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Method in History

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I knew that if I we were going to have anything more than a heap, I would have to write a book on method.¹

For many “history” is a subject in school. It is “something out there” – on the page, in the books - about which one takes certain classes. For others it is “just the facts” – what’s obvious, what’s not dependent on intellect. For others it is a constantly changing human construct totally dependent on political considerations – constantly being re-written according to who is in power.

Bernard Lonergan had another understanding, however, one rooted in our radical historicity that explained how all these misconceptions can arise. For everything we do as human beings is historical. We are radically historical beings long before we begin to write books about it.

And so there is a process from historical experience to historical knowledge by way of the critical history that has arisen during the last several centuries. The notion of “method in history.” therefore, emerges as we reflect on various kinds of history. We will begin our reflections, then, by first reflecting on the notion of method; secondly, on the notion of method in history; and finally, on the various notions of “history” among historians. Our conclusion will be that there are various operative notions of history among historians, that is, various historical methods they employ, not all of them adequate to the subject they undertake to study.

1. What is “method?”

According to Lonergan, method is the human spirit itself insofar as it works well and thus is able to produce results. One of Lonergan’s major points is the human spirit is capable of knowing itself as methodical, as being able to produce results by following its built-in dynamism of intelligence, rationality and responsibility articulated in the transcendental precepts: Be attentive! Be intelligent! Be reasonable! Be responsible!

Such a process of self-understanding, of knowing oneself as an interiorly called to be intelligent, reasonable, rational and responsible, Lonergan calls self-appropriation. The result of such self-appropriation is a conversion, an intellectual conversion to knowing oneself, as interiorly methodical, that is, as oriented to meaning, truth, reality, value.

But such a conversion, though intensely personal, is not necessarily solitary. It unites us to others in the common pursuit of all that is intelligible, all that is true, all that is valuable. Speaking of a heightening of one’s self-awareness, Lonergan once wrote:

It is not personal in a merely individual sense: it is not exhibitionism on the part of the speaker...It is what the Germans call a Bessinnung, a becoming aware, a growth in self-consciousness, a heightening of one’s self-appropriation, that is possible because our separate, unrevealed, hidden cores have a common circle of
reference, the human community, and an ultimate point of reference, which is God, who is all in all…

So it is that method raises the profile of the individual by his or her participation in a group that is communally acting methodically in a particular area.

It remains the high privilege of method to raise the stature of individuals by making them members of a scientific community and so compensating for the weakness of any by the presence, the aid, the challenge of others. So the gifts of each become the leaven of the whole mass and, while this leavening process works its effects insensibly at any time, still over time it is not difficult to document its cumulative impact.

Consequently, the intellectual conversion that is the self-appropriation of the “transcendental method” built into each person contributes to the whole of each communal area of human endeavor: education, sports, science, culture, etc. It does so, not by primarily critiquing each area but by first appreciating the genuine lines of development in each area. In the words of St. Paul, the transcendental method that is each person working well contributes to the methodical unfolding of things in every other area by first appreciating

…whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable — if anything is excellent or praiseworthy — think about such things. (Philippians 4, 8)

Secondarily, it represents a principle of conversion for all that in the light of intelligence, rationality and responsibility needs to be critiqued, that is, all self-centeredness, all bias, prejudice, political maneuvering that gets in the way of the human spirit’s natural orientation to acting intelligently, reasonably, responsibly, well.

2. Critical History?

If all this is true of method in general, our next question is how does method function in history? Indeed Lonergan begins the two chapters on history in Method in Theology by reflecting first on existential, lived, history and the process from that to critical history (chapter 8), and then by reflecting on the reflections of historians on method in history (chapter 9). We will begin by reflecting on the process from existential, lived, history to the important discipline that has emerged during the last few centuries, that is, critical history.

There are many levels of history then, beginning from the very rooted-ness of the human person and the human family in historical particularities. For every culture has “its story” by which it tells itself where it came from and where it hopes to go. Without a story, we are “lost.” Lonergan begins by calling attention to our “existential history,” that psychological present that reaches back into the past and anticipates the future. To illustrate this he calls attention to the case of amnesia, where a person totally forgets who he is.

He no longer knows who he is, fails to recognize relatives and friends, does not recall his commitments or his lawful expectations, does not know where he works
or how he makes his living, and has lost even the information needed to perform his once customary tasks. Obviously, if he is to live, either the amnesia has to be cured, or else he must start all over. For our pasts have made us whatever we are and on that capital we have to live or else we must begin afresh.\textsuperscript{4}

Recently I came across a woman’s reflections on amnesia. Her husband had been severely injured, had lost his memory and was undergoing therapy to recover his memory. Speaking of the loss of memory, she writes:

It’s terrifying. Because who are we without five minutes ago? Who are we without our stories? Recently I went to a conference given by the Brain Injury Association of New York State, and I sat in on a talk by [a person from] the traumatic-brain-injury rehab facility. She said the first thing they do to assist a person who has experienced a loss, not just of memory but of self, is to make a story. With the help of family and friends, they write a story of the patient’s life – the events, names, faces. It is basic, our need for story, perhaps because it is such a handy way to carry our experiences around – story as container, so to speak.\textsuperscript{5}

Lonergan continues his own reflections by emphasizing the centrality of such historical memory to our existential and psychological present. This is true of ourselves, not only as individuals but also as members of groups.

Groups too live on their past, and their past, so to speak, lives on in them. The present functioning of the good of order is what it is mostly because of past functioning and only slightly because of the minor efforts now needed to keep things going and, when possible, improve them. To start completely afresh would be to revert to a very distant age.\textsuperscript{6}

So history is our existential make-up. We are radically historical beings, formed by living traditions that have made us what we are and that live on in us.

…being historical is the history that is written about. It may be named, if considered interiorly, an existential history - the living tradition which formed us and thereby brought us to the point where we began forming ourselves. This tradition includes at least individual and group memories of the past, stories of exploits and legends about heroes, in brief, enough of history for the group to have an identity as a group and for individuals to make their several contributions towards maintaining and promoting the common good of order.\textsuperscript{7}

Out of this existential history there emerges the series of steps by which we come to objectify and say who we are and where we have come from. Such steps might be elementary memoirs, songs, tales of heroes, etc. Each of us can recall the ways our parents communicated to us who we are: the stories they told us of their parents and grandparents, their saints and heroes, and concomitantly, the stories of those not to be imitated. And in school we read stories of great people who gave us images of virtue, right living, contributing to the common good, etc. All
these stories were ways of filling out our self-understanding as we fit into bigger groups who even today struggle to define themselves.

Lonergan lists all these steps in the process of the objectification of the self and the group in history: beginning with diaries and moving on to memoirs that reconstruct the past from new perspectives of emerging “dominant concerns.” Biography moves out from memoir to give not just the life but “the life and times,” that is, the self in interaction with significant public events. So I lived in Rome during the Second Vatican Council and during that time studied under Father Lonergan. My life moved out, therefore, from what I did on a particular day – for example, “went skiing at Terminillo” - to interaction with more public events that had a more public significance. Looking back, it is the Council and my encounter with Fr. Lonergan that have grown in significance.

And so one moves on toward history, history that regards more the “the times” than the life. History regards, not just overlapping biographies but the social/cultural process, “what was going forward,” often beyond the awareness of individuals. Such ongoing process is not just a sum of individual words and deeds. Rather,

…[t]here exists a developing and/or deteriorating unity constituted by cooperations, by institutions, by personal relations, by a functioning and/or malfunctioning good of order, by a communal realization of originating and terminal values and disvalues. Within such processes we live out our lives. About them each of us ordinarily is content to learn enough to attend to his own affairs and perform his public duties. To seek a view of the actual functioning of the whole or of a notable part over a significant period of time is the task of the historian.  

So there is history, the telling and recounting of history and, finally, the longer-range project of writing history. Writing history is about recounting what was going forward: not just the routines of nature or those human routines studied by psychology or sociology, but rather what was changing, “what was going forward” in the human community. This historical knowledge is an extension of commonsense understanding to the commonsense of other periods and times. Unlike natural science, which regards general patterns, history regards the singular event and change in the course of events. As opposed to incomplete, inadequate or even false accounts of what has gone on before, history as written aims at setting the record straight. Of its nature it is involved in what Lonergan calls a dialectical process: a discernment of a genuine account as opposed to inadequate or bogus accounts.

In Method in Theology Lonergan describes this process of historical research as one in which one small insight follows upon another until one reaches the point at which one’s initial assumptions begin to be challenged. At that point the researcher might mumble to herself, “How could I have been so stupid to have thought X?” Elements once assumed to belong in one context fit more securely into another and one gets closer to the historical quarry one has been seeking. Thus, Pseudo-Dionysius is understood not to have belonged to a first century context – he quoted Proclus – but to a fifth century context. Such inverse insights contribute immensely to the
historical account: realizing where one had been mistaken as the root to a deeper understanding of historical reality.

Such transformations of mind were of great interest to Lonergan because they illustrated the basic dynamic method of the human mind as it operates in scholarly research. In such scholarship basic assumptions about the past change as new questions lead to changed surmises and images, giving way to new insights, etc. The historian is involved in a self-correcting process of learning in which he comes to understand the evidence provided by his sources and on that basis hazards a judgment about what was going forward. Such historical method finds support and critique in the scrutiny of the history-writing community.

Where earlier history was a matter of believing testimony, contemporary history is a matter of understanding evidence. Any relic or trace of the past may be evidence, but what it might be evidence for emerges only from the accumulated expertise of the history-writing community, and what it actually does establish results only from a consensus based on investigations that have been carried out by competent researchers and submitted to the scrutiny of competent reviewers.  

In such scholarly process there can be discerned a two-fold use of the basic method of the human mind as first it comes to evaluate its sources and secondly it hazards a judgment about what was going forward. The facts ascertained in the first process of critical history – evaluating one’s sources - are not historical facts, but just data for the discovery of historical facts. This critical process has to be followed by an interpretive process in which the historian pieces together the fragments of information he has gathered and critically evaluated to arrive at a rounded view of a period beyond the knowledge of contemporaries. Thus, the historian moves from the fragmentary experiences of the early Christians to Bultmann’s overall view of the synoptic tradition. Consequently, even in such a complicated area as critical history the scholar, Carl Becker, could judge that gradually we can build up a body of substantial historical knowledge.

Still, historical knowledge is dependent on understanding historical contexts and such contexts can extend down into the present.

Only inasmuch as a context is still open, or can be opened or extended, do later events throw new light on earlier persons, events, processes. As Karl Heussi put it, it is easier to understand Frederick William III of Prussia than to understand Schleiermacher and, while Nero will always be Nero, we cannot as yet say the same for Luther.

3. Method and Historians

…when the scientist understands nature, he is not grasping nature’s understanding of itself; for though nature is intelligible, it is not intelligent. But when the historian understands man, his understanding is a recapturing of man’s understanding of himself.
When I was a young student of philosophy I picked up Bertrand Russell’s story of philosophy and was surprised to find there, a book of at least a few hundred pages, only about a page and a half on the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas. That was a long distance from the volume given to Aquinas in Frederick Copleston’s multi-volume history of philosophy that I was accustomed to reading. Copleston was, of course, a Jesuit priest and a convert to Catholicism; and so it was not surprising that he would give a different amount of attention to Aquinas in what he certainly considered an “objective” history of philosophy. The lesson that came home to me in that instance was that there are different histories dependent on the personal development of historians.

In chapter nine of Method in Theology Lonergan illustrates the fact that there are different underlying philosophical and epistemological issues beneath what historians say about what they are doing when they are doing history. For positivist historians history is just the dry as dust “facts” seemingly untainted by meaning. Illustrating this from a nineteenth century handbook on history, Introduction aux études historiques composed by C. Langlois and C. Seignobos, Lonergan noted that it contained a clear-cut distinction and separation between the determination of historical “facts” and the determination of their “interconnections.” Analytical operations, for example, analyzing the psychology of the author, removed the facts from their original context, isolated them from one another, and reduced them as it were, to a powder. Further synthetic operations were filled with pitfalls. Such a view was grounded in 19th century positivist view of natural science: What was important was “the facts?” Why add to the facts concerns about meaning? Why not just “let the facts speak for themselves?”

Quite distinct, however, and closer to Lonergan’s view of method in history, on the other hand, was the thought of the nineteenth century historian, Johann Gustav Droysen, who held that the facts of history are different from the facts discovered by textual criticism. The facts of history resemble, not a text, but the meaning of a text.

They are like battles, councils, rebellions. They are complex unities that result from manifold actions and interactions of individuals. They extend over space and time. They cannot be singled out and observed in some single act of perception. They have to be put together by assembling a manifold of particular events into a single interpretative unity…facts and interconnections form a single piece…

Closer still were the views of R.J. Collingwood for whom the “facts” are not “out there;” they are rather constructions of the historians own developed understanding of historical reality. Attacking the old “scissors-and-paste” view of history, Collingwood held that in a real way “the historian is his own authority.” Similarly, for Carl Becker everyone is “his own historian” and what is needed for critical history is the fullest possible development of the historian’s own understanding. It is preposterous to “let the facts speak for themselves.” Rather, there is the gradual accumulation of insights by which historical experience is promoted to historical knowledge. Or, in the formulation of August Boeckh, history is “the interpretative reconstruction of the constructions of the human spirit.”

Finally, there is the judgment of Henri-Irénée Marrou: where his positivist teachers urged a critical spirit, he called for sympathy and understanding. The historian's task is not limited to
eliminating errors and deceptions; what is needed is comprehension. Similarly, a great deal of German historical reflection on history focused on the act of Verstehen and Lonergan traces that development through such figures as Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Husserl and Heidegger. Of that reflection he says:

[It] was empirical without being empiricist: it was aware that there was more to knowledge than taking a look. It knew of the hermeneutic circle: the reciprocal dependence of words, sentences, paragraphs. It also knew of the irrelevance of the universal for understanding the unique individual: there is only one Divina commedia.

Finally, speaking of all of these authors, Lonergan makes his own judgment. There is a distinction between his understanding of insight and Verstehen. The former is more precise and broader. Furthermore, in the above authors there is an insufficient awareness of the importance of the act of judgment.

Secondly, experience and understanding taken together yield not knowledge but only thought. To advance from thinking to knowing there must be added a reflective grasp of the virtually unconditioned and its rational consequent, judgment. There is an insufficient awareness of this third level of cognitional activity in the authors we have been mentioning and a resultant failure to break away cleanly and coherently from both empiricism and idealism. 16

Furthermore, the break from both empiricism and idealism involves the elimination of cognitional myth that knowing means “taking a good look.”

There are notions of knowledge and of reality that are formed in childhood, that are in terms of seeing and of what's there to be seen, that down the centuries have provided the unshakable foundations of materialism, empiricism, positivism, sensism, phenomenalism, behaviorism, pragmatism, and that at the same time constitute the notions of knowledge and reality that idealists know to be nonsense. 17

However, other considerations enter in. For, as Carl Becker pointed out, historians are inevitably influenced by the “climate of opinion” in which they live. They tend to determine the self-deception of witnesses according to that climate of opinion which influences their basic convictions and options. That climate often contains philosophical presuppositions. For example, in the nineteenth century Laplace argued against miracles in the light of what was considered then the “uniformity of nature.” Such a notion has tended to be replaced in the twentieth century by a conception of “emergent probability,” the gradual emergence of schemes of recurrence according to schedules of statistical probability. With this emergent, more “open,” view of the universe, “the scientific case concerning miracles has weakened.”

But for one to critique one’s basic options and to go back and tear down one’s fundamental assumptions is a massive operation - similar to radical surgery. Once such options are taken and built upon, they have to be maintained, or else one must go back, tear down, reconstruct. So radical a procedure is not easily
undertaken; it is not comfortably performed; it is not quickly completed. It can be comparable to major surgery, and most of us grasp the knife gingerly and wield it clumsily.\textsuperscript{18}

So there are contradictory histories and these can only be discerned through transcendental method, that is, a growth in accurate self-knowledge and the rejection of positivist, idealist and, in general, inadequate counterpositions. Still, this does not account for all the differences in histories. Some of those differences are due to different perspectives.

Where relativism has lost hope about the attaining of truth, perspectivism stresses the complexity of history and its specific difference from mathematics, scientific and philosophical knowledge.\textsuperscript{19}

History reveals the historian: that's why it is written anew in each new generation. Structures are in the minds of historians, and when they are set within larger contexts, they provide new data for historical research. Historical reality is very complicated; one selects according to one's standpoint. Critical history, therefore, is incomplete and approximate. It does not admit of systematic objectification. The historian operates in the light of his whole personal development and that does not admit of complete and explicit formulation and acknowledgement.\textsuperscript{20} The presuppositions of the historian are also social developments in him; and such an admission may result in irreconcilable histories.

To deal with the complexities of history historians often construct “ideal types” by focusing on the most favorable instances. Such ideal types are not descriptions or hypotheses; rather, they are theoretical constructs that are both heuristic and expository: that is, they suggest and help form hypotheses as well as guide analysis. Lonergan recommended Toynbee's \textit{Study of History} as a sourcebook of such ideal types.

\section*{4. Conclusion}

Toward the end of his reflections on history in chapters eight and nine of \textit{Method in Theology} Lonergan notes:

\begin{quote}
[T]he historian's value-judgments are precisely the means that make his work a selection of things that are worth knowing, that, in Meinecke's phrase, enables history to be "the content, the wisdom, and the signposts of our lives."\textsuperscript{21}
\end{quote}

However, although the historian makes value judgments, that is not his specialty. The focal point of the functional specialization of “history” is the judgment about “what was going forward.” That functional specialization builds on research (experience) and interpretation (understanding) in order to paint a broader picture of historical process. But the task of passing judgments on the values and disvalues offered to us by the past pertains to Lonergan’s further functional specialties of dialectic and foundations in \textit{Method in Theology}. Indeed, as Lonergan once put it, his method of four specializations regarding the past (research, interpretation, history, dialectic) and four specializations regarding the future (foundations, doctrines, systematics and communications) reflects the invariant structures of the human mind as it looks to the past in
order to guide action in the future. His own aim, however, was ultimately theological. Regarding a paper of Karl Rahner’s on Lonergan’s “method” as he had set it out in the *Gregorianum* in terms of functional specializations, he remarked:

Karl Rahner, in his paper remarked he thought it could be applied to any human science that was fully conscious of itself as depending on the past and looking towards the future. I think that’s true. But I’m not working it out in those terms. I’m working it out in terms of a theology.22

Gerard Whelan’s paper later in this volume on “Practical Theology” spells out the implications of Lonergan’s method of functional specializations.

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6 *Method in Theology*, 181-182.
7 *Method in Theology*, 182.
8 *Method in Theology*, 184.
9 Today truth commissions throughout the world, often in response to past oppression, employ critical history in order to distinguish bogus accounts of the past from genuine accounts.
10 *A Third Collection*, 80.
14 *Method in Theology*, 199.
16 *Method in Theology*, 213.
18 *Method in Theology*, 221.
20 *Method in Theology*, 223.