

Humus 5 Trying to Talk Functionally

Did we end *Humus 4* on a high note of humble aspirations? Likely enough, we did not. I am bringing us back here to the mood of the first *Humus*. We are deeply conditioned, molecularly, to talk about the more serious realities as if we were at home in their distant meanings. If this were an introductory meeting about functional talk in physics there would be a less serious problem. Certainly there would be no problem if it was focused on the talk proper to the beginning of a first year university course in that area. Some of us at this Halifax conference of 2008, this fresh beginning, have lived with the broad problem through a life of teaching, the problem of *haute vulgarization*.¹ In my own case I have the cherished memory of not having the problem when I first taught, say, mathematical physics. I recall asking the professor that autumn of 1960 how I should handle my class, an initial group of about thirty students. His advice: "Talk over their heads for about six lectures, clear out the class, and you'll have a great year".

What, popularly, is the problem? Paradoxically, as we move up from that simplest of sciences we move up, in this axial period, into a world of illusion. We live in an ethos of ordinariness, and easily gather in an evident group to talk anti-Socratically. The fact that we are at the beginning of human evolution is quite beyond our fantasy, and certainly beyond our axial bones. The axial period has massaged us away from compact consciousness' mysteriousness to pastures never-new, to worlds of sameold-sameold. How, then, might we try to bring ourselves, our bones, into the ever-new pasture that is *the field*?² How do we battle in ourselves the pressures of description, pressures that may be technical or aesthetic in their grounding of illusion?³

The advantage of the challenge of functional talk is that it can be taken as an elementary

¹There is no point on enlarging on this here. The classic spots in Lonergan are *Collected Works*, Volume 6, pages 121,155 and Volume 10, page 145. A context for reflection on the problem is chapter 3, "*Haute Vulgarization*", of *Lack in the Beingstalk* (Axial Press, 2007).

²"The field is *the* universe, but my horizon defines *my* universe" (Phenomenology and Logic, 199). This is a rich existential opening of the book. See the index, under *Field*. Again, the chapter mentioned in the previous note is relevant, especially the two section titled "The Field..."

³Richness of technical or aesthetic description is a complex topic. *Cantower XXIII* helps.

challenge of common sense, inviting and leading to differentiations of common sense. And there is the advantage within that advantage that the differentiations involved are global, are not differentiations of this common sense from that.

But that is to be discovered, and the differentiations to be initiated, only by venturing forward into little exercises. The context of the exercises is the shared suspicion - a sharing that must move from belief to personal conviction through stumbling experience - that there is a need for, and call to, a cycle of collaboration that is neatly represented by imagining a relay race team operating with beautiful efficiency. There are eight runners, each running, say, one hundred metres with a subtle baton exchange after each leg. Leg two is the interpreter-runner: what subtle talk is required to make an effective and beautiful baton-pass to the historian-runner? The answer is beyond present practice, beyond indeed present fantasy. We need strategic practicing to bring us to initial fantasy.

We are going to tackle such exercises only after *Humus 12*, only after we get some fuller sense of the total challenge we face. And I would note, in conclusion here, that the reach for the fuller sense does not escape the pressure mentioned in the first paragraph above, but it is to have its own protective inner dynamic in that it involves linguistic techniques.⁴ It is a new differentiation both of consciousness and of language. It is not a differentiation present in Crowe's work or in Lonergan's, and certainly not in mine. Its strategies merge with the strategies of minimalism that focus, not on luminous differentiations and identifications of consciousness, but on communal divisions of the tasks of withdrawal and return.⁵ Sweaty exercises in it are a contribution to the positive shifting of the global statistics of the end of the longer cycle of decline.

⁴We shall gradually discover how it meshes with the techniques of linguistic feedback mentioned in *Method in Theology* 88, note 34. I would draw attention that linguistic feedback was also mentioned in the original type script, but omitted in the text. I give the passage here, with the missing phrase in boldface: "in the measure that linguistic **feed-back is achieved, that is in the measure that** explanations and statements provide the sensible presentations...."(92).

⁵I have treated this notion of minimal collaboration in the third chapter of *Pastkeynes Past modern Economics: A Fresh Pragmatism* (Axial Press, 2002). See also my *Method in Theology: Revisions and Implementations*, ch. 3, "Minimalist Functional Antifoundationalism"