The rejection of common reason, a central tenant of postmodern thought, is said to fracture traditions into disparate ‘language games.’ Allegedly, this at best inhibits dialogue and at worst renders discussion impossible through a lack of common axioms. This article rejects this assessment through engaging the work of Catholic scholar Bernard Lonergan and two key works of the postmodern mood: Jean-Francois Lyotard’s *La Condition Postmoderne* and George Lindbeck’s *The Nature of Doctrine*. That there are significant degrees of similarity between Lonergan and these two thinkers is this article’s primary contention. However, whilst Lonergan and Lyotard’s diagnosis of 20th century intellectual life share considerable similarities, their solutions differ substantially. Additionally, Lindbeck’s ‘cultural-linguistic’ model of doctrine and Lonergan’s own discussion of doctrine and dogma will be demonstrated to be far more similar than a cursory overview might suggest.

In *On the Thousand and One Goals*, Nietzsche’s titular Zarathustra gazes upon many lands and peoples, and in doing so discovers the vast array of good and evil. This good and evil is written on tablets that hang above the peoples’ heads, and Zarathustra is unable to find any greater justification than what the people’s themselves have created. The idea of God and universals is retreating, and in its place, is a new type of human for a new era: one who creates their own meaning. Such is a large part of the postmodern mood: authority no longer determines our values and meaning, for there is no ultimate authority and no ultimate meaning to be found. The death of God has brought about the Anthropocene, and with it many different moralities, epistemologies, and forms of life.

It is within this historical – postmodern – milieu that the work of Catholic intellectual Bernard Lonergan is written. And as others have drawn attention to, there is something quite appropriate to a Lonergarian critique of this milieu; as a child of modernism, Lonergan wields the tools of modernity in his systematic works. But beyond critique, are there elements in Lonergan’s thought that are congruent with postmodern thinking? It is the purpose of this article to contribute to the small but growing body of scholarship that argues in the affirmative. Notably, ‘postmodernity’ is at times a vague and nebulous concept and any engagement with it raises the question of which form of postmodernity is in view. To alleviate this ambiguity, this article will anchor dialogue in specific thinkers. As such, for the purpose of this article *Method in Theology* (henceforth: *Method*) will be brought into dialogue with two major works indicative of postmodern thinking: philosophically, Jean-Francois Lyotard’s *La Condition Postmoderne* and theologically, George Lindbeck’s *The Nature of Doctrine*. 
Lyotard presents his *La Condition Postmoderne. Rapport sur le savoir* (henceforth: *Condition*) with the claim that the text is the amalgamation of two different language games: that of the philosopher, and that of the expert. The expert is aware of what he knows and what he does not, but the philosopher knows neither and simply poses questions. With this ambiguous statement Lyotard makes no claim to the accuracy or originality of his report. Its worth is contained in its strategic value: in raising the right questions required for reflection.

Lyotard’s point of departure is the nature of knowledge in the 20th century and beyond; the two major legitimation narratives justifying the development of knowledge – that of the speculative spirit, and that of emancipation – are no longer valid. The speculative spirit, as Niels Brugger identifies, is the Hegelian hope that scientific, social, and existential knowledge can be united as one grand field of understanding. The narrative of emancipation however, is the belief that science and knowledge should liberate individuals and communities from whatever prevents them from becoming. In the former, the state is part of the unifying project, providing the funding for universities to conduct their task. In the latter, it is inevitably part of the oppression. These forms of legitimation – these meta-narratives – are no longer considered trustworthy, and it is this de-legitimization that constitutes the postmodern condition.

How does this de-legitimization come to pass? The knowledge embodied by these meta-discourses differs significantly from knowledge embodied by the scientific method, which is that of strict denotation. The meta-narratives just ‘are’, and do not seek any justification beyond ‘...the pragmatics of (their) own transmission without having recourse to argumentation and proof’. Scientific knowledge *does* seek such recourse however, and as such provides a more thorough ‘trustworthy’ source of knowledge that relies on description alone. There is a second distinction also, as science is unable to legitimise itself and in an ironic twist needs to appeal to narrative knowledge for legitimation – the very form of knowledge that science itself has cast doubt on. Nevertheless, it will not do this, for the language games of the sciences are incommensurate and specific, and the craving for generality violates the particular. Importantly, the accuracy of Lyotard’s adoption of Wittgenstein’s ideas here is not of present concern – though this has been addressed elsewhere. What is significant is the sovereignty of language games in Lyotard’s thought that contributes to overarching postmodern condition.

In addition to the loss of faith in metanarratives, and the splintering of heterogeneous sciences, the postmodern condition consists of the rise of capitalism and the technological society. Like many theorists of technology (Ellul, Marcuse, Heidegger), Lyotard sees technology as an expression of, and bound to, the principle of efficiency and not the true. Any ‘move’ within this game is considered ‘good’ if it ‘does better and/or expends less energy than another’. Furthermore, in comparison to knowledge based on revelation or speculative reason, scientific knowledge needs technology to assist in producing proof (such as CERN’s Large Hadron Collider). As such, scientific proof requires more consideration of funding and an equation between proof and wealth is established. In a market society, investments demand return and as precedence is given to projects that have the potential to maximise profit, truth is relegated to a second order consideration. This performativity criterion fills the void left by the meta-narratives, and is the only element that transcends the autonomous language games of knowledge and information. From this narrative, an important observation arises: what is the role of the speculative sciences in the postmodern condition?

In Lyotard’s later work he fixes on the theme of justice, which for him signifies a respect for the heterogeneity and plurality of language games in the postmodern condition. Philosophy must function with justice in mind, and becomes an aesthetic and reflective practice on the variety of language games, which has the inevitable defect of being unable to discriminate between them. In this sense, like many of those influenced by Wittgenstein, Lyotard thrusts philosophy...
back onto the study of language and away from metaphysics and attempts to ground other sciences.

With this analysis in mind one is able to draw several connexions with Lonergan’s work. In *Method*, Lonergan explores the development of meaning, made explicit in three stages: In the first stage, conscious and intentional (as opposed to sub-conscious and instinctual) operations follow that of common sense. As the child grows in this stage they move from the directly experienced to the mediated, from sensory stimuli and response to interpretation facilitated by the community. However, this mediation is not simply cognitive but ‘blends with the constitutive’ resulting in myth. As Lonergarian scholar Neil Ormerod describes, the community constitutes their social institutions and what significance these institutions have, but also the wider world’s shape, purpose, origin, and destiny.

In the second stage of meaning, the world mediated to the individual by myth and narrative splits into the sphere of ‘common sense and the realm of theory.’ The first stage involved the subject attending, understanding, and judging (three of the four-part transcendental method) but they do not make a speciality of these processes. The phenomenological does not yet exist as the ordered reflection on consciousness, nor does the linguistic exist as the ordered reflection upon language. The subject continues to operate in the realm of common sense, the only difference is that they now have the theoretical in conjunction to the abstract and concrete.

In the third stage of meaning, the subject becomes reflective: science is no longer the mere stating of truth-claims, but now includes the reflection on how truth is approximated as more relevant data becomes available to the subject. Stated otherwise, scientific theory is now the optimisation of understanding. But like Lyotard, Lonergan argues that the sciences are autonomous and consider truth-claims scientific only if an appeal to the relevant data can be made. Just as Lyotard sees the sciences specialising and fragmenting into inconsumable, heterogeneous forms of life, so does Lonergan. He contends: ‘In other words, they have worked out their respective methods, and there is no higher discipline that could discover their proper methods for them’.

Lonergan states that science has emancipated itself from the conditions of philosophy and ‘discovers its own basic terms and relations’. Furthermore, like Lyotard, Lonergan sees science as narrative-neutral: science ‘...aims to an empirical knowledge in which value judgements have no constitutive role.’ However, whilst Lyotard does not see the possibility of unification, Lonergan argues that such unification is conceivable. However, this is only attainable in a very general sense: hence his ‘transcendental method’, a method so general and ubiquitous that one cannot properly refute it without falling into performative self-contradiction. A method so encompassing that followers of Lonergan have applied his approach to fields as disparate as political science and physics. In the details of operations the sciences cannot be reconciled: the work of the physicist is vastly different from that of the biologist. Therefore, defining just what is the ‘Scientific Method’ is fraught with difficulty. However, in the process of any human research – good research – the subject will need to attend to the data, engage with data intelligently, make reasonable claims about the data, and be responsible with conclusions arrived at – they will employ a generalized empirical method. Here Lonergan’s modernism is explicit, for as David Tracy notes what is required is a renewed defence is reason – an Anglo-American empirical reason – located in individual consciousness.

A second point of agreement between the two thinkers is their diagnosis of philosophy. Like Lyotard, Lonergan sees the rapid development of science as of serious consequence for the discipline of philosophy:
Since the sciences between them undertake the explanation of all sensible data, one may conclude with the positivists that the function of philosophy is to announce that philosophy has nothing to say. \(^{29}\)

The positivists coveted the scientific method and sought to form philosophy in the same image, and the linguistic turn shifted philosophy to the clarification of truth-claims through the strict application of logic, and later, analysis of regular discourse. As Lonergan sates:

Since philosophy has no theoretical function, one may conclude with the Linguistic analysts that the function of philosophy is to work out a hermeneutics for the clarification of the local variety of everyday language. (emphasis added). \(^{30}\)

Lonergan however, grounds philosophy in the school of phenomenology. \(^{31}\) As Lonergan claims, ‘Philosophy finds its proper data in the intentional consciousness.’ \(^{32}\) Philosophy is ‘... to place abstractly apprehended cognitional activity with the concrete and sublating context of human feeling and of moral deliberation, evaluation, and decision.’ \(^{33}\) If phenomenology is the proper object of philosophy then its purpose is to promote the authentic appropriation of the self which will cut to the root of philosophical problems. \(^{34}\) Contra Wittgenstein who thought philosophical confusion arises when ‘language goes on holiday’, Lonergan believes that confusion arises from faulty conscious operations in the subject. \(^{35}\)

Moreover, Lonergan extends the role of philosophy further. He does this by delegating to philosophy the purpose Lyotard denies: philosophy anchors the realms of meaning, grounding the scientific method and promoting unification. \(^{36}\) As noted earlier, the second stage of meaning sees common sense and theory as disparate and largely undifferentiated, while the third stage is one of differentiation and specialisation with the goal of integration. This is the telos of the third stage of meaning and runs explicitly against Lyotard’s thesis.

Lonergan is not naïve to the challenges that face such a process of differentiation and integration. For example, like Lyotard he identifies the ‘use-value’ of knowledge and its modern status as wealth and power. In addition, he notes that the differentiation of meaning is not simply a matter of common sense and theory (as per the second stage of meaning), but also of interiority, immediacy through mass media, and the normative power of universal education. \(^{37}\) In Lonergan’s view, there has never been a time whereby differentiated consciousness was so difficult to achieve. \(^{38}\) In this sense, Lonergan acknowledges the postmodern landscape in a very similar manner as Lyotard, but responds with what Fredrick Lawrence calls ‘a concern for a theory of human solidarity.’ \(^{39}\) In the localised area of theology, Lonergan seeks no less than the full union of the discipline through the transcendental method and functional specialities. It is to here that we now turn.

The question of God, Lonergan states, lies with the horizon of humanity. \(^{40}\) The experience of God however is limited by ‘proportionate being’ to which God transcends. \(^{41}\) What can be known about God is extrapolated from ‘proportionate being’; for example, the gift of feeling in love without restriction. \(^{42}\) In the absence of divine fulfilment for this desire, human life is trivialised to a hedonistic pursuit of pleasure, a ruthless pursuit of power, or the nihilism of the absurd. Importantly, this encounter with the divine is not for the fulfilment of our agency and knowledge, but the abolition of our present horizon where the love of God transforms both our values and understanding. \(^{43}\) In the words of Paul Tillich, it is being gripped by the ultimate concern. \(^{44}\) And like Tillich, Lonergan’s object of desire need not be acknowledged as God, for even the atheist may acknowledge God in their ‘hearts’ without knowing Him consciously. \(^{45}\) In light of this, Lonergan is often viewed in an expressivist frame, unsurprisingly, as Lonergan states:
So it is by associating religious experience with its outward occasion that the experience becomes expressed and thereby something determinate and distinct for human consciousness.46

Importantly, expressions of religious experience will differ significantly depending on context and consistent with the phenomenological method, studying the expressions can lead one to draw conclusions regarding the essence of the experience.47 Important is Lonergan’s admission that definitive evidence for this perspective is difficult to find, unless posited on \textit{a priori} theological assumptions.48

Lonergan’s expressivism might lead one to believe – as per Tillich – that the dogmas and doctrines of Christianity are not fixed, but fluid. However, such a determination would be too simplistic, as the tension between historical truth statements and the unchanging dogma of the Roman Catholic Church recurs often before \textit{Method}. In Lonergan’s 1965 essay titled ‘Dimensions of Meaning’ he notes that the ‘splendid isolation’ that doctrines once enjoyed is now deconstructed by our awareness of their historical contingency.49 He would devote considerable intellectual energy to solving this tension. \textit{De Deo Trino}, for example, displays Lonergan’s sympathy for historical study, whilst in his early \textit{Theological Understanding} Lonergan is at pains to state that this development in historical study should not interfere with the permanancy of dogma.50 An example of this uncompromising stance can be seen in his approach to Marian Dogma, where he simply defers to the inerrancy of the church and papacy; for to deny the Assumption of Mary is to deny that the church had been preserved from error.51 In Chapter 12 of \textit{Method} Lonergan seeks to synthesise these apparently contradictory elements in a very Hegelian manner. His point of departure is \textit{Des Filius}, of Vatican I – where the permanence of dogma is stated – and notes that it was in response to a ‘rationalism that considered mysteries non-existent’. A rationalism that defended scientific findings against church dogma, and went as far to grant scientific discoveries the authority to re-interpret them.52 In response to this challenge, Vatican sought to differentiate four categories: 1) The natural light of reason, 2) faith, 3) Reason illuminated by faith, and 4) reason operating beyond its competence. Through these distinctions, Vatican I sought to clarify each of the categories and draw limits to their reach. Reason can know some truths from revelation and the church should not prohibit the work of human disciplines. Faith however, is a supernatural virtue whereby we believe what God has revealed to be true, for God Himself is trustworthy and would not deceive. Reason illuminated by faith gives us insight into divine mysteries, but is limited due to their transcendental nature. Lastly, there is reason that has gone beyond its limits and disturbs faith, for what God has revealed is not discovered through human endeavour but revealed.53 Lonergan calls this the ‘divine deposit’; a gift that needs to be declared and defended, because it is given by God and not arrived at by human activity. However, as Whelan Gerald notes, this permanent meaning needs to be understood as a statement: the statement has meaning, but the meaning is dependent on the context in which the statement is uttered. The context in which the statement (dogma) is given is culture, and culture changes overtime, therefore the meaning will necessarily change also.54 Here Lonergan hopes to address both the historicity and immutability of dogma.

In summary, for Lonergan the permanence of dogma is justified by two key propositions: what God has revealed and the church has infallibly declared is true, and what is true is permanent. In the case of reason truth is determined by data and in the case of dogmas, the truth is given.55 George Lindbeck’s \textit{The Nature of Doctrine}, whilst certainly a critique of Lonergan’s perspective, still owes much to it.

Drawing on the work of later-Wittgenstein (specifically Wittgenstein’s private language argument and his concept of ‘forms of life’) Lindbeck wants to define and account for the
plurality of doctrines and religions. Regarding the latter, religion is a ‘comprehensive interpretive scheme, usually embodied in myths or narratives and heavily ritualised, which structure human experience and understanding of self and world. What is important for this discussion is the reversal of priority between community and individual, whereby the personal experience is derived from communal. For Lindbeck, to be a Christian is to learn the language, beliefs, and story of Christianity, and is not primarily a personal religious experience. This enculturation may involve the experience of being in love without limitations, or it may not; it will involve propositions about metaphysical realities and morals, but propositional content is not primary, nor is assent to propositions sufficient to be religious. There are some difficulties with this model that Lonergarian scholars have noted. For example, this model does not provide an explanation for how religions come to be; it may well provide a description of how they function, but not how they begin. It is also worth noting that Lindbeck’s model lacks explanatory power in a deeper sense as well, for while Lonergan attempts to explain the global normativity of Roman Catholic beliefs, Lindbeck is content to allow normativity to remain local, casting doubt on the realism of religious beliefs. Of course this might be thoroughly in step with identifying theology as grammar, but reducing metaphysical beliefs to categorical rules doesn’t address metaphysical isomorphism, of which Christianity is surely wedded to.

Despite this, there are significant areas of agreement between the two scholars. As Crowe draws attention to, reading chapter 12 of Method leaves one with the distinct sense of tension:

Currently in the church there is quietly disappearing the old classicist insistence on worldwide uniformity. And there is emerging a pluralism of manners in which Christian meaning and Christian values are communicated. Here Lonergan is addressing what he labels as the transcultural problem in Theological Understanding: Christian revelation is normative for all, but is also particular insomuch as it was given to a certain people group in history. Yet as noted above, Lonergan is at pains to assert the permanency of dogma, so how does he reconcile this contradiction? Crowe suggests we consider that the dogmas of the past are to which we commit our faith, but the doctrines that Lonergan has in mind are the formulations of the future. The church then, becomes all things to all people; but the meaning of dogma remains.

Lindbeck uses different language to express the same meaning. In his description of practical doctrines, he makes a distinction between doctrines that are ‘unconditionally necessary’ and doctrines that are ‘conditionally necessary’. Unconditional necessary doctrines are the equivalent of Lonergan’s dogmas, unchanging and permanent (more on this below). Regarding conditionally necessary doctrines, these can be furthered divided into reversible and irreversible. For example, the Christian Pacifism of the early church was considered binding, but in the modern age of Christian Realism and Just War theory, this doctrine has been reversed – perhaps it will be reversed back to its original claim in the future. An example of irreversible conditional doctrine is the church’s position of slavery. Whilst a condemnation is now informally present in most denominations, early Christians believed that such an institution was unavoidable. As the possibility of a slave-less society arouse, Christianity was quick to abandon the institution. This model of reversible/irreversible, conditionally necessary doctrines finds similarity in Lonergan’s discussion on the plurality of doctrines in Chapter 12 of Method as described above.

There are further areas of agreement also, such as the communicative, effective, constitutive, and cognitive role that doctrine plays in Method. Doctrine is effective insomuch ‘as it counsels and dissuades, commands and prohibits’. Regarding the constitutive function of doctrine Lonergan states doctrine is constitutive because it is a set of meanings and values that inform an
individual’s living, knowing, doing. Lonergan also identifies the communal-constitutive function, noting that a community exists if a group of people believe in, adhere to, and share meaning and values. Doctrine also serves a normative function, for the functional specialty of dialectic deploys dialogue and analysis to determine correct doctrine and in doing so, identifies theoretical failings and logical fallacies. Here there are several connexions between Lonergan’s thesis and Lindbeck’s own discussion on doctrines. For Lindbeck, doctrines incorporate a vocabulary of discursive and non-discursive symbols, a distinctive form of life, rituals, and myths that are normative for that group. However, whilst Lindbeck’s unconditional necessary doctrines bear resemblance to Lonergan’s dogmas, they contain only grammatical force and are not ‘true’ in the Lonergarian sense.

Fredrick Lawrence wants to argue that Lonergan’s thought takes seriously the major concerns of postmodern movements, and this article functions as evidence in support of his thesis. As key thinkers in their fields, Lonergan and Lyotard provide similar assessments of the ‘postmodern condition’, but present starkly different pictures for the future of philosophy. In the case of Lonergan his concern remains the modernist goal of reconciliation between disciplines. Yet his thesis is not simply a reinstatement of the modernist paradigm. The end result is that whilst Lyotard could not see a path for reconciliation, Lonergan identifies a point of unification without colonising the disparate disciplines. His religious epistemology is less convincing however, at times descending into ‘thus sayeth the church’. Lonergarian scholars are correct to note that Lindbeck’s model raises some significant questions regarding the truth-value of religious propositions, but it is unclear that Lonergan himself has the answer to this challenge.

Notes

4 Ibid. 7.
6 Brugger, ‘What about the Postmodern?’ 80.
7 Ibid. Importantly, as Brugger draws attention to, these discourses were problematic from the start, and whilst their flaws become explicit in the 20th century, the metaphorical stiches were coming lose in the two preceding centuries.
11 Lyotard, Bennington, and Massumi, The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge. 44.
12 Ibid. 45.

16 Lonergan, ‘Method in Theology.’ 89.
19 Ibid. 94.
20 Ibid. See also, p.248 for a fuller description of scientific epistemology.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid. 274.
23 Ibid. 248.
24 Ibid. 94.
30 Ibid.
31 Perhaps best illustrated by his 1957 Boston College Lectures, ‘Mathematical Logic and Existentialism’.
33 Ibid. 275.
34 Ibid. See also, Gerard Walmsley, *Lonergan on Philsophic Pluralism: The Polymorphism of Consciousness as the Key to Philosophy* (University of Toronto Press, 2008).
36 Ibid.
37 Ibid. 99, see also *Dialectic*, ‘Fully differentiated consciousness is the fruit of an extremely prolonged development.’ 257.
38 Ibid. 100.
44 It is debatable just how accurate this adoption of Tillich is. For Tillich the Ultimate Concern was just that, what concerns an individual ultimately. This need not manifest itself in Divine love, as the atheist also has an ultimate concern, an act of faith that excludes God. See Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*. (New York: Harper, 1958), 52.
46 Ibid. 108.
47 Ibid. 108, ‘When distinct religious experiences are associated with a single place, there arises the god of this or that place.’
48 Ibid. 108.
53 Ibid. 320.
54 Whelan Gerard, *Lonergan’s Anthropology Revisited: The next Fifty Years of Vatican II* (Gregorian Biblical BookShop, 2015), 450.

55 Lonergan, ‘Method in Theology.’


57 Ibid. 34.

58 Ibid. 35.

59 Ormerod, *Method, Meaning, and Revelation*, 30. As an aside, one could argue that the private language argument provides a limited point in this context: that interior descriptions of religious phenomena is *necessarily* built from shared norms and as such, the idea of a religious experience that only the individual can understand is nonsensical.

60 The common sense use of the word true is ignored, but it is in this sense that communities utilise the word see Jay Wesley Richards, ‘Truth and Meaning in George Lindbeck’s “The Nature of Doctrine,”’ *Religious Studies* 33, no. 1 (1997): 42.


63 Ibid.

64 Ibid.


66 Ibid. 86.


68 Ibid.


70 Lawrence, ‘The Fragility of Consciousness.’ 93.