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Are Faith and Reason Reconcilable?

Joel Chan

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Objection 1: It would seem that faith and reason are not reconcilable. This is so because the object of faith is distinct from the object of reason.[1] Faith, through theology, is solely concerned with the truths of God and the supernatural, whereas reason, through philosophy, is primarily concerned with the truths of the universe and the natural world.[2] Faith does not aim to attain knowledge of the universe because it does not employ the skills of inquiry and demonstration necessary for discovery. Reason cannot attain knowledge of God because it "is deficient in the things of God"[3] and "those things which are beyond man's knowledge may not be pursued by man through reason,"[4] according to Aquinas. This being the case, two different modes of knowledge that each aims at two different ends cannot be reconcilable. Additionally, if the objects of faith and reason are to be the same, then the truths of God would need to be identical to the truths of the universe. This is impossible because God is not the universe, and the universe is not God. Knowledge of the natural will not increase knowledge of the supernatural, and knowledge of the supernatural will not increase knowledge of the natural. As such, it is apparent that faith and theology are specifically matters of religion; likewise, reason and philosophy are specifically matters of natural science.

Objection 2: Furthermore, for humans to assent to the truths of faith, they must be able to discern that it is reasonable to do so. However, the truths of faith exceed reason's capabilities and are thus incomprehensible to humans. It is unreasonable to have faith in 'truths' that one cannot understand, and it is foolish to believe that something is true which cannot be proven true. For example, the doctrine of the Trinity, that God is one and three persons at the same time, states a contradiction, and that which states to be so and not so at the same time cannot be true. Believing that this doctrine is true simply because someone else said so is an act of naïveté and laziness on

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[1] First Vatican Council, *Dei Filius*: Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith, Pius, Bishop, Servant of the Servants of God, with the Approval of the Sacred Council, for Perpetual Remembrance, April 24, 1870, 1795.

[2] Angus Brook, "Faith and Reason," in *Introduction to Philosophy and Theology Within Catholic Liberal Education*, ed. Angus Brook, 79–87 (North Ryde: McGraw-Hill Australia, 2014), 83.

[3] Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Contra Gentiles of Saint Thomas Aquinas: First Book*, trans. The English Dominican Fathers (London: Burns, Oates & Washbourne Ltd., 1924), 4.

[4] Thomas Aquinas, "Thomas Aquinas on the Nature and Scope of Sacred Doctrine," in *Medieval Philosophy: Essential Readings with Commentary*, eds. Gyula Klima, Fritz Allhoff, and Anand Jayprakash Vaidya, 45–57 (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 46.

the part of the intellect. Therefore, one cannot reasonably trust the 'truths' of faith, which consequently renders theology an inadequate form of attaining knowledge.

Objection 3: Moreover, in order for humans to be certain of demonstrated and discovered truths, they must have faith that their methods of reason are correct. As Angus Brook put it, "we generally take on trust – on faith – that the scientist or the scholar is telling us the truth and that they have the authority to tell us the truth on matters pertaining to their expertise."[5] However, humans are fallible and incapable of using reason properly. John Paul II, recalling the words of the Apostle, stated that "human thinking, because of sin, became 'empty', and human reasoning became distorted and inclined to falsehood (cf. Rom 1:21-22)."[6] As such, one cannot have faith that reason can attain 'truth' with certainty, which also renders philosophy an inadequate form of attaining knowledge.

On the contrary, John Paul II said, "Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth, and God has placed in the human heart a desire to know the truth – in a word, to know himself – so that, by knowing and loving God, men and women may also come to the fullness of truth about themselves."[7]

I answer that, Faith and reason are reconcilable because they both find their beginning and end in God, and they are both necessary for humans to create a beautiful and flourishing life. Let us first examine faith and reason's shared origin. Reason is not merely a naturally occurring accident of human biology. Rather, reason is the power of the human intellect, which is spiritual in essence. Maimonides explained that God endowed humans with the intellect as their "ultimate perfection," and this is why it can be said that humans are "created in the image and likeness of God."[8] In a similar way, not only is it evident that faith must be divinely inspired since it exceeds human reason, but also God infuses faith into humans through an inward act of grace.[9]

Regarding faith and reason's mutual end, they both aim to attain the truth, but what kind of truth? Brook concluded that faith aims for "an irreducible ultimate explanation; a first cause,

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[5] Brook, "Faith and Reason," 80.

[6] John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, encyclical letter (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1998), 14.

[7] John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, 1.

[8] Moses Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed: Volume I*, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963), 24.

[9] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1911-1925), IIa-IIae, q. 6, art 1.

final end and the ultimate intellectual ground of interpreting life."[10] Is this not also the object of reason? Aristotle said, "all men suppose what is called wisdom to deal with the first causes and the principles of things."[11] From this, Aquinas concluded that "truth must be the last end of the whole universe; and the consideration thereof must be the chief occupation of wisdom."[12] It becomes apparent that both faith and reason come from God, and through theology and philosophy, they also seek God. Regarding the supposed contradictions between faith and reason, it seems that God provides these to provoke us to investigate their truth claims more critically and pursue new knowledge, which increases our understanding of the truth and transcends us beyond our current state. In this way, the supposed contradiction between faith and reason is one method in which faith and reason work together to arrive at the fullness of truth.

Lastly, humans achieve beautiful and flourishing lives through faith and reason. Brook argued that "how reality is, independently of what we would like to think, has a real impact on our lives."[13] To expand on this, John Paul II said, "Truth enlightens man's intelligence and shapes his freedom,"[14] and Benedict XVI held that "[b]eing Christian is … the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction."[15] This direction of both faith and reason is wisdom, which Aquinas declares is the greatest "of all human pursuits" because it enables humans to "share in true happiness," to "approach to a likeness to God … unit[ing] [them] to [Him] by friendship," to enter "the kingdom of immortality," and to have joyful company and conversations.[16] This is in line with Aristotle's arguments that those who are wise and virtuous are "dearest to the gods" and "also the happiest."[17]

Reply to Objection 1: The fact that both faith and reason can discover some truths about God, such as that He exists,[18] proves that faith and reason are not separate but complementary. It is true that they have different ends, but "the subject-matter proper to each of them [has] a certain

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[10] Brook, "Faith and Reason," 85.

[11] Aristotle, "Metaphysics," trans. W. D. Ross, in *Complete Works of Aristotle, Volume 2: The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, 1552–1728 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 1553.

[12] Aquinas, *The Summa Contra Gentiles*, 2.

[13] Brook, "Faith and Reason," 79.

[14] John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, encyclical letter (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993), 1.

[15] Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, encyclical letter (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2005), 1.

[16] Aquinas, *The Summa Contra Gentiles*, 3.

[17] Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. David Ross, revised with an Introduction and Notes by Lesley Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2009), 198.

[18] Aquinas, *The Summa Contra Gentiles*, 5.

overlap with the other," as they can both pursue the cause and meaning of reality and morality.[19] Through philosophy's methods of investigation, reason discovers that the natural universe is ordered and must have been designed by some divine being, which is a doctrine of Plato.[20] From divine revelation, faith discovers that God has given meaning and direction to His creation, which includes the natural universe. Furthermore, the First Vatican Council upheld that "although faith is above reason, there can never be any real discrepancy between faith and reason, since the same God who reveals mysteries and infuses faith has bestowed the light of reason on the human mind. And God cannot deny Himself, nor can truth ever contradict truth."[21]

Reply to Objection 2: It is unreasonable and impossible to think it unwise to trust in something one does not understand, for then it would be unwise to trust anything at all. In fact, humans first come to know truth as children, having a "passive trust ... in their caregivers, their community and their society to communicate the truth to them about the world in which they find themselves."[22] Since it is reasonable and natural to have faith in humans, who are prone to error and deception, would it not be more reasonable to have faith in God, who is unerring and undeceiving? As St. John said, "If we receive human testimony, the testimony of God is greater;"[23] as well as St. Paul, "when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God's word, which is also at work in you believers."[24] Additionally, although human reason cannot understand the truths of faith, it can defend them.[25] If something can be defended, it is not unreasonable. For example, a defence of the doctrine of the Trinity can include the argument that the three persons signify that God is relationality and that we, who are made in the image and likeness of God, are meant to live in relationality also, as well as the argument that God, being infinite and supernatural, should not be confined to the limits of finite and natural laws.

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[19] Joseph W. Koterski, *An Introduction to Medieval Philosophy: Basic Concepts* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2008), 24.

[20] Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, trans. Marcus Dods and George Reith (Moscow, ID: Roman Roads Media, 2015), 14.

[21] First Vatican Council, *Dei Filius*, 1797.

[22] Brook, "Faith and Reason," 80.

[23] 1 John 5:9 (New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition).

[24] 1 Thessalonians 2:13 (NRSVCE).

[25] Bruno Niederbacher, "The Relation of Reason to Faith," in *The Oxford Handbook of Aquinas*, ed. Brian Davies and Eleonore Stump, 337–347 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

Reply to Objection 3: Humans can have hope that the proper use of reason has been restored by the grace of God; as John Paul II said, "The coming of Christ was the saving event which redeemed reason from its weakness,"[26] An example of this 'redemption of reason' can be found in John 16:13, in which Jesus proclaimed, "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth."[27] The Spirit of truth not only provides testimonies that humans are compelled to assent to by faith, but also imparts among humans the gift of wisdom. Through this divinely inspired wisdom, humans are able to contemplate and critique the truths of faith and reality without the hindrance of sin.

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[26] John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, 14.
[27] John 16:13 (NRSVCE)

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