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Introduction

At the Level of our Time

In the original unpublished preface to *Insight*, Lonergan quoted the admonition of the Spanish philosopher and existentialist José Ortega y Gasset who wrote that one must “strive to mount to the level of one’s time.”¹ Lonergan used this imperative to justify *Insight*’s ambitious scope. Lonergan did not see thinking at the level of one’s time as an arbitrary preference for novelty. It is, rather, a deliberate, at times painstaking attempt to recover the source at the heart of things. When Lonergan wrote that first preface in 1953, it is clear he thought that the level of our time is at best uneven. A new context, certainly, but one defined by increasing instability owing to the admixture of error and insight, decline and progress, bias and self-transcendence. Such a situation often leads to limited horizons and truncated subjects standing—and thinking and acting—within them. When we examine ourselves within this situation, we reach a paradoxical appraisal of our own human capacity:

For it is the paradox of man that what he is by nature is so much less than what he can become; and it is the tragedy of man that the truth, which portrays him as actually he is, can descend like an iron curtain to frustrate what he would and might be.²

In other words, we are beset by a persistent temptation to conclude that we can be no more intelligent, no more reasonable, and no more responsible than we already are. We take for granted that our identity is something already given, permanent, and in need of defense, rather than a site of responsibility for actions that contribute to development or failures that initiate decline. This is not only an existential problem of personal self-transcendence, but also a problem of structural limitation and transcendence. We awake to inquiry already amidst a situation that frames—even if it never quite determines—our curiosity and attention. From such situatedness arises our native dispositions shared by (and in many ways constituting) our communities. These communities can both inhibit and promote our self-transcendence in a variety of ways. The ongoing task of self-transcendence, therefore, is doubly burdensome because it always requires simultaneously a critical appraisal of oneself and one's environment: the disciplining of one's desire to know and personal freedom as well as the augmentation of one's community, one's culture, one's tradition.

The contemporary context described by Lonergan is also characterized by a renewed appreciation of the fact that human knowledge develops and that many of its most stable attainments are still likely to undergo further modification. In his original preface, Lonergan notes that the renaissance and scientific revolutions ushered in new forms of knowledge and new methods for attaining them, but the initial spirit of bold confidence in the mastery of knowledge and nature gradually gave way to a more sober appraisal as initial insights, scientific theories, art forms, and cultural expressions were either transformed beyond recognition or rejected. He writes:

That new world has been realized, but the ideas that fostered its genesis have been discredited by its maturity. What was so new has become so old.³

So it is that a new world has been bequeathed us and yet we, the heirs of the Renaissance, have been denied its spirit of bold

confidence, of venturesome assurance. For we know too much in too many fields, we have witnessed too much suffering in too many unexpected quarters, to purchase confidence by an easy exuberance of feeling or to accept words of assurance without answers to our questions.⁴

And so we have seen the naïve account of knowledge as a simple, if in some ways mysterious, confrontation between the mind and reality rendered untenable in science as well as art: Einstein revises Galileo, Heisenberg revises La Place, Picasso revises Velásquez, and the list could continue indefinitely. On account of these developments we suffer “widespread disorientation” from, at one and the same time, too many answers and too few.

Lonergan’s response to this situation was to identify the conditions for collaboration between different fields of knowledge. This required recovering the human person as an agent of truth, someone to whom the world is given as vulnerable to intelligent inquiry as well as someone for whom truth can be achieved. The fundamental condition for collaboration in the search for knowledge—the source at the heart of things—resides in the thinking and choosing subject. Thinking at the level of one’s time, therefore, requires a new philosophical anthropology rooted in a new cognitional theory.

The present volume presents a series of articles and reviews that show the enduring fruitfulness of Lonergan’s proposal. The application of his generalized empirical method and the use of its categories of analysis continue to help us question more pervasively, understand more comprehensively, judge and decide more responsibly. Thinking at the level of our time is not only a question of method, but also, as Lonergan saw clearly, of sustained and creative collaboration across diverse and growing fields of knowledge. That collaboration is evidenced here.

In our first article, Dr. Jeremy Wilkins asks Lonergan’s question about the conditions for collaboration in relation to a functioning democracy and the role of a Christian community within that democracy. Both communities—the democratic and the Christian—presuppose a

functioning civil conversation as their condition of possibility. When this breaks down, what results is a civil war of words that ushers in a dialectic of delegitimation, each side of the other, in which the essential policies of one partisan group are the precise cause of its delegitimation according to the other. According to Wilkins, a main reason for the breakdown in our civil discourse in our time is that it is conducted under two different, mutually exclusive moral languages: expressive and possessive individualism. At the same time, each language is also a dialect of the more encompassing language of American individualism. We are thus doubly indemnified against conversion by a “moral monolingualism” that constricts our horizons and thereby the scope of our imagination and the range of our moral action. Wilkins argues that, rightly understood and practiced, Christianity has something to offer our present situation precisely because it holds the moral language of any place and time only in relative authority to the language of Christ. It proposes a more capacious vision of the human good than either of the vernaculars of American individualism. Christian participation in a democracy requires a renewed commitment to the virtues of inquiry and conversation. Such a commitment would make Christians into “ambassadors of reconciliation.”

In our second article, Dr. Michael Stebbins shifts our attention from the political to the economic sphere of life. He argues that in the sphere of business and economics, correct understanding is essential to ethical business practice and therefore also to understanding and experiencing one’s work as a vocation. It is not enough to mean well. We must actually understand what the right thing is in order to do it. Thus, the pursuit of correct understanding “is an essential leadership task.” Stebbins illustrates the various ways business leaders are led to make the wrong decisions because of underlying cognitive distortions or inadequacies. Ultimately, Stebbins argues that cultivating our attentiveness to the desire to know is one way to experience work as a vocation. Our work offers us daily opportunities to discover and heed this fundamentally orienting desire. This can make our work into a spiritual exercise, helping us discover a vocation in the daily realities of life. It reveals an ongo-

ing call to greater understanding and a route to greater love, the very stuff of our participation in God's redemption of the world.

From culture and politics to professional vocation, we move next to modern religious history and Christian self-understanding in Dr. John Dadosky's article. Dadosky offers a rereading of Lonergan's introduction to his second great work, *Method in Theology*, in light of the prerogatives of the Second Vatican Council and in particular its call to "read the signs of the times." Dadosky interprets this in light of two conciliar concerns also addressed in *Method*: the modern fragmentation of knowledge and the need for a renewed foundational theology in an age of pluralism. To address these concerns, Dadosky analyzes the mediating role of theology and Lonergan's empirical notion of culture, showing their enduring relevance for a theology at the level of one's time.

Our fourth article is written by our founding editor, Msgr. Richard Liddy. It commemorates the recent beatification of St. John Henry Newman. In charting Newman's intellectual and spiritual influences, Liddy unfolds for us Newman's understanding of the university as a place of encounter, as well as the lifelong nature of conversion. Liddy goes on to show one strand of Newman's lasting influence in the thought of Bernard Lonergan, who provided a systematic account of Newman's ideas of interiority and assent. Liddy's presentation results in a fresh appreciation for this new saint as particularly relevant to the questions of learning and interiority at the level of our time.

Lastly, Dr. John Laracy offers us an essay in systematic theology aiming to explain and relate the trinitarian thought of two great theologians of our time, Bernard Lonergan and Hans Urs von Balthasar. Laracy argues that each approach has something to offer the other. Balthasar offers a consideration of God as Trinity in light of "the economy of redemption," while Lonergan offers a consideration of God as Trinity in light of the "Augustinian-Thomistic 'psychological analogy.'" Laracy traces the influence of Lonergan's dynamic account of consciousness on his particular understanding of the psychological analogy. Laracy looks further to *Method in Theology* and Lonergan's later statements on the importance of love to provide new insights into the nature of the triune God.

We are fortunate to have two responses to Dr. Laracy's essay. Dr. Jeremy Blackwood, a scholar of Lonergan, and Dr. D. C. Schindler, a scholar of von Balthasar, both suggest there is value in a renewed consideration of these trinitarian systems and, naturally, raise some further pertinent questions.

Endnotes

- 1 E. E. Crowe, "A Note on the Prefaces of *Insight*" in *Method: Journal of Lonergan Studies*, vol 3.1, 4.
- 2 Crowe, "The Prefaces of *Insight*," 3.
- 3 Crowe, "The Prefaces of *Insight*," 4.
- 4 Crowe, "The Prefaces of *Insight*," 5.

