.’ Just as intuitionism arises as a result of an overreaction to the perceived limitations of an Aristotelian-Thomist account of human knowing, voluntarist reinterpretations of the relationship between intellect and will arise as an exaggerated response to the purported deficiencies of an Aristotelian-Thomist account of moral knowing and choosing. The tendency to conceive divine and or human freedom as ‘unfettered’ choice results, on the one hand, in divine command theories of obligation that conflict with commitments to classicist notions of natural law and, on the other hand, in libertarian conceptions of human freedom whose lack of intrinsic criterion reduces the basis for compliance with divine law to fear of punishment.

The second stage in my narrative of philosophic development focuses on the way in which the evolution of intuitionist and voluntarist themes distort negotiations of the modern turn to the subject in the empiricism of Hobbes and Locke and the transcendental idealism of Kant. All three authors in similar albeit significantly different ways combine a pejoratively classicist construal of scientific theory and culture with some variation of ‘picture-thinking.’ At the same

time, voluntarist presuppositions combine with empiricist and idealist variations of intuitionism to condition the possibility of two opposed accounts of early modern liberalism. On the one hand, in Hobbes and to a lesser extent in Locke, one finds expressions of the ‘general bias of common sense,’ a truncation of the human good that represents an intermediate stage in the ‘longer cycle of decline.’^{xxi} Both authors combine a sensitive or experiential criterion of ‘good’ with a voluntarist conception of obligation that conceives laws as authoritatively sanctioned expressions of instrumental reason designed to serve mutual self-interest in a distinctively ‘sensate’ civilization.^{xxii} Forced to adapt to and provide a rationalization for this truncated vision of the subject and society, the cultural superstructure inevitably loses its independence or its critical capacity.^{xxiii} On the other hand, Kant retains the late medieval conception of categorical obligation but identifies the source of moral commands conceived in classicist terms with a purely *a priori*, fully rational and autonomous will. Kant’s concomitant emphasis on human dignity helps shape an alternative form of liberalism that is superior in many respects to crude forms of empiricism. However, Kant’s classicist construal of moral knowledge, rationalist account of moral motivation and lingering commitment to individualism inappropriately downplays the role that contingency, affectivity and communal self-understanding play in the decision-making process.

The third and final stage in my narrative of philosophic development focuses on the rise of historical consciousness. The emergence of postmodernity has called into question classicist and naïve realist expressions of intuitionism as well as early modern empiricist and rationalist forms of individualism. On the one hand, post-modern emphases on the tradition-constituted or context-dependent character of human knowing and choosing and on respect for a multiplicity of conceptions of the good are to be commended. On the other hand, the typical post-modern

inability to adequately differentiate between positional and counter-positional expressions of classical culture and the modern turn to the subject may lead, in the limit case, to an exaggerated rejection of any and all transcultural norms. Despite their best efforts to avoid charges of relativism, post-modern communitarians and post-metaphysical liberals' tendency to reduce human subjectivity to a product of socialization impugns their capacities to account for conceptual innovation and debate, both intra- and inter-traditional, in critically post-conventional terms. Their project succeeds in relativizing neo-liberal and post-Kantian forms of proceduralism in contemporary discourse but at the price of reducing the basis for choosing between all options to irrational choice, a conclusion that represents, ironically, a terminal expression of voluntarism.

Where do we go from here? It's no coincidence that my narrative started with the Thomistic synthesis because in some basic sense the basis of a response to the contemporary problematic resides there as well. More specifically, it is Lonergan's contention that the objectification of Aquinas' largely latent account of human knowing and choosing provides an immanent criterion that simultaneously negotiates the modern turn to the subject in positional ways and provides open-ended foundations compatible with historicity. According to Lonergan, personal self-appropriation sets the conditions of possibility for genuinely critical post-conventional dialogue by shifting the control of meaning from *a posteriori* tradition-dependent norms to the *a priori* source and norm of social, cultural and personal development immanent in human consciousness.^{xxiv} In my judgment, the heuristic account of human fulfillment correlative with the subject's *a priori* basic horizon provides a non-classicist or historically-conscious account of natural law, a thin conception of the good implicit in democratic reason-exchange whose objectification yields the more specific cultural and traditionally liberal emphases on critical reflection, self-determination, equality, mutual respect, and tolerance. The religious

correlative of this heuristic account of human fulfillment would focus on the objectification of norms that counsel religious freedom and mutual respect between adherents of different faiths grounded in the transcultural features of conscious intentional striving and religious experiencing. The dual aspects of this thin conception of the good govern the public discussion between individuals who hold alternative thick conceptions of human fulfillment, whether religious or non-religious, and provides, even in the absence of widespread agreement concerning such thick commitments, a shared starting point for negotiating the dialectic of community in ways that serve the basic life necessities of all members of a particular community. Although individuals may appeal to their thick commitments in this reconstituted public sphere, since the truth of such historical claims is never more than at best highly probable no thick account of human fulfillment may supersede the heuristic account or, in the case of religious claims, abolish the separation of church and state. From this perspective, what distinguishes the religious believer from non-believers who may both stand committed to a ‘universal humanism’ is her commitment to articulating the role and significance a purely heuristic notion of redemption plays in strengthening commitment to democratic norms.

ⁱ See Bernard Lonergan, “The Human Good as Object: Differentials and Integration,” and “The Human Good as Developing Subject,” in *Topics in Education*, ed. Robert M. Doran and Frederick E. Crowe (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 2000).

ⁱⁱ Bernard Lonergan, “Natural Right and Historical Mindedness,” in *A Third Collection: Papers by Bernard J.F. Lonergan S.J.*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe (New York: Paulist Press, 1985).

ⁱⁱⁱ Lonergan, “Differentials,” 50-57, 71-78.

^{iv} Lonergan, “Natural Right,” 176-178. Lonergan distinguishes between three plateaus.

^v *Ibid.*, 176-182.

^{vi} Lonergan, “Differentials,” 50-67.

^{vii} Lonergan, “Natural Right,” 172-175.

^{viii} These four stages include: the emergence of society via intellectual development; the emergence of classical culture via reflective development; the modern turn to the subject; and the rise of historical consciousness.

^{ix} Lonergan, “Differentials,” 73-74. Bernard Lonergan, “Human Good as Object: Invariant Structure,” 33-36.

^x Lonergan, “Differentials,” 54-57, 71-73. Lonergan, “Invariant,” 37-38.

^{xi} Lonergan, “Differentials,” 73-74.

^{xii} Lonergan, “Differentials,” 74-76, 55-57. Lonergan, “Natural Right,” 177. Lonergan, “Developing,” 87.

^{xiii} Lonergan, “Developing,” 80-82. Lonergan, “Natural Right,” 178-179. The distinction between the turn to the subject, historical consciousness and the resulting need for self-appropriation are not clearly distinguished here. Nonetheless, on my reading one might distinguish an initial turn to interiority in the modern rise of epistemology

and its commitment to the classical control of meaning from the subsequent rise of probabilistic science and historical consciousness.

^{xiv} Lonergan, "Differentials," 76-78. Lonergan, "Natural Right," 170-171.

^{xv} See Lonergan on the topic of 'Philosophic Development' in Lonergan, "Developing," 95-96. See also Lonergan, "Natural Right," 178-180, where he speaks of a second plateau negotiation of the exigencies proper to the third plateau, about other aberrational developments of the latter, and about the general lack of one or more forms of conversion.

^{xvi} Lonergan, "Developing," 95-96.

^{xvii} Lonergan, "Natural Right," 180. My effort is in line with what Lonergan terms the 'critique of our historicity.' The focus will be on exploring the relationship between 'general critical principles' and the modified four-stage 'basic division of the materials' I have outlined above.

^{xviii} See Bernard Lonergan, "The Subject," in *A Second Collection*, ed. William F. Ryan and Bernard J. Tyrell (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1996) and Bernard Lonergan, *Verbum: Word and Idea in Aquinas*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1997).

^{xix} See my "Conceptualism, Classicism and Lonergan's Retrieval of Aquinas," *Pacifica: Australasian Journal of Theology*, 26 (1) (2013): 37-58. Lonergan and many of his interpreters typically distinguish the *de facto* differentiation of pre-critical from 'classical' culture correlative with the birth of the cultural superstructure – a genuine achievement or instance of progress in the history of thought – from the 'haute vulgarization' of theory, a degeneration of the classical ideal that Lonergan came to describe in pejorative terms as 'classicist.' Lonergan at least hints at this distinction in "Differentials," 75-76.

^{xx} See Mark Morelli, "Obstacles to the Implementation of Lonergan's Solution to the Contemporary Crisis of Meaning," in *The Importance of Insight: Essays in Honour of Michael Vertin*, ed. John J. Liptay and David S. Liptay (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 2007), 30. Lonergan typically associates the medieval expression of the classical form of culture that emerges in the wake of the 'Greek discovery of mind' with five features: '(1) control of meaning and expression by a logic; (2) scientific inquiry of the Aristotelian type; (3) the metaphysical soul;...(4) a fixed and unchanging human nature; and (5)...a foundation consisting of propositions that are to be regarded as self-evident, necessary first principles.'

^{xxi} Bernard Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1992), 250-251, 253-257, 262. Lonergan conceives this cycle as a product of 'sin as aberration' in "Differentials," 65.

^{xxii} Lonergan, "Invariant Structure," 42, 45-47.

^{xxiii} Lonergan, *Insight*, 255-257, 262. Lonergan, "Differentials," 65.

^{xxiv} Lonergan, "Invariant," 38. One might associate this development with the fully reflective emergence of 'ethical' or 'personal' value. See also the shift from 'essence to ideal' in "Developing," 80-81. See also Lonergan on moral development in "Developing," 100, where he describes the transition from a conventional to a post-conventional moral stance.