

# METHOD

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## “CLASSICIST CULTURE”: THE UTILITY AND LIMITS OF AN IDEAL- TYPE<sup>1</sup>

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“CLASSICIST CULTURE” is an ideal-type Lonergan formulated retrospectively, based on his experience of pre-Vatican II Catholic culture, which for centuries had largely been in a siege mentality against the assault of “modern culture” (where at the turn of the twentieth century the arch heresy became “modernism”). Immediately we may wonder at its utility for philosophical analysis, since the retrospective formulation was made almost forty years ago and subsequently Catholic culture has fragmented into various streams, including large currents of a “scattered left” caught up with now this modern innovation and now this post-modern innovation. And all along, this “classicist culture” seemed a relic of an earlier age. What value does the examination of “classicist culture” have for us today?

First, we must consider that “classicist culture” is an ideal-type, which offers not an exhaustive description of reality but a set of intelligible relations that sheds light on a discernible pattern. It is an historical construct specifically in the field of intellectual history, a field that grasps major trends of thought and identifies the basic assumptions – ultimately philosophical – that define intellectual horizons. The work of intellectual history allows us

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1 This was first presented as a paper at the West Coast Methods Institute and Fallon Memorial Lonergan Symposium at Loyola Marymount University, April 3, 2008. It also incorporates some material from Thomas J. McPartland, “Meaning, Mystery, and the History of Consciousness,” in *Lonergan Workshop 7*, ed. Fred Lawrence (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 203-367, which is substantially the same as chapter. 4 in Thomas J. McPartland, *Lonergan and historiography: The Epistemological and Speculative Philosophies of History* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, forthcoming).

to reflect on history with critical tools so that we can examine the trends and assumptions in light of the dialectic of progress and decline. We can, then, develop "positions" consonant with cognitive, moral, and spiritual authenticity and reverse "counter positions" at odds with cognitive, moral, and spiritual authenticity. This, of course, is a reflection of our historicity, a notion at variance with "classicist culture." But "classicist culture" is a trend in intellectual history that is also part of the history of consciousness, with its themes of differentiations of consciousness and attendant radical horizon shifts. The ideal-type of "classicist culture" must be seen as a component of the ideal-type of the Age of Theory in the history of consciousness. We may live in a world after the Age of Theory (namely, the Age of Interiority), but since we are dealing precisely with ideal-types, we need to understand the achievement and limits of the Age of Theory and the role of "classicist culture" so that we do not underestimate the recurrent appeal of "classicist culture" in some form. And to appreciate the problems of the present age we need to consider that the history of consciousness deals with differentiations of consciousness that pose the historical challenge of integration. If "classicist culture" is inadequate to the task of integration, we need to know what is to be integrated and how "classicist culture" is fundamentally inadequate.

Let us consider, first, the relation of the ideal types of the "age of theory" and "classicist culture," second, the utility of the ideal-types, and, third, the problem of differentiation and integration.

### 1. THE AGE OF THEORY AND CLASSICIST CULTURE

The Age of Theory achieved a revolutionary new understanding of basic horizon. The discovery of the human mind as a noetic and spiritual center, particularly in ancient Hellas, implied human responsibility for the creation and maintenance of civilization; the differentiation of both theoretical and

religious consciousness stressed individual responsibility and, within that context, emphasized a new, positive ideal of freedom.<sup>2</sup>

A number of factors, however, blunted the edge of a theoretical control of meaning so as to obscure the understanding of basic horizon and preclude satisfactory awareness of human historicity. In the first place, according to Lonergan, the humanist tradition of Isocrates, repelled by the technical achievements of philosophy, stepped in and obliterated the difference between the world of common sense and the world of theory. This strand of humanism, spreading from Greece to Rome and from antiquity to the later Middle Ages and the Renaissance, marveled at the fact of language and traced all aspects of culture to man's power of speech and persuasion. Being educated linguistically and becoming human it considered as interchangeable.<sup>3</sup>

Secondly, thinkers in the Age of Theory, who labored under a Greek conception of the physical universe that either attributed mind to the cosmos as a whole or at least held the beings of the celestial realm to be more intelligent than humans, tended, conversely, to ascribe to human history the qualities of a natural process.<sup>4</sup> A distinction between nature and history was not sufficiently articulated. The philosophy of history in antiquity failed to appreciate adequately the radically temporal dimension of human existence, while medieval theologies of history tended to regard Providence too much as a kind of natural force.

Thirdly - a point Lonergan stresses forcefully - the very advance of theoretical understanding also bred an excessive fascination with concepts, with logic, with the necessary, the immutable, the certain, with the end

2 Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *A Second Collection*, ed. William F. J. Ryan and Bernard J. Tyrell (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), 226. Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*, trans. Gilbert Highet (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1943), 2.357, argues that Plato created the early European idea of the free human personality. The *Orestes Trilogy* of Aeschylus perhaps represented a new awareness of the human personality in terms of both intellectual and psychological development. On the psychological level, Orestes attained a differentiation of his own ego against the forces that would prevent his individuation. Erich Neumann, *The Origins and History of Consciousness*, trans. R. F. C. Hull (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 1.186-89.

3 Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Collection*. Vol. 4 of *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, ed. F. E. Crowe. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), 260; Bernard J.F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 97.

4 Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, 5th ed., *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, vol. 3, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 129.