

Faith and Reason

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FAITH DIVORCED from reason is piety crowned and reason divorced from faith is pedantry enthroned. Both proclaim a universal sovereignty and these illegitimate lords challenge one another to a duel to the death—their battleground is the geography of the human spirit. This war has erupted periodically in Western history: Tertullian preached an arrogant faith that reduced reason to sin, and centuries later the same disease broke out as would the pox in the Rhine valley where the “brotherhoods” reproved men who sought wisdom from the schoolmen; the Latin Averroists in the High Middle Ages insinuated into the universities a paganism that flagrantly insulted the conscience of the Latin West and the Averroists countered by insisting that philosophy had nothing to do with religion. Believe with your right hand, my boy! think with your left! be certain that your right knows not what your left is doing!

Some have argued that this split between what we believe and what we think goes back to the Fall of Man. Be that as it may, there is undoubtedly an itch in the human thing to shatter the unity of his own existence and to scatter the fragments of his being to the scavengers of history. The supposed opposition

between faith and reason is an instance of this suicidal imitation of Humpty Dumpty. And this supposed opposition has returned to the American academy where it occupies the very highest posts of power in the most prestigious as well as in more modest institutions of higher learning in the nation. Theology is becoming mindless and philosophy is becoming incorporeal. The vacant mindedness of the former and the insubstantiality of the latter are breeding theological idiocy and philosophical irrelevance. The study of theology has been radically divorced from the great tradition of scholastic philosophy and the reading of much scripture substitutes for the recognition of the middle term in a simple piece of reasoning. Much Greek and no logic mark the vast majority of our seminaries today. In the very moment in which theology departments divide the time of their students into pondering biblical texts and espousing the social gospel, philosophy departments increasingly teach their discipline as though Christianity had never happened, as though philosophical discourse grows up in a hothouse university building having little or no intercourse with the world without and practically none with the Western tradition. An alienation from the Christian tradition is a *con-*

dition sine qua non for a doctor's degree in philosophy in most of the universities in this nation supported by the tax money of believing Christians.

But the Thomist ought to be peculiarly wedded to the conviction that faith must not be separated from reason and that reason, at its best, was married to faith. The reflections molding this essay and the reasoning which is its excuse for being are the work of a Thomist who is disturbed to note that faith seems to have abandoned philosophical reasoning and that philosophy seems to have abandoned faith. Being a philosopher, my observations will fall largely upon this latter issue. Some definitions are in order and some reasoning therefrom is imperative. Disorder always involves a scattering of what ought to be knit together in the catalyst of existence. The divorce between faith and reason is disorder: scattering, shattering, smashing. And the office of the philosopher—does not Aristotle teach me this and did not St. Thomas reiterate it in the first sentence of the *Summa Contra Gentiles*?—is to establish order. And there is an order in the lively business constituting the interplay between faith and reason. To that order I now turn, addressing myself initially to the structure of faith with the hope of elucidating experientially some verifiable relations between faith and reason.

First, we must ask believers what it means to believe, not only—let us say—in a church but in the word of my neighbor or in the truth of my own civilization. To believe is to assent to the truth of a proposition which is communicated to the believer through its being heard, not seen. Assenting to the being true of some predicate in a subject, the mind assents because moved by the will. Such propositions, primed by the immediacy of experience, are not reducible thereto. I cannot, for example, believe that I face a typewriter as I write these words because that truth is simply evident to me. Were I to doubt the evidence of my senses—in this instance, principally the senses of sight and touch and secondarily the sense of hearing—I would be a candidate for a rest home.

Nor can I believe—if I am a mathematician—that “the angles of a triangle are

equal to two right angles”: as a mathematician I would know that this conclusion is engendered by synthesizing two previously understood propositions bearing on the definition of triangle and the concept of a parallel line drawn through the apex. I know the truth in question thanks to having produced that conclusion by reasoning.

Belief is neither a judgment of direct experience (nor a judgment reducible to it), nor is belief a conclusion which is the product of reasoning. Assume further, however, that I am a mathematical idiot but otherwise a fairly bright fellow: I am told by a mathematician that “the angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles.” I understand the meaning of the proposition but I assent to its being true only because some authority in matters geometrical has communicated that truth to me. I hear the man tell me these things: a fact of experience; I have cogent evidence leading me to conclude that this man is not a fraud but a competent expert in his field: a reasoned fact; I assent, altogether without any doubt, to the truth of what he says about triangles: a matter of belief, a reasonable as opposed to unreasonable belief, but belief nonetheless. In placing my trust in the word of the mathematician, my will has responded to his authority. Belief always involves at least three aspects: (1) an intellectual grasp of the meaning of the terms of a proposition; (2) an assent to the truth of the proposition which is: (3) prompted by a free act. If there be no understanding of the meaning proposed for belief, there is no belief: totally blind belief is a contradiction. If there is evidence of the truth of the proposition presented directly or indirectly in experience; or if there be a movement of the mind concluding to the truth from at least remotely evident premises, there is no belief but rather either experience or reason.

The weight of two thousand years of Christian teaching insists that belief in Jesus Christ as expressed in the historic Creeds is precisely that: belief; faith; hence the symbol of *The* faith and the admonition to “keep the faith.” Could I demonstrate the truth of Christianity, as claimed by one enthusiastic Cartesian in the eighteenth century, I would have knowledge, *episteme, scientia*. This knowledge would be

pleasant to have but I am afraid that it is reserved for another order of things. If I had a direct experience, let us say a mystical rapture, of the risen and glorified Lord, I would not have belief—in any event not at the moment of the experience. In a word: you cannot both simultaneously know or conclude to and believe in the same truth. The word “belief” has been so debased in our time that people can tell us that they “believe” or “do not believe in capital punishment”: civilized usage demands that we respond by asking them if they mean that they believe that capital punishment exists or does not exist. “Belief” is not approval: belief is an assent to existence on the testimony of a witness.

Catholic Christianity of the Latin West, after centuries of hesitation and debate, came to conclude that not only is there no contradiction between faith and reason but that both buttress one another. That theology in our time has progressively shaken off reason in the name of a fideistic return to scriptural tradition is a sign of a malaise disturbing the well-being of theology itself. As a philosopher I shall leave that problem to the theologians. I am more interested in the topics clustering around the role of both experience and faith in the exercise of philosophical reasoning. If I have a target towards which I shall be bending and winging arrows from my quiver, that target is the contention that philosophy is a work of rationality foreign to faith. Presuppositionless philosophy is no saint of my devotion and I would be less than candid were I to dissemble my conviction that such an understanding of philosophy not only divorces philosophy from its sources in history but shrivels it into an enterprise utterly boring to men of flesh and blood, as Unamuno might have put it.

Neither faith nor reason can be divorced from experience. My thesis, therefore, stands or falls with my demonstrating the truth that experience is a kind of “middle term” mediating the synthesis of faith and reason in the actual exercise of philosophical thinking.

But what is experience? The Latin “*experior*”—“to try” or “to put to the test,” thus Cicero’s customary use of the verb; “to measure one’s strength with another,” “to try in

a hostile manner,” thus Caesar’s more military employment of the verb; “to experience,” “to find,” thus Livy’s understanding of the word, a sense very close to contemporary English usage—comes from “*ex*” and the root “*per*”: *ex-per*, “to come out of” (*ex*) by “going through” (*per*). Hence “*experientia*” in Ciceronian prose means both “trial” and “experiment”; finally, by extention, “knowledge gained by experiment or experience”: “*multarum rerum experientia cognitus*”—the line is from Tacitus but the usage was already Cicero’s. In turn, the “*experimentum*” of “experience” indicates the results of the “*experientia*.” In the medieval Latin of St. Thomas Aquinas—his usage here seems typical of his time and certainly is typical of the meaning given the term in scholastic Latin throughout the past seven centuries—“*experientia*,” while remaining a trial undergone such as a “trial by arms,” is more usually understood to be “a trial of learning—through experience”; thus the man of experience is contrasted to the man without experience: “*inexperientia*.” When associated with Aristotle’s teaching on “the searching intelligence,” the “*experimentum*” was understood to be the fruit of repeated experiences which finally yielded intelligibility or meaning. Through trial and error the chef mixes his condiments and relishes, spices, and the rest. Finally, the soup savors for the palate and from that *experimentum* the active intelligence, other conditions being equal, can illuminate the causal structure at work and the chef thus comes up with a recipe. The recipe is *episteme* or *scientia* if it includes the “why” of the successful soup. The cause of knowing the cause is the *experimentum*: “*Causa causae est causa causati*.” “Trial,” originally “trial by arms” or at a court of law in the Latin of Caesar and Cicero, now means “trial and error” in the searching for meaning until the sensibility produces a unified perceptual whole within which the intellect grasps the working of form in matter or, possibly, entelechy or finality in this moving and changing world.

Experience, involving—as it does—man’s sensorial marriage with a world whose being is saturated in time and the restlessness of matter, is a “going through” a kaleidoscope of what

originally are isolated impressions for the sake of "coming out" with a patterned whole whose symbolic structure can be penetrated intelligently. All men do this in order that they might survive; subsequently, some men do this in order that they might contemplate. So highly did Aristotle value experience that he tells us that he prefers the man of experience who knows no theory to the man of theory who has no experience. Not all the theory in the world about how to swim will substitute for one brief splashing about in a pool. Nonetheless, only the most primitive romanticism would despise theory in favor of experience. Romantic mystification of experience violates experience. Experience is not merely a "going through" (*per*); experience is also a "coming out" (*ex*). I come out of the experienced, the passion underwent or suffered or gloried in, not in the sense of abandoning it, but in the sense of understanding what has happened to me. Experience exists for the sake of cognition: even more, there is no human cognition without experience. Because of these considerations, both Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas insisted that sensation is the first principle of human knowing. But sensation does not know being. Brute animals do not affirm or deny and therefore they are singularly inept at producing civilizations. Human sensation is saturated by mind.

Although our concept of experience could exclude cognition and could be restricted to the immediacy of sensorial life, *a la* Bergson, I think that such a narrowing of the meaning of experience does violence to the subject. In the normal course of a man's life, he is conscious of nothing that precedes cognition or some intellectual penetration of the perceived: were he so conscious, consciousness would precede itself and men would understand before they understood. This Alice in Wonderland Fun House composed of charming "unbirthday birthday parties" belongs to controlled fantasy but not to experience prior to any conscious attempt to control it. Controlled experience objectifies an activity, better yet, a synthesis of activities both sensorial and intellectual, bodily and spiritual. Man quite literally is—as Karl Rahner insists—"Spirit in the World," *Geist*

in Welt. If God is pure spirit creating a world; if the angels are spirits sent as messengers to a world, then man's spirit is constituted *in* a world: man becomes what he is by acting in and through his body. Man's soul is not a motor which pushes a body as though it were a go-cart. The soul is itself an act in and through the body. Again, the doctrine advanced is both Aristotle's and Aquinas', although understood by these two geniuses in their own distinctive ways.

Consciously we are already in a world before we commence to think deep thoughts about this odd situation; indeed, the situation itself does not even begin to seem odd at all until we back away from it and thus separate ourselves from the way in which we exist prior to signing up for Philosophy 101. Signing up for Philosophy 101 is often today signing away our humanity. The trick of the Cartesian and rationalist *cogito* consists in inviting us, often with the threat of an "F" grade, to separate our knowing of X from the X without which our knowing would not be a knowing at all because the knowing is *of* X. Secondly, the rationalist and Cartesian (possibly positivist or phenomenologist) schoolmaster will ask us to separate our knowing (already now separated from the known-X) from ourselves who are doing the knowing. Once this double sleight of hand has been accomplished, this lonely knowing which is not a knowing of anything or a knowing by anybody converts itself into idealism or criticism or phenomenology or whatever and commences to confer doctoral degrees on I know not whom.

For the over-arching purposes of this essay, I offer the following observation: experience escapes both faith and reason in the sense of being prior to both, prior because—although *faith and reason can be brought to bear upon experience in an effort at evaluating it—the judgment of experience, itself principiated by sensation and perception, is an ultimate. With ultimates in life we quarrel at the peril of our sanity. Sensation—the pun seems to be worked into the fabric of the language—is the touchstone of existence. According to Hilaire Belloc anyone questioning this proposition ought to be baptized with a pint of beer in the name of the five senses.*

We reason for the purpose of concluding but we conclude only thanks to something previously understood. There is an exceedingly curious factor about reason which makes it—as an act—as ultimately unjustifiable by anything prior to itself as is experience. I do nothing at all curious or untoward if I ask the reason why the angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles. But I do something very curious and untoward indeed if I ask for a reason for reasoning. Such a presumptive reason would be concluded to by reasoning and we would be presuming to already know what we set out to prove. This cart before the horse situation points to the somewhat alarming truth that there is no reason for reasoning. We reason because we want to and because we must, because of volitional and emotional needs: if I am locked in a room, I think about ways to free myself; if I philosophize to dispel ignorance, I do so because I fear ignorance. An overarching skepticism about the capacity of reason to achieve truth cannot be dispelled rationally. Such skepticism can only be overcome existentially: possibly all absolute skeptics ought to be locked in rooms and told to find the one clue that will free them: this could shake their doubts about reason's capacity to do what reasoning does: conclude. Given in its own way as is experience in its way, reason is an absolute. This is the way we are: reasoning animals.

Experience and reasoning as delineated follow the pattern that Aristotle sketched in describing these ontological structures in the *Posterior Analytics*. But the concept of experience can be broadened to include the whole spatial-temporal world in which man exists. Experience need not be limited to evident judgments made about the here-and-now or reducible to the here-and-now. The continuum of life is woven out of a pattern of immediate judgments, mediated judgments, evident judgments, self-evident judgments, and judgments made in faith or belief. All of this accumulated knowledge constitutes a history, a culture. Understood broadly, this corporate experience is traditional wisdom, the inheritance of a *populus*. Every people has its presuppositions: let us think only about the Western technical presuppositions that permit us all

to move about in an ordinary day's work; they may have been demonstrated rationally by learned gnomes lurking in distant laboratories, but they are given credence by men at large because society imposes its own authority and validates that authority, so to speak, sensibly. The man buying a new car ought to read carefully the manual instructions the manufacturer gives him with his purchase. Prudent faith in the authority might avoid breakdowns and subsequent drain upon the wallet. Hume can teach us something here.

Reason, all reason, operates within the prescriptions and suppositions of some social order because reasoning cannot take its point of departure from itself: the act of a man, reasoning is lodged in him; and—very profoundly—is *his* product: we produce our own conclusions; we do not capture them on the wing as though they were Platonic ideas floating in a void. In life, reason is always operating on faith and faith is always operating on reason, and both of them are stirred out of the broth of experience.

The man who would drive a wedge between Reason and Faith—capitalized—does so on the grounds that the one is not the other. This reasoning is not very good reasoning: man is not woman but this argues to no necessary divorce. Reason is not faith but both have a common source permitting them to nourish one another: experience. The posture which stakes out an opposition between faith and reason and which does so in the name of philosophical reason is no sacred cow: the advocates of the position advance it as philosophically sound, and hence open to rational questioning. Therefore they can have no objection to their position being evaluated by another philosopher who adheres to a different order of things.

The reason-faith divorce court posture advances itself under the rubric, as suggested earlier, of a “presuppositionless philosophy,” a rational body of teaching which depends on nothing prior to itself and which is therefore hermetically sealed from the influence of faith, especially religious and most especially Christian faith. The mind can, of course, entertain the proposition according to which philosophy ought to have no presuppositions. The mind

can equally well entertain its contrary. *A priori*, before taking a look at the actual practice of philosophy, there is no inbuilt self-evident structure insisting that philosophy have or not have any presuppositions. That reason operate in total isolation from faith is, on logical grounds, not a first principle. There is nothing particularly unintelligible about the “presuppositionless” position—except that such a philosophy in fact has one: namely, that philosophy should have none! And this altogether without a shred of proof! The business cannot be settled in advance of some act of philosophizing and the conditions for that act can only be disengaged once the act is performed. The business must be resolved experientially and historically: what happens when men think philosophically? In truth, no philosophy ever mushroomed into being like Topsy without anterior causes rooted in experience. We all know about the unsuspecting freshman who signs up for Philosophy 101 and who hears instructor X tell the class never to accept any authority in philosophy and we all know that the poor devil writes down in his notebook: “Teacher says never to accept any authority in philosophy.” Being a good little student, he swallows this nonsense, thus entering his putatively short-lived career in philosophical studies marked with the sign of contradiction.

Anyone with a modicum of realism and what Kierkegaard called a sense of the comic knows that this is not what happens. Philosophy departments and individual professors have their preferences, some may even have made their commitments. Students who stray into their classes or who are told by others, hence, take it on faith that this man or the other university teaches sound philosophy, and commence their study already specified by faith in some authority. In differing cultures and at different moments of time this or that philosophy is the rage of the hour or the public orthodoxy of the academy. Faith in the orthodoxy or in the fashion are the motor powers which get the wheels of philosophical thinking spinning. Be it the French rationalism of the seventeenth century; the German idealism of the eighteenth and nineteenth; the phenomenology or existentialism of the twentieth; the enduring

positivism of the Anglo-American tradition; or any other philosophical tradition—each and all of them fashion young minds who tend to accept the authority of their cultures or tend to become apes of contradiction and are thus defined by what they reject.

Very few human beings have the capacity or the time to master thoroughly one great philosopher and it is my guess that the most that could be mastered by anybody in a lifetime is two. Philosophy is as much a risk as is the life of which philosophy is a part. I might be duped in giving ten or twenty years to studying this or that system but I will be able to evaluate rationally what I have studied only *after* I have studied it, after I have gambled time and money and—possibly—a life. When I commence, I go where I go because of some authority: I take a culture or a person or a school and I make of it my authority. My decision, possibly but usually not free, may be motivated by sound reasons; more often, it is the product of sheer luck, good or bad. Nobody ever entered into a philosophical life because of a philosophical decision: there are no philosophical decisions: there are only philosophical conclusions. If philosophy caused a man to study philosophy, he would be a philosopher before he became one. The so-called “life of reason” begins with an act of faith. I am not proving anything here: I am simply pointing to the way things are.

If I may be permitted a personal observation by way of illustration, I am a Thomist. Today I am a Thomist by conviction, philosophical and rational conviction. But I commenced my studies in the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas because he was recommended to my consideration by the *Magisterium* of the Church which centuries earlier had declared him The Common Doctor. I began my career with an act of faith—but then again so does everybody else. What is at stake on this level is which authority are you going to choose and whose word are you going to believe, instructor X in Philosophy 101, the *Zeitgeist*, or the authority of Christ’s Church?

So much for the facts: nobody ever philosophized in an hermetically sealed box. If philosophy be understood to be a body of rea-

soned conclusions achieved by a man moved to wonder about the world of being and who wills to dispel ignorance with knowledge; if all reason, including—of course—philosophical reason, takes its point of departure from experience; if, again, experience is not solipsistically sealed in some suitcase; if, in a word, the aspirant to philosophical truth is a man who lives in a world; if these conclusions be sound—and this essay has so argued—then it follows that the questions men formulate when they commence to philosophize will be structured or specified by their experience, by life, by history; and, finally, because these questions include a tissue of propositions previously entertained on faith although not coextensive therewith, no philosophy could possibly get off the ground unless carried by the wings of experience.

Philosophical speculation poses questions and then tries to answer them. A questioning stance is consubstantial with the wonder from whence philosophy begins. Most questions admit of affirmation or negation. Both look to the actual existence of the content mounted in the subject-predicate structure of the question. I use the word “content” to mean intelligibility, thinkability—meaning. (Meaning is not being; by “being” I mean “existing.” Were meaning being, erroneous judgments would be unthinkable. The judgment declaring that “Great Britain is a peninsula” is false but the terms of the proposition are easily intelligible to anyone who has heard about or lived in Great Britain and who understands what the geographical term “peninsula” means). Now the terms of all propositions are derived, ultimately, from experience. It follows that I cannot reason about, hence affirm or deny, positions unknown to me. Aristotle never denied that the world was created *ex nihilo*, “out of nothing,” because Aristotle never heard of the Jewish and Christian doctrine insisting that it is. Even philosophies which negate the presuppositions of a going order—the public orthodoxy, a term I coined a number of years ago—are defined and specified by what they deny. It follows that an impoverished historical order asks impoverished questions, just as a household, impoverished imaginatively and intellectually,

busies itself with trivialities. Because experience is accumulative and hence traditional, a betting man would be wise to put the odds on a superior philosophy emerging out of a superior culture.

I take it that I need not argue the proposition that nobody gets answers to questions that he does not ask. Further, I take it that questions run ahead of answers in the sense of specifying them. Philosophies can be evaluated in two ways:

1. Do the conclusions follow logically from their first principles? Making a man take his own point of departure seriously can often result in hanging him on his own pitard: *e.g.*, Descartes’ use of the principle of causality to prove the existence of an external world when he had previously told us that he was suspending doubt about everything hitherto held by him to be true and at a moment in which he knew only two truths, his existence as a thinking principle and the existence of God; Kant’s postulation of *das Ding an sich* after he had located all judgment in experience and had excluded the “Thing-In-Itself” from experience. (Fichte caught him on *that* one.)

2. From what questions do these particular conclusions follow? Further, for whom are the questions worth asking? Possibly, these questions do not interest me because in no sense do they enter into my experience of the real. Ortega y Gasset was a brilliant philosopher who probed splendidly the subtleties of the *dolce vita*. Ortega was a philosopher for a duchess with a dog in his explorations of the intricacies of charm and flirtation. His world tempts me from time to time but it is not really my own. In a lengthy bookshelf of writings, the *obras* of Don José contain only about six pages concerning God and the destiny of the soul. A philosopher of this world, Ortega was not concerned about matters that have absorbed the lives of other philosophers. Philosophical speculation always exists in an existential context which has already annealed the questioner in the catalyst of his own corporate response to the real. In this sense, if only in this, heart dictates to head.

Christian philosophy is marked by conclu-

sions whose springboard has been Christian convictions: The Faith. There is nothing in pagan antiquity that is remotely comparable to the sophisticated body of philosophical doctrine that grew up around the Christian belief in the intrinsic dignity of the person; the providence of God over each man; creation out of nothing by a God whose name is "I Am"; the basic dignity of the family; the distinction between nature and person; natural and international law. Instances could be multiplied but all add up to one conclusion. Christians have asked superior questions in philosophy because those questions have been quickened by faith in the word of God.

Questions, from which philosophical reasoning grows, are themselves not ultimate intelligibilities because every question is an at least implicit judgment about the status of the question, the terms at play. Asking any question at all, most especially a sophisticated question, involves a world in which somebody halts the projector of time and freezes a slice of reality

into a problem weighed. The probing mind must have experienced, gone through—*per*, a history. That history, in turn, will have been congealed into a symbolic structure from which the light of intelligence illuminates meaning. That meaning is first conceptualized and questioned, pondered over, scaled by evidence and eventually affirmed to have existence effectively in the real in this or that way, or even absolutely. The truth known in an ultimate judgment will be truth about being; illuminated in the stream of history.

Reason can never escape experience and therefore reason can never escape its twin, faith. Both are born of the same mother. There are those who have known as their mother the experience of Faith and the history it created. Their reasoning about the ultimate things issues therefrom. Then again there are those who have not known the history of salvation and their reason issues from their experience. Every man is free to look at the fruits because by their fruits ye shall know them.