

The Survival of Reason: Reflections on *Fides et Ratio*

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I Introduction

Catherine Pickstock has ably sketched the achievement of Plato and his reports of the academy of Socrates as an early counter-signal to a time when the philosopher has come to embody the empirical rather than reason.² But she has also had the courage, in the current philosophical marketplace, to develop the forgotten insights of Plato's lyceum—that the pursuit of wisdom took place within the context of a cultic association, i.e. within the cycle of prayer and offering which characterised the early activity of the university. So while poetics were abandoned in Plato's vision for the Republic, hymns to the gods were not. It is in this context that we can take time out of the great *putsch* of post-war British philosophy with its dismissal of metaphysics as nonsense, and attend to the reflections of a Continental *philosophe* from a far country. In possibly the last great work of his pontificate, *Fides et ratio*, we have, arguably, the most far-reaching and mature contribution of his time and one which justifies his election as a philosopher-pope. It is not inappropriate to suggest that Plato could not have wished for more in his designs for a city-state than one headed by a philosopher-king.⁴ So it seems appropriate to re-pristiniate that *sapiential* dimension of philosophy for which the Pope calls in the concluding chapters of the encyclical and suggest ways in which British philosophers might grow as a result.⁵

II Impediments to the Marriage of Minds

From the very outset it would not be a simple exercise in xenophobia to highlight possible objections to learning from a Continental philosopher. British philosophy has after all developed a tradition of rationality that must be regarded as enviable, and its assiduous attention to the dictates of logical argument, thanks to the combined efforts of Wittgenstein, Russell and Ayer have left an impression upon the houses of academe in this country which are worthy of imitation. By contrast the novels of Continental philosophers such as Camus and Sartre could come to us as the vituperations of reactionary thinkers-on-the-hoof who are railing

against a clerical heaven for the ills of their generation. Their genesis in the crises of Nietzsche about a civilisation absented by faith mark them out as signposts within a certain established tradition. But this tradition falls on deaf ears in Britain, for at least one English philosopher has dismissed existentialism as “another word for self-indulgence.” Compare the sentimentality of Camus’ *La Peste*, for instance, to the calm unassailable logic of Antony Flew’s efforts on the problem of suffering. Similarly, even in a more up-to-date context, how can one not compare the obscurantism of Lyotard’s *The Post-Modern Condition* to the clarity of exposition of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*? Or how does one offset the difficult terrain of Husserl’s *Phenomenologie* to the broad light filled brushes of the work of Ayer and Popper? British philosophy has celebrated the achievement of the natural sciences, and while prematurely shackling the philosopher to the petri-dish and the microscope, nevertheless has given us, within the Catholic world, a much more useful platform for a departure with metaphysics in its philosophy of science. How could metaphysics have attained the credibility it enjoys today were it not for the work of scientists specialising in physics and cosmology. Not so on the Continent where such fundamental philosophical doctrines as efficient causality, on which the scientific edifice rests, have long been dismantled by the activities of the *philosophes*. And the enquiry into general laws and structures in the universe, yielding up the building blocks of a modern cosmology-led metaphysics and a modern genetics-led natural law ethic, has long since buckled on the Continent to the shrill chaos of the post-structuralists and the post-moderns. It seems then there are impediments to the marriage of minds represented by the Continental and Anglo-saxon *collegia philosophiae*.

Nevertheless, there are Continentals who have exercised an enormous influence on the broad *iter* of philosophy, an influence which has transcended national boundaries and fixed key ideas permanently in the philosophical firmament. Take Pascal, Kierkegaard, Descartes and Kant. Is it possible to do philosophy without reference to the effects these thinkers have had on the general European climate? Pascal’s reflections on the expanded universe of his time and the philosophical implications of the triumph of Tycho Brahe and the Copernican system have about them an urgency and appeal that could just as easily have been written in our time, having, as we do today, the benefits of the far-reaching perspective of the Hubble telescope. The idea that a frail biological being on one planet in one star system, is the centre of a metaphysical universe, seems ridiculous to many of our contemporaries, and so Pascal’s fears for the entire theistic system of his time, with its

preoccupation with human tellurian life forms, would revisit us in our own time were intelligent life discovered in another star system. Kierkegaard too, is raised from his past insofar as he speaks to a generation in Britain for whom institutional Christianity with its collective acts of worship seems a far cry from the intimacy of their solitary encounters with the Deity in created realities. The individual before God responds to one of the great growth industries of our culture—new age gnosticism. As for Descartes, Pickstock has rightly lamented his canonisation of idealism in his seminal axiom *cogito ergo sum* and attributes the historio-genesis of his idealism to a medieval, the philosophy of Scotus. For Scotus upset the empiricism of Aquinas, when he insisted on the priority of concepts over facts and the defeat of the empirical test.⁶ Consequently, a few centuries down the line, Descartes would take this approach to its logical conclusion in his *clear and distinct ideas* and adopt in his approach to questions of faith, a reductive methodological doubt. Yet who can deny that, in an agnostic age as our own, the method of Descartes responds to the lifestyles if not the thoughts of many of our contemporaries, who have been habituated to doubt the assertions of authorities and establish their own reality by a deductive process of scepticism. Of course here we would have to make a nod to the importance of Husserl and his disciple Stein who released philosophy from its Cartesian prison by reminding us that when we cogitate we do not cogitate in a vacuum as it were but we always refer to some specific thing—the *cogitatum*. Enter stage right, phenomenology, from which tradition is born the creative thought of Karol Wojtyla. Finally, what of Kant and his distinction between phenomena and the numinous? Does not his effort to eschew metaphysics plunge us into the darkness of further epistemological controversies? There are philosopher-theologians in the Christian tradition who suggest that they have “taken Kant seriously” and who promote a new kind of idealism in Christian philosophy on the backs of an alleged affinity with Aquinas. These are the “Transcendental Thomists” whose work, especially that of Lonergan, in the Seventies and Eighties of the last century, was adopted by many Catholic seminary faculties as the sole basis for integrated philosophy and theology programmes. These philosophers argued that *the truth points to itself*, i.e. they argued for a unitive approach to the two disciplines on the basis that Lonergan had overcome the problem in Aquinas’ epistemology, taken Kant seriously with regard to the numinous and produced a theory of knowledge that would also challenge and correct the reductionism of the epistemology of many natural scientists of the post-war years. His division of the process of knowledge into four stages, experience – understanding – judgment –

decision, gave many theologians what they needed in the post-war years; a response to Kant's critique on the one hand and to logical positivism on the other. He was adopted with open arms as the saviour of Christian philosophy after the failure of Gilson's critical realism to win adherents in the Anglo-saxon theological academy in the years after Vatican II. In practice interpreters of Lonergan, like the late respected Anthony O'Sullivan, tended to emphasise his theory of knowledge as a vindication of the subjective side of the scientific experiment. Natural scientists had denied the contribution of the subject to the process of scientific discovery for too long. And indeed Karl Popper himself, who did so much to limit the dogmatism of natural scientists at this time, had already pointed to the high priority that the subjective "hunch" played in scientific discovery. He had also permanently inquired the claims of natural scientists to be infallible guides over the Stygian waters of doubt when he revealed that in practice and in theory scientists worked with a principle of non-falsifiability and not a principle of verification as A.J. Ayer had long insisted. Popper was possibly the greatest friend that beleaguered Christian philosophers could have found in the philosophical marketplace but it was Lonergan who won their hearts. For Lonergan had another ace up his philosophical sleeve when he argued that as a result of the rise of scientific dogmatism and its solemn patronage at the court of philosophy of the works of Ayer, Russell and Wittgenstein, the field of human knowledge had become seriously fragmented so that thinkers were no longer speaking to one another, nor were they able to in any serious way. The loss of a common language of discourse he put down to the fragmentation occasioned by the triumph of specialisation in science with its attendant specialisation in philosophy, by the domination of the Vienna School and its view of philosophers as mere handmaids to the real innovators, the laboratory scientists.

Lonergan would find a soul-friend in the work of the moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre. For MacIntyre the condition of society today may be likened to a collection of shipwrecked sailors on a desert island—each is pursuing his own interests under minimal constraints, strangers to each other and each speaking a different language.⁷ For verification, Lonergan pointed to the loss of a common language of intellectual discourse in the disappearance of the common intellectual currency of Latin in the eighteenth century as the point at which fragmentation, or more positively specialisation, began. The achievement of the Transcendental Thomists seemed monumental, but not everyone was happy in the Thomist household. Many neoThomists felt that Transcendentalism had made a profound error in unloosing

Thomist psychology and epistemology from the empirical test. Moreover, for the neo-Thomists there was a real issue in Lonergan's starting-point. He took his point of departure from the epistemological question, "how do we know?" whereas they were convinced Aquinas had it right when he took his starting-point from the metaphysical question "what is the nature of being?" For Aquinas, so they argued, the starting-point was a kind of metaphysical certainty, evidenced from top to bottom in the human family, by the jurist who asked what law was to the peasant who sunk his spade into the topsoil. The peasant did so with a kind of metaphysical certainty, that the world in which he worked was real and not rumbled by metaphysical doubt. The serf in his field did not ask "how do I know that the spade is real?" before feeling the justification to begin work. Lonergan, many neo-Thomists felt, had ceded the pass to Descartes in beginning from the way we cogitate about our experience. They argued that there was no way out from the Cartesian nightmare once you took your starting point from the mind. In this respect, Pickstock's instincts are correct, for it is Descartes who "conducts a funerary procession for philosophy".⁸

One would have to be Apollo before the Sybilline phantom to guess where British philosophy will head in the next few years, but it seems present orientation suggest a consolidation of new metaphysics in the continuing work of cosmologists, like Hawking, Jaki, Coyne and Stoeger. But there is a disquieting rearguard action being carried out by ultra-Darwinists who ply a reborn trade with the tools that Darwin and Spencer first elaborated. Steven Rose has perceptively identified the problem with ultra-Darwinism—its reduction of complex living processes to one simple model of explanation. He argues that philosophy is technology-led. So just as the Renaissance was dominated by the hydraulic model applied to living processes (see the diagrams and drawings of Da Vinci and Michelangelo), so the eighteenth century saw Newton's mechanistic models predominate, the nineteenth century the electrical model as a theory of living processes, the early twentieth the atomic model, and the latter half of the twentieth century the DNA model for explaining living processes.⁹ Biologists have been as susceptible as other scientists to philosophical currents. In fact Rose argues that the problem today is not which model to choose, that is to cede the field to the reductionists, but how best to harness the different fields in one overarching or grand unified theory. Astro-physicists will know what he is talking about. Rose gives the example of five biologists who decide to go out for a picnic. During the picnic a frog leaps from the bank into the nearby pond. And a discussion begins on why or rather how (the two questions are not always distinguished) the frog decided to jump into the pond. The first, a

physiologist, describes the frog's leg muscles and nervous system and explains that the frog jumps because impulses have travelled from the frog's retina to its brain and thence down motor nerves to its muscles. The second, a biochemist, points out that the muscles are composed of actin and myosin proteins and the frog jumps because the properties of these fibrous proteins enable them to slide past one another. The third, a developmental biologist, describes the processes whereby the fertilised ovum divides, in due course forming a nervous system and musculature. The fourth, a student of animal behaviour, points to a snake in the tree above and explains the frog jumps to escape the snake. And finally the fifth, an evolutionist, explains the processes of natural selection which ensured that only those frog ancestors able both to detect snakes and to jump fast enough to escape them had a chance to survive and breed. Five biologists, different explanations, so which is the right one? The truth is that they are all right, just different according to premise. The biochemist's explanation is the reductionist one which today would enjoy most intellectual respectability—but it does not eliminate the need for the others. Rose says that they are all valid as long as they do not contradict one another.¹⁰ But he is not alarmist. A new school of neuro-philosophers has arisen which collapses physiology into biochemistry and biochemistry into chemistry and physics (Churchland and Dennett), thus dismissing what they call "folk psychology" in favour of neuro-computation in which brains are understood simply as computers.¹¹ Another reductionism. So Lonergan's attempt to offer a broader and inclusive theory of knowledge and discovery is not invalid.

We have to turn to a legal philosopher, however, if we want a way out of the present impasse generated by reductionism in the natural sciences. Harold Berman develops five criteria for what we might call pan-scientific method. A science in the modern Western sense may be defined as i) an integrated body of knowledge; ii) in which particular occurrences of phenomena are systematically explained; iii) in terms of general principles or truths or laws; iv) knowledge of which is obtained by a combination of hypothesis, observation, verification and experimentation; while v) the scientific method of investigation is not the same for all sciences but is to be specifically adapted to the nature of the phenomena under observation. This definition, elaborated by Berman, is important for us as it rejects the view still common on campuses in the UK and the US that only methods appropriate to the natural sciences can properly be called scientific.¹² The five features elaborated above in fact suggest that the origins of modern scientific method lie not in the sixteenth century with Galileo, Kepler and Tycho Brahe but with twelfth century jurists who developed this approach and whose insights were

later systematised in the back-breaking work of philosophers of the empirical such as Albert Magnus and Aquinas.¹³ What Berman is looking for is a return to the broad methodology of the medievals so as to free modern science of its attachment to the reductionism of post-Darwinian chemistry and physics. He seeks the repristination of *scientia* in a way that is broad enough to include under its umbrella other disciplines developed since the twelfth century including law and theology. Berman is however useful to British philosophy in that he provides us with a way out of the straitened gates of the Vienna School, opens us up to the hypothesis-led theory of Popper, allows a place for the frontier-thinkers of modern astro-physics, and finally permits the return from exile of metaphysics. He is then an Apollo to our Sybilline vale.¹⁴

III The Project of the Philosopher-Pope

Enter crashing upon the steps of the Senate House, as it were, in a trajectory that takes them through the Husserlian escape from Descartes, the Lublin Thomists and their interest in the human subject as the principal *locus philosophicus*. Existential personalism, as it has been called, or as the philosopher-pope has it in his book *The Acting Person*, is designed to put anthropology at the centre-stage of philosophy for the twenty-first century.¹⁵ It is only toward the end of his reign as the twentieth century's only philosopher-pope that John Paul II can feel sufficiently confident in the success of his project, at least within the Church, to produce the mature work of his pontificate and let slip the cat from the philosophical bag, his essay on faith and reason, *Fides et ratio*. The encyclical is remarkable for its defence of reason against the onslaught of postmodernism which like the hordes of Alaric stands menacingly without the walls of traditional foundationalist philosophy. If genius is the rediscovery of the obvious, then the podium belongs to foundationalism for it is the fundamental argument of the encyclical, and is expressed in the adage of Aquinas, the conformity of the mind to reality (and not vice-versa—as Pickstock adroitly observes) or *adequatio rei et intellectus* (FR 82):

Wherever men and women discover a call to the absolute and transcendent, the metaphysical dimension of reality opens up before them: in truth, in beauty, in moral values, in other persons, in being itself, in God. We face a great challenge at the end of this millennium to move from *phenomenon* to *foundation*, a step as necessary as it is urgent.¹⁶

Note the insistence of the encyclical—the philosopher-pope is a theist because he is a realist, he is not a realist because he is a theist. There is no concession here, in Husserl's disciple, to Berkeley's

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guaranteeing God of the gaps. Theism is not a convenient crutch that props up a faulty and reductionist vision of reality, it is the conclusion of an adequately attended to the metaphysical dimensions of the empirical world. The metaphysical is not just a syllogistic conclusion, though, because the style of the Pope's discourse suggests it is more an epiphany, a sudden spiritual manifestation of the world. It inheres in being and is not a creation of the over-active human imagination. The philosopher-pope then insists that his approach to the question of empiricism is to explode its reductive optic. This echoes the remark of Mary Midgley in her plea for pluralism among empiricists; "neither the value of money nor the rules of football are collapsible into biology or physics—we surely live in one world, but it is a big one."¹⁷ The philosopher-pope continues that it is not a question of short-circuiting the epistemological process:

We cannot stop short at experience alone; even if experience does reveal the human being's interiority and spirituality, speculative thinking must penetrate to the spiritual core and the ground from which it rises. Therefore a philosophy which shuns metaphysics would be radically unsuited to the task of mediation in the understanding of Revelation.¹⁸

But lest we think that empiricism is the target here, we should note that this passage is directed to theologians as well as philosophers. There have been schools of theology in the post-conciliar period who have aped the empiricist rejection of metaphysics for fashionable reasons, if reason is the word to use here, and it is these schools of theology, built on highly subjectivist foundations, that are the object of the philosopher-pope's censure. The empiricist tradition of British philosophy can then relax a moment while Continental philosophy comes in for a bad quarter of an hour. For Continental philosophy with its emphasis on man as the moral subject living in a disembodied world, and struggling to bridge the Cartesian chasm, hems in Christian theologians because it strikes at the possibility of an objective content to Revelation, as the encyclical explicitly states. So keen are such philosophers and theologians to emphasise the subjective experience of humankind that they play into the hands of Nietzsche, Sartre and Camus. If man is busy creating his own essence and descends into an increasingly complex round of introspection as the primary method of reflection on his experience, then he short-circuits the Augustinian model of illumination as well, i.e. *ab exteriora ad interiora et ab interioribus ad superiora*. He simply fails to arrive at the *superiora* because he becomes entrenched in the grit of the *interiora* like a

disorientated David Roberts in the middle of an Egyptian *ha'sim*:

A theology without a metaphysical horizon could not move beyond an analysis of religious experience, nor would it allow the *intellectus fidei* to give a coherent account of the universal and transcendent value of revealed truth.¹⁹

By the very same turn of the Caesarian coin, one could also see this statement of the encyclical as a rebuke to Transcendental Thomism. It seems to suggest that it is not enough to reconfigure a faulty epistemological structure in order to provide a foundation for theologians, there must be a serious adscription to the entire objective super-structure of metaphysics, old or new.

The Continental philosopher has been preoccupied with the function of language, not denying of course the attention to language we find in the late Wittgenstein and the likes of Kelsen and Austin, but one will not find an arationalism among these; it is in the work of Bultmann, Gadamer and Ricoeur that we find the emergence of the science of hermeneutics and the analysis of language. The philosopher-pope decides to place the threat to reason in modern times at the door of some interpreters of these Continental philosophers:

Some scholars working in these fields tend to stop short at the question of how reality is understood and expressed, without going further to see whether reason can discover its essence. How can we fail to see in such a frame of mind the confirmation of our present crisis of confidence in the powers of reason?²⁰

The problem with an excessive interest in the *phenomenology* of language is that it is not enough to furnish us with the building blocks of a coherent schema within which propositional expressions of faith, such as in the creeds of Tradition, can find a comfortable home. For the philosopher-pope the solution to this inability to break through to essential considerations in the application of reason is to be found in the comforts that the Christian faith gives to the limitations of human language. For here as elsewhere in the encyclical the philosopher-pope seems to be conscious of the applications of philosophy to theology. There are forms of spiritual theology which underplay the importance of knowledge in the experience of faith, just as in some quarters the writings of professional philosophers can sometimes pay no allegiance to the principle of non-contradiction and the need for clarity of exposition. One is reminded of the comment of Schopenhauer:

To conceal a want of real ideas, many make for themselves an imposing apparatus of long compound words, intricate flourishes and phrases, new and unheard-of expressions, all of which together furnish an extremely difficult jargon that sounds very learned. Yet with all this they say—precisely nothing.²¹

Spiritual theology which obscures rather than reveals may be labouring from a loss of faith in the power of the human knower to express religious truth, even if framed, as is often the case, in the respectable livery of Thomism's *via negativa*. To this the philosopher pope insists: "Faith clearly presupposes that human language is capable of expressing divine and transcendent reality in a universal way— analogically, it is true, but no less meaningfully for that."²² This judgment of the encyclical alludes to the controversy of the thirteenth century involving Abbot Joachim on the possibility of knowing God.²³ Incidentally, here we touch upon a problem very skillfully aired by Gavin Hyman in his exploration of the dispute in the philosophy of religion between John Hick and Gerard Loughlin.²⁴ Hick's philosophical heritage comes to us by way of Oman, Farmer, Price and Kemp-Smith, just as the logical positivists owe their historical genesis to Descartes, Locke, Hobbes, Kant and Hume.²⁵ For Hick's first important work *Faith and Knowledge* (1957) identifies the author as one of a series of Anglo-American philosophical theologians who are broadly modernist, empirical and foundationalist in their framework, trying, as they do, to ground the theological enterprise in their adopted philosophical system.²⁶ Loughlin points out that the theological discourse is foundational and that it is its own foundation—"it founds things, other things are built on it ... there are no reasons, beliefs or values which found it; it founds reason, belief and value."²⁷ The only problem with Loughlin's laudable defence of theology is that it ignores faith's foundation in metaphysics. Furthermore, there are forms of theology which argue from similar premises that religious experience is its own confirmation and that it does not admit of a cognitive component that is susceptible to reason. And it is this denial of the cognitive and rational component in faith that concerns the philosopher-pope. He ties it to a loss of confidence in the possibility of arriving at a unified and organic vision of knowledge:

Taking up what has been taught repeatedly by the Popes for several generations and reaffirmed by the Second Vatican Council itself, I wish to reaffirm strongly the conviction that the human being can come to a unified and organic vision of knowledge ... The segmentation of knowledge, with its splintered approach to truth and consequent fragmentation of meaning, keeps people today from coming to an interior unity.²⁸

This echoes the remark of MacIntyre (“what we have a mere fragments of a conceptual scheme”) which though directed at the current state of moral philosophy nevertheless bears application further afield to other areas of knowledge and enquiry. Theology no less than philosophy has been characterised by a loss of unity in that each specialty, be it dogmatics, systematics, scripture, morals or canon law, can at times seem to pursue its own goals without sufficient allusion to the contributions and insights of the others. Worse, it is possible in such a framework that a scholar gifted in scripture may feel authorised by his own specialty to invade another field and pontificate at length to other specialists on their own turf.²⁹ Obviously this is not what the encyclical envisages in its appeal for a grand unified framework in the pursuit of human knowledge, but it is not incidental for us to point out that this is really the privileged task of philosophy. Here Lonergan’s concerns and his experiment with functional specialties in theology stand out as benchmarks of what he calls theology for historical consciousness. In this and many other respects he is ahead of his time. It seems it is this aspect of his work, rather than his epistemology, that will probably stand the test of time and this which has arguably been assumed by the latest intervention of the papal magisterium. This said, we have in the last chapters of the encyclical a nailing of papal colours to the philosophical mast and the recipient for the papal pennant is Thomism after the example of the Lublin variety’s synthesis with contemporary philosophy:

I believe that those philosophers who wish to respond today to the demands which the word of God makes on human thinking should develop their thought on the basis of these postulates (the unification of human knowledge) and in organic continuity with the great tradition which, beginning with the ancients, passes through the Fathers of the Church and the masters of Scholasticism and includes the fundamental achievements of modern and contemporary thought.³⁰

With this advice the encyclical invites philosophers to return to another age when the unity of human knowledge was the predominant treasury of the university. As Alexander Neckham described life in the medieval academies of Paris in the thirteenth century:

Here the arts flourish, the heavenly page rules
The laws stand, rights are illumined and medicine reigns.³¹

Philosophy provides the over-arching umbrella under which such specialties found a home and a niche for its practitioners. Here we see the journey of the encyclical from Jerusalem to Athens if one may use

an expression of Tertullian.³² Yet out of this tradition of the organic unity of human thought a leviathan could emerge. Here the philosopher-pope warns of *eclecticism* as a danger to the credibility of the philosophical project. He means by this those who in research, teaching and argumentation, even in theology, tend to use individual ideas drawn from different philosophies, without concern for their internal coherence, their place within a system or their historical context. Yet what he censures in this approach is not the quarrying of ideas from other philosophers but the absorption of elements which may be erroneous or ill-suited to the task at hand. The antidote to eclecticism seems to lie in scientific rigour:

The rigorous and far-reaching study of philosophical doctrines, their particular terminology and the context in which they arose, helps to overcome the danger of eclecticism and makes it possible to integrate them into theological discourse.³³

Also falling foul of the papal quill is *historicism* by which he does not mean the historico-critical method, to raise the spectre of biblical hermeneutics from the ashes of *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, but rather the claim that “the truth of a philosophy is determined on the basis of its appropriateness to a certain period and a certain historical purpose.”³⁴ What was true in one period, historicists claim, may not be true in another. In a rather nice flourish the encyclical explains that for them the history of thought becomes little more than an “archeological resource useful for illustrating positions once held but for the most part outmoded and meaningless now.”³⁵ He applies to theology the lesson learnt from historicism, namely that even if time-limited one may still assess a philosophy on the strength of its truth or falsehood, in a rather steely passage designed to warn theologians of the seriousness of their discipline. His chief theologian, a self-confessed Platonist, for whom the pope still expresses the greatest fraternal reverence, strikes the right note in an interview when he says “when I began theology I did not come to the university to learn a trade but to deepen my faith.”³⁶

A third threat to the broad canvas of philosophy especially in the Continental tradition is identified as *scientism* which the Pope describes as the refusal to admit the validity of forms of knowledge other than those of the positive sciences; relegating religious, theological, ethical and aesthetic knowledge to the realm of mere fantasy. The encyclical observes that this position is the legacy of positivism which considered metaphysical statements to be meaningless. Astutely, the Pope states that there is a new guise to scientism in our time which dismisses values as mere products of the emotions and rejects the notion of being in order to

clear the way for pure and simple “facticity.” This is the kind of philosophy which is found on the lips of Dickens’ Thomas Gradgrind in that memorable analysis of the social malaise of the world of crude scientific industrialism, *Hard Times*. The encyclical sums up the implications of a “scientistic outlook” (as opposed to a truly scientific outlook) and lays the blame for a modern ethics-free technocracy squarely at the door of runaway dogmatic scientism.³⁷

No less dangerous for the expansive project of the new millennium is the philosophy of pragmatism which precludes choices made on the basis of ethical principles. The practical consequences of pragmatism are observable in the growth of a form of democracy that is not grounded upon any reference to unchanging values. Tony Blair’s victory speech outside 10 Downing Street in 1993 was a case in point: “No more dogmas for we are the people’s party” and again at the last Labour conference: “we used to believe in eternal truths but we must now move on to values.” These are the perfectly crafted premises of the manifesto for a new kind of democracy in which the values-agenda is set anew each time there is a general election. Allan Bloom would have found this kind of political spin deeply disturbing because it is really philosophical. Spin doctoring aside, we can see that the electoral and social projects of New Labour are based firmly on a doctrine of political pragmatism. Whether this will eventually satisfy an electorate that needs certainty and security in an age of unceasing change remains to be seen.³⁸

The final threat to the pursuit of reason in philosophy is one that is as much cosmological as ethical, namely *nihilism*. For the pope this amounts to the denial of all foundationalism and the negation of all objective truth. Perhaps more the proud boast of the likes of Nietzsche and aesthetes such as Baudelaire, this philosophy in practice leads to the denial of many aspects of what it means to be human. If the universe is not a cosmos but a chaos then many forms of ordered narrative and many forms of science fall by the wayside. What is interesting in the encyclical’s analysis of nihilism is its assertion that its roots lie in the neglect of being. The loss of metaphysics leads eventually to the philosopher losing touch with objective truth and also letting slip the very ground of human dignity. Nihilism leads to the abuse of man:

This in turn makes it possible to erase from the countenance of man and woman the marks of their likeness to God, and thus lead them little by little either to a destructive will to power or to a solitude without hope ... Truth and freedom either go hand in hand or they perish in misery.³⁹

It is interesting that this concluding remark refers back to the Pope’s

first encyclical *Redemptor hominis* and in this light he comments again on the words of the Gospel, “you will know the truth and the truth will set you free” (Jn 3:32). Here the last great pronouncement of the pontificate ties up with the warning of the first. It would appear that in the intervening years a variety of conflicts and gross abuses of human rights have confirmed the intuition of the first essay toward devising a response to nihilism, be it practical or theoretical. For nihilists the time of certainty is now past, and the human being must live in a horizon of total absence of meaning, where everything is provisional and ephemeral. Inherent in the philosophy of chaos of the likes of Nietzsche is an ethic of violence—man must impose his will and his own schema upon reality and this must be done by force, for there is no inherent design or pattern to the universe, human or cosmic. Civil liberties are often the first to be extinguished in a society that has ceded the field to the assertion of power as the only means of negotiation with reality. The Pope recalls that a certain positivist cast of mind continues the illusion that thanks to the advances of scientific and technical progress, men and women may live as a demiurge, single-handedly and completely taking charge of their own destiny, and even making that destiny.⁴⁰

IV Conclusion

Rationalist optimism began the twentieth century with an unconquerable faith in history as the triumphant march of reason. By the end of that century, two world wars later and several holocausts thrown in, many are tempted to despair of the possibility of an alliance between reason, the true, the good and the beautiful. How can humanity look upon the pantheon to reason in Paris again with pride after having shed so much blood in the assertion of irrational causes? The appearance of so much moral evil in the heart of man has made human reason seem guilty of a separation from reality. And yet, what the philosopher-Pope extends to philosophers is an olive branch to reason which comes from the terrain of faith, the optimism of the redeemed.

- 1 Priest of the Diocese of Northampton.
- 2 Catherine Pickstock has described this process very ably in her book *After Writing: The Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford Blackwell 1998), 12-45. For Pickstock everything went wrong in philosophy with Duns Scotus because he broke with the philosophical tradition of centuries and deduced facts from concepts where before Aquinas, for example, deduced his concepts from facts (Aquinas was an empiricist of sorts). Scotus begins with concepts and works from the possible existence of things to realities. The process was brought to a head by Descartes whose “I think—therefore I am” begins with a concept and tests reality against clear

and distinct ideas. Descartes “conducts an intellectual funeral procession” which closes the human mind against reality. The rest is history. Reason became divorced from reality.

- 3 Newman concludes his *tour de force* on the university with some apposite reflections on the lyceum at Athens. He asks whether Marcus Aurelius, Cicero, Horace or Gregory of Nyssa, in coming to Athens as youths bent upon an education, did so for love of wisdom or love of truth? “He goes to the Parthenon to study the scriptures of Phidias; to the temple of the Dioscuri to see the paintings of Polygnotus ... onward he proceeds still and now he has come to that still more celebrated Academe ... and there his eye is arrested by just one object—the very presence of Plato. Had our stranger got nothing by his voyage but the sight of the breathing and moving Plato, had he entered no lecture-room to hear, no gymnasium to converse, he had got some measure of education, and something to tell of to his grandchildren” (cf. J. H. Newman, *The Idea of a University*, Chicago 1987, 494—495).
- 4 Plato, *The Republic*, London 1964, bk iv, 484, at p. 244.
- 5 John Paul II, *Fides et ratio*, London 1998, no. 80, at p. 119.
- 6 There are theologians who argue, however, that Scotus was qualifying problems in Aquinas and who suggest that Aquinas was not the empiricist that many believe him to be. In particular they argue that Aquinas’ epistemology, notably his idea of the *phantasm*, forced a break in the mind’s perception of reality, so that for Aquinas it is an intellectual concept that is first intuited by the mind not empirical reality. The same theologians also argue that Aquinas’ distinction between form and matter must be revised in the present age due to the discoveries of the sub-atomic structure of matter pioneered by physicists and cosmologists of our own time. These show that we can no longer hold to a distinction between matter and *form* in the way that Aquinas understood it. This is a position, incidentally, that they share with a number of cosmologists from the Vatican Observatory.
- 7 MacIntyre wrote in the Eighties that “what we possess [...] are the fragments of a conceptual scheme, parts which now lack those contexts from which their significance derived. We possess indeed simulacra of morality, we continue to use the key expressions. But we have—very largely, if not entirely—lost our comprehension, both theoretical and practical, of morality” (cf. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, Notre Dame 1981, p. 232).
- 8 Cf. Pickstock, *After Writing*, p. 123.
- 9 “In the hands of a generation of ultra-Darwinists, modern biology seeks to explain everything in terms of DNA. The biology of the future must overcome this crude reductionism” (Steven Rose, “A New Biology,” in *Prospect* 49, Feb. 2000, p. 27).
- 10 Rose, “A New Biology,” p. 28.
- 11 Similarly in the selfish gene view of the world, the organism is DNA’s way of making more DNA in order to ensure its safe replication. But as Rose points out, DNA is an inert molecule (hence the possibility of recovering it intact from amber many thousands of years old as in *Jurassic Park*). What

brings it to life is the cell in which it is embedded. DNA cannot make copies of itself unaided; it cannot therefore replicate itself in the sense in which this term is usually understood. Replication requires an appropriately protected environment, the presence of a variety of complex molecular precursors, a set of protein enzymes, and a supply of chemical energy (Rose, "A New Biology," p. 29).

- 12 Cf. Berman, *Law and Revolution*, p. 152.
- 13 Aquinas and Albert are here contrasted with Abelard and Scotus. The former built their systems on empirical observation (not the essentialism later attributed to them by existentialists) while the latter tended to see logic as the principal means of verification (for more on this see my article "St. Thomas the Exegete," in *Milltown Studies* 44 [1999] 14–15 and the article by Eleanor Stump, "Biblical Commentary and Philosophy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas*, Cambridge 1993, pp. 252–268).
- 14 I am referring to Heaney's rewritten version of the encounter between Apollo and the Sybil in the *Aeneid*, bk vi, lines 98–148 (in Seamus Heaney, "The Golden Bough," in *Seeing Things*, London 1991, p. 1).
- 15 This is why the philosopher-pope made the first literary essay of his pontificate an exercise in Christian anthropology when he wrote the encyclical *Redemptor hominis* (1979).
- 16 Cf. John Paul II, *Fides et ratio*, no. 83, at *ibid.*, p. 123.
- 17 Cf. Rose, "A New Biology," p. 28.
- 18 Cf. John Paul II, *Fides et ratio* no. 83, at *ibid.*, p. 123.
- 19 Cf. John Paul II, *Fides et ratio*, no. 83, at *ibid.*, p. 123.
- 20 Cf. John Paul II, *Fides et ratio*, no. 84, at *ibid.*, p. 124.
- 21 Cf. Bryan Magee, "Sense and Nonsense—the Writing of Philosophy," in *Prospect* 49, Feb 2000, 23.
- 22 Cf. John Paul II, *Fides et ratio*, no. 84, at *ibid.*, p. 124–125.
- 23 The Pope cites the statement of the Fourth Lateran Council (cf. Lateran IV, 1215, *De errore Abbatis Joachim*, II, at DS 806).
- 24 Cf. Gavin Hyman, "Hick and Loughlin on Disputes and Frameworks," in *New Blackfriars* 79 (1993) 391–405.
- 25 Cf. Gerard Loughlin, *Mirroring God's World: A Critique of John Hick's Speculative Theology*, unpublished dissertation Cambridge 1986, p. 22, nt. 24.
- 26 Cf. Hyman, "Hick and Loughlin," p. 393.
- 27 Cf. Loughlin, *Mirroring God's World*, p. 58.
- 28 Cf. John Paul II, *Fides et ratio*, no. 85, at *ibid.*, p. 125.
- 29 This is the criticism sometimes made of scripture scholars who venture into dogmatics without a corresponding jog through the vale of church history.
- 30 Cf. John Paul II, *Fides et ratio*, no. 85, at *ibid.*, p. 126.
- 31 "Hic florent artes, caelestis pagina regna
Stant leges, lucet jus, medicina viget"
(cf. Henri de Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale*, Lyon 1959, I, 120).
- 32 "Because Tertullian sees the need for rational theological enquiry he has been placed among the first philosophical Christians." I am using an expression that appears in Tertullian to signify the move from faith to reason

- and from dogmatics to apologetics (cf. Eric Osborn, *Tertullian*, p. 35).
- 33 Cf. John Paul II, *Fides et ratio*, no. 86, at *ibid.*, p. 128.
- 34 Cf. John Paul II, *Fides et ratio*, no. 87, at *ibid.*, p. 128.
- 35 Cf. John Paul II, *Fides et ratio*, no. 87, at *ibid.*, p. 128.
- 36 Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, *The Salt of the Earth*, San Francisco 1997, p. 66.
- 37 "The scientific mentality has succeeded in leading many to think that if something is technologically possible it is therefore morally admissible" (cf. John Paul II, *Fides et ratio*, no. 88, at *ibid.*, p. 130).
- 38 One is reminded of the postcard adage which a seminarian in the heady Seventies had pinned to his wardrobe: "change as an unchanging ideal itself becomes changeless."
- 39 Cf. John Paul II, *Fides et ratio*, no. 90, at *ibid.*, p. 131.
- 40 Cf. John Paul II, *Fides et ratio*, no. 91, at *ibid.*, p. 134.

The Recovery of Metaphysics

Francis J. Selman

One of the most notable features of *Faith and Reason* is its plea for metaphysics. The twentieth century saw interest in metaphysics recede to a low ebb. There were signs, however, that the tide had already begun to turn before Pope John Paul made his plea. Calls for metaphysics sometimes came from unexpected quarters. At the end of 1996, Clifford Longley wrote in *The Tablet*:

Unless it is grounded in reality, one must doubt whether a sense of the sacred can be much more than a kind of aesthetic sensitivity, an accoutrement of a man or a woman of exemplary taste. And one must doubt whether it can be grounded in reality without something like metaphysics to give it firm anchors.¹

In the same article, Longley suggested that the answer to the philosophical debate of our time about what is real, may be connected with "perhaps the most important event in European history in the entire second millennium", namely the rediscovery of most of Aristotle's thought by the West in the thirteenth century. "It brought about the rebirth of Christian metaphysics, and it put them on a rigorously logical

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