The Drama of the Separation

of Faith and Reason[#]

GIOVANNI B. SALA, S.J.
Hochschule für Philosophie München

1. Two forms of knowledge

In a strictly philosophical context, reason and faith are distinguished as the two fundamental forms of human knowing: a knowledge immanently generated as the result of one's own experience, understanding and judgment, and a knowledge attained when one relies on the veracity of another and accepts that other's knowledge as one's own. Here we wish to reserve the word "faith" for this second form of knowledge as it occurs specifically within the religious sphere, and in particular for knowledge of the "mysteries hidden in God that cannot be known unless they are revealed by God himself" (DS· 1795). Hence, we can follow the Encyclical "Fides et Ratio [Faith and Reason]"· (*FR*) and call this second form of knowledge as it occurs in every other sphere "knowledge by believing".

The way of believing, or faith in a generic sense, is no less rational than the way that consists in using one's reason to personally gather the evidence that grounds true knowledge. Indeed, what a person knows is an inseparable agglomeration of personally achieved knowledge and knowledge borrowed from others and, more generally, from that common patrimony that is the culture of the time (*FR* 31).

This twofold way is valid not only for common sense, but also for science. Science, and especially the sciences of nature, have a social dimension and so are, in large measure, instances of knowledge by believing. Without a collaboration among scientists, whether they are contemporaries or live in successive periods, there would be no scientific progress. Every scientist would be forced to spend his life redoing work done by others without ever making his own original contribution. "The human being—the one who seeks the truth—is also the one *who lives by belief.*" (*FR* 31) The possibility of belief or faith lies in a property that is intrinsic to truth: the true of its nature is not private, but public. It occurs only in a mind that has succeeded in making a well-founded judgment (St. Thomas, *Summa Theol.* I, 16, 2); but what is thus known is independent of the individual mind and is therefore communicable from one mind to another by the process that is faith.

2. The encounter of philosophy with the Christian faith

We now wish to consider religious faith, and more precisely the Christian faith, in its relation to the specific exercise of reason that is philosophy; this is the theme of the Supreme Pontiff's message. It will be useful to trace the history of this relationship briefly, in order to recognize the separation the Pope refers to when he denounces "the drama of the separation of faith and reason" (*FR* 45-48).[1]

[#] [Originally published as "Il dramma della separazione tra fede e ragione" in *Per una lettura dell'Enciclica FIDES ET RATIO* [*Toward a Reading of the Encyclical FIDES ET RATIO*] (Vatican City, Quaderni de "L'Osservatore Romano": 1999), pp. 103-111.]

· [Denzinger-Schönmetzer, *Enchiridion symbolorum definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum* [*Handbook of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations Concerning Faith and Morals*], 1973, editio 35, Herder (Freiburg in Breisgau).]

· [Encyclical Letter "FIDES ET RATIO" of Pope John Paul II, 14 Sept. 1998. References are to numbered sections in the Encyclical. Quotations and paraphrases will generally use the wording of the official English version.]

[1] It would be a mistake to restrict religious faith to the Christian faith and to limit philosophy to "western" philosophy. But it is not without reason that the Encyclical fixes its attention on the philosophy that emerged from classical Greek thought. On the one hand, this philosophy has had a development and has exercised a cultural influence that are not met with in

The usual chronology divides the history of philosophy into 1) ancient philosophy, embracing the thought of classical Greece and its direct continuation in Hellenistic-Roman philosophy, 2) Patristic and Scholastic philosophy, 3) modern philosophy.

The acceptance of Christianity marked a new beginning in the history of philosophy. "Christianity, in order to develop and express its doctrinal content, made use of ancient philosophy. However, this doctrinal content, i.e., its whole conception of God, the world and man, and consequently its whole spiritual attitude, is in principle different from antiquity."[2] In the Patristic age philosophy still was not distinguished from theology or from the Christian religion, either in principle or in fact (indeed, the Fathers saw the Christian religion as the true philosophy (*FR* 38)), but medieval, Scholastic, philosophy was quite aware of the distinction between theology and philosophy. However, for the Scholastic Doctors philosophical reflection still had the purpose, proximately or remotely, of preparing the rational instruments for theological speculation.

The medieval Scholastics were the first to recognize philosophy's status as a science distinct from theology, because philosophy is based on its own principles and proceeds by its own methods. But at the same time they placed this distinction within theology, the science *par excellence* in the nascent universities. The systematic foundation for this distinction was the theorem of the supernatural formulated by Philip, chancellor of the University of Paris from 1218 to 1230, which brought to completion a complex movement of thought that had gone on for some time. The theorem consisted in positing two entitatively distinct orders of reality: the order of grace, faith and charity, and the order of nature, reason and natural love of God.[3]

This distinction not only made it possible for a distinct and subordinate area to be formed for philosophy within theology; it also invited reason to grow in its awareness of its own capabilities and thus to demand its own area of research. This was fulfilled at the beginning of the modern era in Humanism and the Renaissance.

But once established, the distinction between faith and reason revealed, in turn, the need for a further distinction within the domain of reason, between philosophy and science. In the 13th Century theology was able to work out its own method as the science of faith only after it had distinguished itself from philosophy. So again, in the modern age philosophy could not formulate its own nature and method without distinguishing itself from science. It thus provided a place for science as a department of knowledge that establishes its own terms and first principles without needing to borrow them from philosophy.

What we have pointed out here is nothing but the well-known process by which human knowledge develops in general. This development consists not only in the accumulation of new knowledge, but also in the gradual emergence of higher and higher viewpoints, precisely because of this new content. It thus becomes possible to make distinctions between contents that, at a prior stage of knowledge, were included under the same undifferentiated viewpoint. And what we have noted in distinguishing the birth of theology, of philosophy, and of science as different fields of knowledge is also true *within* each of these three fields, especially within science. In this sense, there is no reason to deplore the fact that, in contemporary culture, philosophy has become one of the many "fields of human knowing" (*FR* 47). But it is quite another thing that philosophical reason has put aside the search for the fundamental truths of existence, and in particular the search for the absolute, and, by taking "side-tracks" (*FR* 48), has reduced itself from

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other currents of philosophy, so that today it has a worldwide reach. On the other hand, it was worked out in such close contact with the Christian faith that neither its history nor its content is comprehensible if one prescinds from Christianity.

[2] BERNHARD GEYER, *Die patristische und scholastische Philosophie*, 1927, 1 (Volume II of the *Grundriß der Geschichte der Philosophie*).

[3] Cf. BERNARD LONERGAN, S.J., *Grace and Freedom. Operative Grace in the Thought of St. Thomas Aquinas*, London 1971, 15f. [Republished in Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran, Vol. 1 (Univ. of Toronto Press: 2000), 16f.]

sapiential knowledge to a marginal knowledge that not infrequently is useless or even harmful for the purpose of making existence more human.

3. The distinction between faith and philosophy becomes a separation

This distinction meets the intrinsic needs of reason in its "natural" exercise and in its task of "fides quaerens intellectum [faith seeking understanding]". But it has been developing in modern philosophy into a separation in the sense of an estrangement and, not infrequently, even an opposition of reason to faith. If it is true, therefore, that the philosophy of the modern age is not comprehensible without the profound influence of the religious, Christian problematic developed by Patristic and Scholastic philosophy, it is no less true that its journey has taken a turn that places it in growing opposition to Christian thought (*FR* 46).

In this sense, the Encyclical speaks of the "drama of the separation of faith and reason". This is a separation that, far from permitting a more luxuriant flourishing of human reason, has rather "abased" it (*FR* 84). Human reason has become enclosed within a horizon of immanence that represses that dynamism of unlimited openness in which the medieval Doctors recognized a "desiderium naturale videndi Deum [natural desire to see God]".

A decisive contribution to this process of separation was made by Kant and by later German idealism. With Kant, the horizon of immanence definitively dropped on philosophy: his turn to the subject was configured as a turn to a subject confined within the limits of sense experience. It is therefore not surprising that Kant recognized in this subject, cut off from its unlimited dynamism of transcendence, only the ability to reach the truth of "appearance". The natural desire to see God thus becomes the transcendental idea of God, the source of a "*natural* and inevitable *illusion*" (*Critique of Pure Reason*, A 298 [Norman Kemp Smith translation]).

The way of practical reason remains open to the mind but, as Kant explains at the end of the last version of his "moral proof of the existence of God", this is a postulate that does not provide "any *objectively valid* proof of the Being of God" (*Critique of Judgment*, B 424 note [p. 301n in the J.H. Bernard translation]), because it rests on "subjective grounds" (*Critique of Pure Reason*, A 829). Practical faith in God is Kant's substitute for an assent of faith that the mind can make responsibly in accord with its innate need for truth. But the consequence of Kantian practical faith is that being religious actually means only "acting *as if* [als ob] such a ruler of the world [God] were real" ("Von einem neuerdings erhobenen vornehmen Ton in der Philosophie", *Akademie-Ausgabe*, *VIII* 397 note).

What Kant had separated, Hegel united again. For Hegel, religion, and faith with it, is one of the cultural products in which the becoming of absolute spirit takes form. In revealed religion the absolute spirit manifests itself as an object of faith, but in philosophy, the supreme cultural sphere, it becomes the object of a thought in which absolute knowing fully becomes itself. In this way, Christian faith is eliminated in its status as a distinct demand made by reason, a demand that manifests to the human being his condition as a creature and so stimulates him to be faithful to a reason that is recognized to be a reflection of divine wisdom.

The subsequent history of philosophical thought testifies that Hegel's all-embracing system has had an influence that is hard to overestimate. The absolute in relation to human reason has become the obligatory theme of innumerable philosophical treatises. But, separated from its original truth, it has taken on more and more the character of an elitist speculation that is as intellectually subtle as it is existentially sterile, and that recalls the "empty" thinking for which St. Paul reproached the pagans (*FR* 22).

In our culture reason is separated from, and replaces, faith in the God who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ. It is therefore not surprising that two phenomena characteristic of modern culture have gradually appeared. On the one hand, the spread of education has gone hand in hand with the rise of a mass atheism, for the most part a "practical atheism". The God in whom

philosophical thought recognizes only the status of a reality "as if", or of an absolute spirit that "becomes" in the dialectical progress of human self-consciousness, cannot provide either a truth capable of giving an ultimate and valid meaning to human life or a base in reality for a moral demand binding on the human being when he exercises his freedom. On the other hand, there has been a reduction of reason to merely instrumental functions. For a scientistic mentality, a radical mistrust of reason when it goes in search of truths and values beyond the range of sense experience is accompanied by the "temptation of a quasi-divine power over nature and even over the human being" (*FR* 46), which leads many to think that if something is technically possible it is therefore morally admissible (*FR* 88).

The Pope notes the very recent development of currents of philosophical thought that are incapable of discovering a sense of existence that is not subject to temporal finitude; he therefore denounces a philosophy that teaches a view of life "where everything is provisional and ephemeral" (*FR* 91). The Encyclical also refers to this elsewhere when it speaks of "the sometimes ephemeral teachings of professional philosophers" (*FR* 30).

4. An ethics without a foundation in God and without natural law

Although ethics has always been a specially favored field of philosophical reflection, it is no exaggeration to say that today we are seeing an inflation in the number of publications on ethical subjects. Contemporary ethical discourse, whose existential influence seems to be in inverse proportion to its rhetoric, has two particular features.

First, this is an ethics that a vast circle of thinkers is developing under the banner of autonomy, i.e., of an obligation whose ultimate origin is supposed to reside in man himself. Here too, Kant's thought has been decisive. Adopting the emancipative sentiment of the Enlightenment, he wrote in his *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* (A 87): "The autonomy of the will [is] the supreme principle of morality". For Kant, autonomy means self-legislation, the independence of the individual from any will outside himself, not excluding the will of God, which Kant numbers among the "spurious principles of morality" (*ibid.*, 88 [pp. 59f in the Library of Liberal Arts edition, tr. Lewis White Beck]).

Second, this is an ethics that in large part has left behind the "natural law", the normativity that the Creator has inscribed in nature and in man himself, replacing it with utilitarian arguments based on a reductionist conception of humanity. It is therefore not astonishing that holders of academic chairs show themselves incapable in their philosophical writings of demonstrating the inhuman character of behaviors that are becoming widespread, even providing pseudo-justifications for them. One thinks of abortion, justified on the one hand by the mother's right to choose and on the other by denying to the unborn human being the status of a person. Of euthanasia, viewed as an expression of the right to decide for oneself when to depart this life. Of the manipulation of the very sources of human life by the gradual breaking down of every barrier to creating a genetically perfect human being, a project that not improperly has been called the eighth day of creation. Of the institution of marriage and the family, crumbling under the joint attack of an emancipation from values and norms founded on human nature, and of a law-making that more and more takes on the function of reporting and sanctioning whatever is currently done.

The evident fact that, in a culture of immanence, the absoluteness of the moral imperative is put in doubt and moral relativism gains the upper hand, confirms how tight the link is between right reason and faith in a God recognized as the personal Absolute who grounds moral obligation. It is hard to deny that the present-day decline in morals, in a society in which technical-instrumental reason is bringing resounding successes, is connected with the disassociation of human reason from religious faith.

A further aspect of the relation between faith and reason, in the field of moral knowledge, deserves to be mentioned. Morality is an essential dimension of the human person, so that the knowledge of moral norms is among the natural capacities of reason. In reality, however, this

reason is no longer intact, as it was when it first came from the hands of the Creator. Because of original sin, not only was man stripped of grace, the supernature that was God's gift to him, but he was also wounded in his nature itself. His reason was darkened and his will was weakened so that he is no longer able to live authentically as a human person (*FR* 22). But God with his Revelation has relieved the darkness of reason. Therefore, through faith in the word of God announced by the Church, man can know with greater ease and security the concrete contents of the command to perform the good that he hears in his own conscience (DS 3005). The listening of faith opens the mind to recognize and deepen those principles and norms of the moral order that emanate from the very nature of the human being. In this sense, philosophy is not turned aside onto paths that are foreign to it; on the contrary, with the help of faith reason recovers its own reasonableness and so takes possession of truths that originally belonged to it. The Church, the Pope writes, "remains profoundly convinced that faith and reason 'mutually support each other' (DS 3019)" (*FR* 100).

5. Beyond "mere reason"

The aid that faith gives to reason illustrates the general relation of supernatural reality to human nature. The inability of human nature to realize and develop itself coherently, either in the personal or in the social sphere, manifests to every sincere humanist the limits to which man in fact is subject. The fact that it is reason itself that asks for a higher wisdom means that by wishing to build his city with his hands alone, man takes on a task that over and over again is rendered fruitless by his own unreasonableness and irresponsibility. Man's proud intent to be completely man and only man[4] inevitably meets with the tragedy that in the present order, in which the solution to the problem of human evil in fact is a supernatural solution, "to be just a man is what man cannot be".[5]

It is difficult to ignore this nemesis inherent in the course of history; it is difficult to deny that the dramatic state of disorientation in which humanity finds itself today is the consequence of the separation of reason from faith in God, the author of mankind and the world. The Encyclical's call to restore a relationship of friendship and collaboration[a] between faith and reason (*FR* 63) is a call to contemporary culture—in particular to those who dedicate themselves to philosophy, "one of the noblest of human tasks" (*FR* 3)—to open itself to a transcendent truth that, far from abasing reason, stimulates it and strengthens it to be fully itself.

[Translation by Donald E. Buzzelli]

[4] The title that Kant gave his essay on religion is programmatic for modern culture: "Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft [Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason]". See also *FR* 23.

[5] LONERGAN, *Insight. A Study of Human Understanding*. London 1957, 729. [Republished in Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran, Vol. 3 (Univ. of Toronto Press: 1992), p. 750.]

[a] [The official English version of the Encyclical has "a harmonious and creative relationship".]