

Humus 2: *Vis Cogitativa*: Contemporary Defective Patterns of Anticipation

“Incidentally, re anxiety, what the Freudians call the Super-Ego is Aquinas’ cogitativa: just as the little birds know that twigs are good for building nests and the little lambs know that wolves are bad, so little human beings develop a cogitativa about good and bad; it reflects their childish understanding of what papa and mamma say is good or bad and in adult life it can cause a hell of a lot of trouble.”¹

I am quoting from a letter of Lonergan to Fred Crowe, where Lonergan is touching on a certain anxiety Fred has about his competent treatment of Lonergan’s view of knowledge. But the point is to note his musing about the *vis cogitativa*. This little essay is certainly not a beginning of an elaboration of his view, much less a dialectic placement on that specialty’s *Assembly*.² It is a beginning in the mood of these short essays: a tantalizing prelude.

Lonergan has, by 1955, come a long way from his first essay, where he dealt with the *vis cogitativa* in quite creative fashion.³ My tantalizing here consists in jumping to what he was habitually thinking of the *vis cogitativa* when, a little earlier, he wrote that brilliant page of *Insight*, page 464[489], on the study of the organism. Of course the organism he points to on that page is the plant, but the same heuristic carries, no doubt analogically, into the following pages on animals and humans.

But my prelude twists towards a larger layered question. I twist towards your anxiety,⁴ your neural net’s anticipation, as you read that much-mentioned page 464[489] or that page in

¹This is quoted from the 13th of 129 written communications of Lonergan to Crowe, some as short as Christmas cards, some several pages long. This letter is dated 27th December 1955. I have no doubt but that these letters will eventually appear in some published form but meantime I avail of Fr. Crowe’s generous permission to quote from archival material that has not been published

²The last word on page 249 of *Method in Theology*.

³“The Form of Mathematical Inference” (*Collected Works*, vol. 20, 3-12), was probably written by Lonergan in 1927, at age 23. The focus of attention was *vis cogitativa*.

⁴The word should suggest the larger heuristic that would come from Lonergan’s sublation of Harry Stack Sullivan’s work. See the *indices* to *Insight* and *Phenomenology and Logic*.

Method, page 250, to which I have given like discomfoting attention over the years. The history of philosophy and of the emergence of the elementary sciences nudge me now to suggest that, in the present stage of the axial period, the *vis cogitativa* of the community to which you belong, most especially if an academic community - including, then, Lonergan students - is deeply disoriented.

What is that disorientation, and what is the character of that whatting? I sing an old song here, (about)³ (about)³.⁵ How else are we to twirl, cycle, ourselves out of the disorientation that clouds so-called civilization in this pre-adolescent axiality? The super-ego is Freud's sick *vis cogitativa* replacing earlier puttering about some *vis cogitativa*. Both the replacing and the puttering are kissing cousins that have been vaguely but well-described, *cogitativa* or "superego: within consciousness it is a **compound** of perceptive symbols and submissive affects; by its finality it anticipates, by its subordination it reflections; by its obsessive and expansive tendencies it caricatures, the judgments of rational consciousness on the conduct of a rational being."⁶

How are we to move beyond this good but vague description? We need the emergence of a slow discomfoting global collaborative functional cycling to lift *Insight* 464[489] into a standard model of procedure for nanophysicist, neurochemists, methodologists and mind-benders. The **compound** must be taken out of its handy fogginess to become a luminous grasp of flexible circles of ranges of recurrence-schemes of acts of chemical-patterns. The out-take requires the emergence of a weird sub-community in which "the extroverted subject visualizing extensions and experiencing duration gives place to the subject orientated to affirming beings differentiated by certain conjugate potencies, forms, and acts grounding certain laws and frequencies."⁷ Such a foundational sub-community seems, on present performance of the academic and technological superego, a battered century away.

⁵Section 2 of chapter 2 of *ChrISt in History* throws light on this odd expression (*about*)³. Perhaps I should mention in passing that we are in the zone here of the layered mudied disorientations of feelings and discussions of feelings: the patterned chemicality involved there is a subquestion of the broad issue of this little essay.

⁶*Insight*, 456[482].

⁷*Insight*, 514[537].