

Faith, Realism, and Universal Reason: MacIntyrean Reflections on *Fides et Ratio*

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Introduction

ACCORDING TO THE classical secularization thesis, secularization is a crisis of faith precipitated by the modern ascendancy of reason and scientific rationality. Charles Taylor has called theories that promote this thesis “subtraction stories” because they describe secularization in terms of humans “having lost, or sloughed off, or liberated themselves from earlier confining horizons, or illusions, or limitations of knowledge.”¹

A case can be made that such stories represent the exact inversion of the truth. To the extent that modernity has ushered in a crisis of faith, this is arguably a crisis precipitated by an even deeper crisis of reason. Beginning with nominalism in the late middle ages, modern thought embarked on a path that would lead to great accomplishments in the areas of instrumental and scientific rationality, but also to a disenchanted world where people think they can have no ascertainable grounds for their existential convictions. In this world, a conception of freedom has emerged that makes a virtue out of reason’s proclaimed incapacity to answer the “big questions” about human life. “At the hearth of liberty,” Justice Kennedy wrote, “is the right to define one’s own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life.”² As Max Weber predicted, uncon-

¹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2007), 22.

² *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, 505 U.S. 833 (1992), caselaw.findlaw.com/us-supreme-court/505/833.html.

strained lifestyle choices, arbitrary desires, and agonistically opposed *Weltanschauungen* have come to occupy the territory formerly ruled by reason. Weber's description of this situation is less upbeat than Kennedy's: "Many old gods ascend from their graves; they are disenchanted and hence take the form of impersonal forces. They strive to gain power over our lives and again they resume their eternal struggle with one another."³

Twenty years ago, Pope Saint John Paul II issued *Fides et Ratio*, his Encyclical Letter on the Relationship between Faith and Reason, to address this state of affairs in Western culture: "It has happened therefore that reason, rather than voicing the human orientation towards truth, has wilted under the weight of so much knowledge and little by little has lost the capacity to lift its gaze to the heights, not daring to rise to the truth of being" (§5).⁴ At the time of its publication, many commentators found it ironic that the Pope, the institutional embodiment of faith, felt called to defend reason.⁵ However, well aware that reason and faith are communicating vessels, the Pope knew that the crisis of one necessarily affects the other: "The religious impulse is the highest expression of the human person, because it is the highpoint of his rational nature. It springs from the profound human aspiration for the truth" (§33, footnote 28). A culture in which the human aspiration for truth is not nurtured is a culture where religion and faith cannot thrive.

The encyclical is incredibly rich and spans many themes. The focal point, however, is the notion of truth and its importance in human life. "One may define the human being," the Pope says, "as *the one who seeks the truth*" (§28). Truth is something that *calls* humans, enticing them to self-transcendence, and faith and reason are the "two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth."

³ Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. H. Gerth and C. W. Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), 149.

⁴ References to *Fides et Ratio* will be done parenthetically in text, and all English quotation of the encyclicals of John Paul II will be taken from the Vatican's website.

⁵ Joseph W. Koterski, S.J., "The Challenge to Metaphysics in *Fides et Ratio*," in *The Two Wings of Catholic Thought: Essays on Fides et Ratio*, ed. David Ruel Foster and Joseph W. Koterski (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 22; Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Faith & Reason," *Books & Culture*, July/August 1999, booksandculture.com/articles/1999/julaug/9b4028b.html; Stanley Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church's Witness and Natural Theology; Being the Gifford Lectures Delivered at the University of St. Andrews in 2001* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2001), 236.

Faith is inherently connected to certain historical events; it is the grace-enabled response to the Incarnation of Truth in history, a response that leads to knowledge that we could not otherwise have had. *Reason* is a very generic human capacity that draws on sense perception and logical inference (§9). It can be used independently of God's self-revelation, taking the guise of an "autonomous" philosophy. The autonomy of philosophy should be "supported and strengthened" (§75), says the Pope, on the condition that philosophy does not close the door to supernatural revelation. Reason can also be used in "dynamic union" with faith (§76) so that it is stimulated by the truths of divine revelation—this is called "Christian philosophy"—or it can assist theology in the explication of divine revelation.

Respecting the fact that faith and reason—like the two natures of Christ—can never be confused or separated, *Fides et Ratio* emphasizes their mutual interpenetration, the way "each contains the other" (*in altera enim altera invenitur*) (§17).⁶ "The relationship between theology and philosophy is best construed as a circle," and philosophy's search for truth helps theology to understand God's word better, while the revelation of God's word entices reason "to explore paths which of itself it would not even have suspected it could take" (§73). The encyclical reminds us, however, that reason is fallen—a circumstance that exposes it to various pathologies (skepticism, agnosticism, nihilism) and brings about a confrontation between the wisdom of this world and the wisdom of the Cross. This is why "the preaching of Christ crucified and risen is the reef upon which the link between faith and philosophy can break up, but it is also the reef beyond which the two can set forth upon the boundless ocean of truth" (§23).

How, then, should "truth" be understood? This is a central question in the encyclical, and the Pope sees a close connection between the crisis of reason in modernity and deficient understandings of truth. In order to reclaim the notion from false prophets, he turns to "the apostle of truth," St. Thomas Aquinas, and the philosophical realism that he espoused. "Looking unreservedly to truth, the realism of Thomas could recognize the objectivity of truth and produce not merely a philosophy of 'what seems to be' but a philosophy of 'what is'" (§44).

⁶ For the encyclical's relationship to Vatican I's conception of the *duplex ordo cognitionis*, see Avery Cardinal Dulles, S.J., "Faith and Reason: From Vatican I to John Paul II," in Foster and Koterski, *The Two Wings of Catholic Thought*, 200–202. See also Antonio Sabetta, *Faith and Reason: Historical Analysis and Perspectives for the Present* (Aurora, CO: Davies Group, 2012), 65–66.

For John Paul II, as for St. Thomas, truth is objective: it designates the consonance between object and intellect (*adaequatio rei et intellectus*) (§82). But a correct understanding of truth involves more than this formal aspect. The Pope usually means “truth” as “important truth”; truths about the ultimate structure and nature of reality, and especially about the place and purpose of humans in the world. This is why the encyclical exhorts philosophy to recover its “sapiential dimension” (§81) and its “genuinely metaphysical range.” “We face a great challenge . . . to move from *phenomenon* to *foundation*. . . . 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” (§83).⁷

Needless to say, *Fides et Ratio*’s teaching on truth and metaphysical reason goes against the current of much contemporary philosophy, not to mention theology.⁸ But to read the encyclical merely as a critique of trends within academic philosophy and theology would be superficial. As Alasdair MacIntyre has argued, the Pope’s ideas put him on a collision course with attitudes that are deeply ingrained in the modern mind to the extent that this mind has been shaped by non-realist conceptions of truth and anti-metaphysical views of reason.⁹ The Pope’s critique of non-realist philosophical doctrines,

⁷ The Pope’s thinking is here in profound harmony with St. Thomas Aquinas’s, who argues that the “metaphysical range” of reason follows from the very nature of the intellect: “The name intellect arises from the intellect’s ability to know the most profound elements of a thing; for to understand [*intelligere*] means to read what is inside a thing [*intus legere*]. Sense and imagination know only external accidents, but the intellect alone penetrates to the interior and to the essence of a thing [Nomen intellectus sumitur ex hoc quod intima rei cognoscit; est enim intelligere quasi intus legere: sensus enim et imaginatio sola accidentia exteriora cognoscunt; solus autem intellectus ad interiora et essentiam rei pertingit]” (*De veritate*, q. 1, a. 12, resp., trans. Robert W. Mulligan, S.J. [Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1952]).

⁸ Of course, the encyclical’s promotion of realism and metaphysics will find resonance in contemporary analytic philosophy. See R. R. Reno, “Theology’s Continental Captivity,” *First Things*, April 2006, firstthings.com/article/2006/04/theologys-continental-captivity. For the encyclical’s relationship to and account of modern philosophy, see Timothy Sean Quinn, “*Infides et Unratio*: Modern Philosophy and the Papal Encyclical,” in Foster and Koterski, *The Two Wings of Catholic Thought*, 177–92.

⁹ Alasdair MacIntyre, “Philosophy Recalled to Its Tasks: A Thomistic Reading of *Fides et Ratio*,” in *The Tasks of Philosophy: Selected Essays*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 193–96.

therefore, is also a critique of a cultural mindset that inhibits humanity's search for answers to the perennial questions.

In what follows, I will do two things. First, I will draw extensively on MacIntyre's analysis of *Fides et Ratio*¹⁰ to argue that the doctrine of Thomistic realism is entailed by the encyclical's portrait of the human being as a seeker of truth. *Fides et Ratio* can therefore be read as a philosophical argument in favor of realism, starting from the premise that humans are essentially "philosophizing animals." With the purpose of highlighting the contemporary importance of the Pope's message, I will then reflect on the consequences—philosophical and cultural—of rejecting the encyclical's portrait of human nature and the Thomistic realism it implies.

Second, I will ask whether the encyclical's optimism about reason's ability to attain universal truth is tenable in light of the alleged demise of "foundationalism" and the contemporary suspicion—persuasively voiced by MacIntyre—against "universal standards of rationality." Is the Pope's belief in the viability of perennial philosophy and the universality of reason blue-eyed?

Truth-Seeking and Thomistic Realism

Fides et Ratio, it has been said, is "both an encyclical about philosophy and an exercise in philosophy, a contribution to the very same debates about which it speaks."¹¹ I will treat the document accordingly and try to unearth the outlines of an argument.

The Pope's point of departure is the claim that philosophy is a business for everybody. "All men and women . . . are in some sense philosophers and have their own philosophical conceptions with which they direct their lives" (§30). There are certain "fundamental questions which pervade human life: *Who am I? Where have I come from and where am I going? Why is there evil? What is there after this life?*" (§1). Philosophy is a way of answering such questions by means of rational enquiry. This activity represents an essential aspect of human life, and professional philosophers are in service of the common man or woman, whose questions they must pursue with systematic rigor.

¹⁰ I will draw especially on "Philosophy Recalled," but also on: Alasdair MacIntyre, "Truth as a Good: A Reflection on *Fides et Ratio*," in *Tasks of Philosophy*, 1:197–215; MacIntyre, *God, Philosophy, Universities: A Selective History of the Catholic Philosophical Tradition* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 165–71.

¹¹ MacIntyre, "Philosophy Recalled to Its Tasks," 179.

This picture of the human being as essentially a philosophizing animal will perhaps not elicit universal assent, but many secular persons as well as Christians will find it plausible and appealing. Taking the next step in the argument, the Pope claims that:

It is unthinkable that a search so deeply rooted in human nature would be completely vain and useless. The capacity to search for truth and to pose questions itself implies the rudiments of a response. Human beings would not even begin to search for something of which they knew nothing or for something which they thought was wholly beyond them. (§29)

It seems, then, that the possibility of finding answers to the “big questions” must be postulated, on pain of making the human situation appear absurd. What are the conditions that must be satisfied if the human quest for truth is not to be in vain? I will follow MacIntyre in arguing that the philosophical tenets of Thomistic realism, or something very similar, must be presupposed as a condition for the feasibility of the human quest.¹² Before we can see whether this move can support the case that *Fides et Ratio* tries to make, we must take a look at the content of Thomistic realism.

An important feature of Thomistic realism is the claim that intelligibility is not imposed on reality by the mind. Mind-independent reality is intelligible *per se*, which means that objects have properties that make them “apt for categorization and conceptualization in this way rather than that.”¹³ Different conceptual schemes “fit” objective reality to higher or lower degrees, and intellectual inquiry is to a large extent about finding the concepts and categories that most closely align with the structure of reality itself. This does not presuppose the possibility of comparing conceptual schemes with unconceptualized reality (which would be impossible). Instead, it is by criticizing and finding problems with our present conceptualizations—with an eye to replacing them with more adequate ones—that we become aware that the realities our concepts describe have characteristics that warrant certain conceptualizations over others.¹⁴

Intelligibility is a phenomenon that has an intrinsic reference to mind. To say that some object or structure is in itself and objectively

¹² MacIntyre, “Philosophy Recalled to Its Tasks,” 192.

¹³ MacIntyre, “Philosophy Recalled to Its Tasks,” 190.

¹⁴ MacIntyre, “Philosophy Recalled to Its Tasks,” 190.

speaking intelligible or “apt for . . . conceptualization in this way rather than that” is to say that it is *potentially* an object of understanding by a mind. But there is no reason to think that mind-independent reality would have this property of being apt for conceptualization unless there is some kind of “pre-established harmony” between mind and world. In modernity, philosophers have tried to solve this problem either by becoming idealists—claiming that there *is* no mind-independent reality—or by denying the intrinsic intelligibility of mind-independent reality. According to the latter view, intelligibility is created by our conceptual schemes and resides wholly on the subject side of the subject-object divide.¹⁵

In Aquinas’s theistic worldview, however, intelligibility is a fundamental property of the world because the world resembles its divine cause, which is supremely intelligible. Human intellects are created for exploiting the world’s intelligibility, which means that they are teleologically directed at understanding things. So there is a pre-established harmony between mind and world: the world is there to reflect the divine intellect, and human intellects are there to understand the world and its divine cause.

Truth is what results when the intellect succeeds in this endeavor. Aquinas defines truth as “the conformity of thing and intellect”—*adaequatio rei et intellectus*.¹⁶ When the intellect in question is the divine mind, then truth means the conformity of natural things to it, just like works of art conform to the ideas of an artist. However, in the case of human intellects, truth means that the intellect conforms to the things that it knows.¹⁷ When the intellect’s judgments agree with how things objectively are, the intellect thinks truthfully. It has then reached its telos, the particular good for which it was created. This

¹⁵ John McDowell tries to escape this modern dilemma in his *Mind and World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996). However, his account of the inherent intelligibility of the world has been met with consternation. Charles Larmore, for instance, asks: “How can we avoid wondering why there should be such a natural sympathy or pre-established harmony between mind and world?” (“Attending to Reasons,” in *Reading McDowell: On Mind and World*, ed. N. H. Smith [London: Routledge, 2002], 199). From a Thomistic perspective, Reinhard Hütter takes McDowell’s struggle to make room for the idea of the world’s inherent intelligibility as a sign of the present “crisis of metaphysics” (“The Directedness of Reasoning and the Metaphysics of Creation,” in *Reason and the Reasons of Faith*, ed. Paul J. Griffiths and Reinhard Hütter [New York: T&T Clark, 2005], 163–64).

¹⁶ Aquinas, *De veritate*, q. 1, a. 1, resp.

¹⁷ Aquinas, *De veritate*, q. 1, a. 2, resp.

telos is most fully realized in the integrated understanding characteristic of *sapientia*.¹⁸

A world with objective teleology and intrinsic intelligibility is necessarily a world in which things have determinate natures that orient them to specific goals. The existence of determinate natures, in turn, implies that a distinction can be made between what a thing is essentially and what it is accidentally. For the intellect to understand something is for it to grasp it *as part of the intelligible order*, which means to discern its nature—distinguishing its essential properties—and to see how this nature fits into the overall order of things.¹⁹

As we have seen, Thomistic realism is a “thick” doctrine, dependent on a number of controversial assumptions about teleology and mind–world harmony. As MacIntyre points out, this kind of realism “entails a denial of theses central to contemporary pragmatism and contemporary nominalism.”²⁰ Nominalism claims that there is no mind-independent order of things. The categories we use to classify things have no intrinsic connection to how things objectively are, and “to understand some phenomenon is no more than to assign a place to it within some scheme which we have constructed.”²¹ Pragmatism claims that the schemes we construct are justified by how well they work in our dealings with the world. The standards for judging how well something works, furthermore, are set by the interests and desires we happen to have. This means that what counts as true and what counts as a good explanation of some phenomenon are interest-relative. Since our interests can change, there is no final goal or absolute truth toward which intellectual inquiry is oriented. There are only temporary goals that are dictated by our present desires and interests.

Pragmatism and nominalism as philosophical theses have counterparts in certain attitudes that have seeped into Western culture at the level of popular imagination. Taylor writes about the “buffered self,” a conception of the disengaged self as the sole source of meaning and value in a disenchanted world.²² MacIntyre similarly talks about a “pragmatism and nominalism of everyday life.”²³ A person whose

¹⁸ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* [ST] I-II, q. 57, a. 2. See also MacIntyre, “Philosophy Recalled to Its Tasks,” 187.

¹⁹ MacIntyre, “Philosophy Recalled to Its Tasks,” 186.

²⁰ MacIntyre, “Philosophy Recalled to Its Tasks,” 190.

²¹ MacIntyre, “Philosophy Recalled to Its Tasks,” 191.

²² Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 134–42.

²³ MacIntyre, “Philosophy Recalled to Its Tasks,” 196.

self-image is shaped by the everyday versions of these doctrines will not see herself as having a determinate nature with characteristic activities and a telos, which means that she will not see her own intellectual activity as being teleologically ordered toward objective truth. Instead she will view herself “as one who defines her or himself through his or her acts of choice, choices which determine for her or him not only what use to make of this or that object and what attitude to take to this or that other human being, but also how to describe or to redescribe, to classify or to reclassify the objects and the uses, the other human beings and the attitudes.”²⁴

One way to characterize such individuals is to say that they are cognitively or epistemically “curved in on themselves” (*incurvati in se*). Since they regard their own interests and desires as the last instance of appeal when it comes to deciding how to conceptually carve up the world, they are prevented from seeing themselves as seekers of an existential truth that transcends their present horizon. So their situation makes it difficult for them to address the big questions. In fact, from this perspective, there can be no inherently “big” questions, since things have importance only in relation to subjective interests and desires. “How should I maximize sexual pleasure?” is a question as big as any other. As MacIntyre argues, “individuals who learn to reimagine themselves in this way, so that they become what they imagine, are prevented thereby from understanding themselves as having an ultimate end, a final good to which they are directed by their essential nature.” In a similar vein, John Paul II talks about “the patent inadequacy of perspectives in which the ephemeral is affirmed as a value and the possibility of discovering the real meaning of life is cast into doubt.” Such perspectives cause many people to “stumble through life to the very edge of the abyss without knowing where they are going” (§6).

It can be argued, then, that contemporary versions of non-realism—culturally embodied in “pragmatism and nominalism of everyday life”—reduce the human condition to absurdity. Those perspectives cannot accommodate the quintessentially human impulse to seek truth. In order to do justice to the human condition, we must espouse a form of realism that can support truth-seeking in general and the search for metaphysical truth in particular. Thomistic realism fits this bill, and it is unclear whether anything else does. Against this background, *Fides et Ratio* can be read as an argument in favor of

²⁴ MacIntyre, “Philosophy Recalled to Its Tasks,” 195–96.

Thomistic realism. As MacIntyre puts it: “The necessary conditions for the possibility of the completion of the human questioning enterprise, are just those specified by Thomistic realism. . . . Thomistic realism is in this way a doctrine presupposed by the questioning of plain persons.” This conclusion does not imply that Thomism must be canonized as the only acceptable philosophical system, but it does imply that any philosophy, if it is to be able to fulfill philosophy’s proper function, “will have to find some place for those truths that were classically articulated as the doctrine of Thomistic realism.”²⁵

Since the writing of *Fides et Ratio*, the influence of “everyday pragmatism and nominalism” has grown in Western culture. The idea that one’s gender identity is a given and not an object of choice is portrayed, in many circles, as an oppressive view, as is the claim that marriage by nature involves a man and a woman. The radical rejection of non-chosen “givens” implies, at bottom, a refusal to let one’s thinking be shaped by mind-independent realities. This attitude cannot be explained merely by reference to defective philosophical doctrines; the volitional depravity that St. Augustine emphasized must also be given its due.²⁶ Non-realist sensibilities, however, can easily be exploited by a fallen will intent on emancipating itself from the shackles of reality. For many people, it is not a question of whether it is *true* that gender identity is established in the womb or whether it is *true* that marriage is a union of a man and a woman. It is the very idea that there could *be* objective truths in these areas that is rejected as incompatible with personal autonomy. This mentality does not require that people reject (in a Nietzschean vein) the idea of objective truth as such. A more common attitude restricts truth to the domain of the “empirically falsifiable,”²⁷ a move that neutralizes reason in those areas where it could potentially have an impact on existential choices. This might explain the peculiar fact that both scientific objectivism and postmodern relativism have great appeal in our culture.

It goes without saying that a culture that makes it difficult for individuals to be open to objective reality also, and *a fortiori*, makes it

²⁵ MacIntyre, “Philosophy Recalled to Its Tasks,” 192.

²⁶ See Paul J. Griffiths, “How Reasoning Goes Wrong: A Quasi-Augustinian Account of Error and Its Implications,” in Griffiths and Hütter, *Reason and the Reasons of Faith*, 152–59.

²⁷ Benedict XVI, “Faith, Reason and the University: Memories and Reflections,” Lecture at the University of Regensburg, September 12, 2006, w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg.html.

difficult for individuals to be open to divine revelation. Revelation, as traditionally understood, is a message from God that reveals to us our deepest identity. From the standpoint of the “buffered self,” however, the idea that a message from beyond the self can tell us who we are and what the meaning of our lives is will appear as intrinsically absurd. Identity and meaning are—almost by definition, from this perspective—the products of the self’s own volitional or expressive activity. Protestant liberal theology and, following it, Catholic modernists were sensitive to the needs of the buffered self. They rejected the idea that revelation is a *message*—that it has a determinate cognitive content—and reconceived it as a modification of human subjectivity. Faith is not a response to a historical revelation, but an impulse that originates from within the self, and reaches toward an unknowable divine reality. St Augustine’s “restless heart” is here transformed into an impenetrable heart: a heart that can yearn for God but not get to know him by receiving his word.²⁸

The liberal/modernist theological project is part of a more general anti-metaphysical trajectory of thought that portrays humans as cut off from cognitive contact with ultimate reality.²⁹ This anti-metaphysical mentality—which the Pope describes as a “mistrust of reason”—has gone hand in hand with the rejection of supernatural revelation and the separation of faith from reason. When reason is no longer credited with the ability to penetrate the veil of phenomena and attain ontological truth, then belief in a divine revelation will soon deteriorate into fideism or be given a non-cognitivist interpretation, eventually to be rejected altogether. An intellect that is curved in on itself is not an apt receptacle for a divine gift from without.

So, non-realist and anti-metaphysical understandings of truth have devastating consequences for both faith and reason. One of the great merits of *Fides et Ratio* is that it helps us see the deep structural similarity that unites these two routes to truth. Correctly understood, both are means to self-transcendence. Reason’s orientation toward objective truth allows human beings to transcend their subjective

²⁸ For a far-sighted critique of modernist doctrines of revelation, see Pius X, Encyclical Letter *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* (on the Doctrines of the Modernists), w2.vatican.va/content/pius-x/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-x_enc_19070908_pascendi-dominici-gregis.html.

²⁹ See Quinn, “*Infides et Unratio*.” For a contemporary critique (from a Thomistic perspective) of modern doctrines of God’s unknowability, see Paul Macdonald, *Knowledge and the Transcendent: An Inquiry into the Mind’s Relationship to God* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2009).

experiences and conceptual schemes and reach “to the very being of the object which is known” (§82). Metaphysical thought, moreover, penetrates to the fundamental building blocks of reality, and ultimately to the transcendent ground of being. Divine revelation is a gift received by faith that completes this movement. It offers to humans “the concrete possibility of reaching the goal which they seek”: “In Jesus Christ, who is the Truth, faith recognizes the ultimate appeal to humanity, an appeal made in order that what we experience as desire and nostalgia may come to its fulfilment” (§33). As two paths to transcendence, faith and reason stand or fall together, and they both stand or fall with a realist conception of truth.

Universal Reason and Its Cultured Despisers

Does reason’s capacity to attain metaphysical truth, so forcefully defended by the Pope, entail that there is a *universal, tradition-independent rationality*? The claim that there is such a thing has been the object of sharp critique in academic theology and some sectors of philosophy during the last decades. The demise of “foundationalism”—a concept associated with Enlightenment reason—was confidently proclaimed long before the appearance of *Fides et Ratio*,³⁰ and non-foundationalist or post-foundationalist perspectives on epistemic rationality have carried the day in theology, together with more radical approaches.³¹ Theological non-foundationalism is often motivated by a laudable desire—apparent in some post-liberal and post-secular theological programs—to protect the Christian tradition from the epistemological imperialism of secular modernity.³²

The encyclical’s position in relation to these debates has been variously assessed. Richard Bernstein interprets *Fides et Ratio* as a

³⁰ See, for example, Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Reason within the Bounds of Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976), ch. 4.

³¹ For a brief overview of the debates surrounding foundationalism as they relate to theology, see Olli-Pekka Vainio, *Beyond Fideism: Negotiable Religious Identities* (London: Routledge, 2016), ch. 2. For a more comprehensive account and a defense of moderate foundationalism, see Randal Rauser, *Theology in Search of Foundations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). Non-foundationalist and post-foundationalist perspectives are presented in: John E. Thiel, *Nonfoundationalism* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1994); Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001); Wentzel van Huyssteen, *Essays in Postfoundationalist Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997).

³² James Fodor, “Postliberal Theology,” in *The Modern Theologians*, ed. David F. Ford and Rachel Muers (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 229–48.

misconceived defense of “foundationalism,” a view he identifies as “a substantial and extremely controversial conception of what constitutes human knowledge.”³³ Stanley Hauerwas, on the other hand, seems to find in the encyclical a tradition-dependent view of rationality according to which “there is no standpoint external to the practice of Christianity for assessing the truth of Christian convictions.”³⁴ “From John Paul II’s perspective,” Hauerwas writes, “modern philosophy has made a philosophical mistake by trying to develop epistemologies that insure that our knowledge is true.”³⁵

These divergent interpretations testify to the fact that the encyclical moves between two poles that can seem to pull in different directions. First, there is a Christocentric pole that emphasizes reason’s weakness after the Fall and the healing, purification, and guidance that reason must receive from faith. This is the side of the encyclical that Hauerwas appreciates. On the other hand, there is a universalist pole that highlights the universal nature of reason and the autonomy of philosophy. Writing about “the fathers of philosophy,” the Pope praises them for wanting to “provide a *rational foundation* for their belief in the divinity,” a foundation that “opened a path which took its rise from ancient traditions but allowed a development satisfying the demands of *universal reason*” (§36, emphasis added). In some other passages, the Pope also mentions “foundations” and refers to the universal character of reason.³⁶ This is the side of the encyclical that Bernstein criticizes. Before we can judge whether his accusation of “foundationalism” is true, however, we must distinguish between three different senses of the term.

First, thinkers influenced by continental philosophy often use “foundationalism” in a very broad sense, signifying any attempt to establish some sort of *prima philosophia* or universal framework for thought or reality—no matter whether this framework is of an ontological or an epistemological kind or whether it is formulated independently of Christian revelation.³⁷ It is obvious that *Fides et Ratio* endorses “foundationalism” in this wide sense. This simply

³³ Richard Bernstein, “Faith & Reason,” *Books & Culture*, July/August 1999, booksandculture.com/articles/1999/julaug/9b4030.html.

³⁴ Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe*, 231.

³⁵ Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe*, 235–36.

³⁶ For example, in §59, §75, and §90.

³⁷ For this understanding of foundationalism, see Thomas G. Guarino, *Foundations of Systematic Theology* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2005), 40.

follows from the fact that the encyclical believes in objective truth and rejects historicism, linguistic idealism, cultural relativism, and related doctrines.³⁸

Second, theologians in the postliberal tradition, as well as analytic theologians and philosophers of religion, usually understand “foundationalism” as an *epistemological* position. Two different views of this kind can be distinguished. Sometimes foundationalism is identified as a thesis about the *structure of epistemic justification*, the doctrine that “all knowledge or justified belief rest ultimately on a foundation of noninferential knowledge or justified belief.”³⁹ Foundationalism in this sense can be roughly subdivided into “strong” and “modest” versions. Strong foundationalism (also called classical foundationalism) requires that the foundation consist of indefeasible beliefs (beliefs that are infallible, indubitable, or incorrigible). Modest foundationalism (or “moderate”), on the other hand, holds the foundational or “basic” beliefs to be defeasible, and therefore only *prima facie* justified.⁴⁰

Another epistemological conception of foundationalism identifies the doctrine with the claim that *the proper criteria of epistemic justification are universal*.⁴¹ This third sense of “foundationalism” should not be confused with the commonsensical claim that *some* criteria of justification are universal. Few people would deny that acceptance of certain laws of logic is a universal criterion of rationality, for example. What the view says, instead, is that there is a universal set of criteria sufficient for rationally settling important epistemic disputes between different intellectual and cultural traditions. Presumably, the reason why this view is regarded as “foundationalist” is that the criteria are

³⁸ Guarino agrees with this judgment (*Foundations of Systematic Theology*, 41).

³⁹ Ali Hasan and Richard Fumerton, “Foundationalist Theories of Epistemic Justification,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, October 24, 2016, plato.stanford.edu/entries/justep-foundational/. See also Michael Bergmann, “Foundationalism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Epistemology of Theology*, ed. William J. Abraham and Frederick D. Aquino (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 253–73.

⁴⁰ Another name for modest foundationalism is “minimal foundationalism,” as used by William P. Alston, *Epistemic Justification: Essays in the Theory of Knowledge* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1989), ch. 2. “Weak foundationalism,” however, is a different (and even more modest) version of epistemological foundationalism; see Laurence Bonjour, *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 28–29.

⁴¹ See Eduardo J. Echeverria, “Divine Revelation and Foundationalism: Towards a Historically Conscious Foundationalism,” *Josephinum Journal of Theology* 19, no. 2 (2012): 291–92.

thought of as a rational “foundation” of sorts, but not in the sense that they are basic beliefs from which other beliefs must be derived.

Alasdair MacIntyre is an influential critic of foundationalism in the third sense. While he accepts the existence of some universal criteria of justification, he denies that those criteria are sufficient to settle important epistemic disagreements between different traditions of inquiry.⁴² The kind of substantial standards or criteria that would be relevant for addressing such disagreements are internal to particular traditions and cannot claim universal acceptance. The idea that “truth is guaranteed by rational method and rational method appeals to principles undeniable by any fully reflective rational person” is an Enlightenment misconception.⁴³

So where does *Fides et Ratio* stand with respect to foundationalism in the last two senses? The encyclical says very little about the structure of epistemic justification. What is clear, however, is that it is not committed to the doctrine of “strong” foundationalism, which has few defenders today, if any. True, the Pope sometimes talks about a “solid foundation” (§41) or “rational foundation” (§36), but in most cases, what he has in mind is not an epistemic but a metaphysical foundation (thereby endorsing foundationalism in the first sense, which is a position that, arguably, is entailed by the Christian faith itself⁴⁴). Moreover, when it seems that he has an epistemic foundation in mind, the text gives us no reason to identify that foundation with a set of indubitable or incorrigible beliefs in the manner of strong foundationalism.

Modest foundationalism, on the other hand, has many contemporary defenders, including some theistic philosophers who reject universal criteria of justification. Alvin Plantinga, for example, denies that the proper criteria of epistemic rationality (or “warrant”) can be established in a worldview-neutral way,⁴⁵ but argues that some beliefs, including Christian beliefs, can be “properly basic” and hence

⁴² Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (London: Duckworth, 1988), 351.

⁴³ MacIntyre, *Whose Justice?* 353.

⁴⁴ See, e.g., Guarino, *Foundations of Systematic Theology*, 41.

⁴⁵ A “criterion,” as I use the term, is something that can figure in an internalist account of epistemic justification. A criterion must, in other words, be accessible “by reflection alone” or in some other internalistically acceptable way. This is why Plantinga’s externalist conditions for warrant (which are universal and refer to the proper functioning of cognitive faculties in their proper environments) do not count as “criteria”; see Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

foundational (for Christians) in the sense specified by modest foundationalism.⁴⁶ However, it is also possible to construct versions of modest foundationalism that entail universal criteria of justification, for example by requiring that only beliefs that meet certain universal criteria can belong to the foundation.

Whether John Paul II is a modest foundationalist or not is hence a moot question. The answer to it is of little consequence for the debate about the Pope's attitude toward universal reason. The decisive issue, instead, is whether the argument of *Fides et Ratio* entails or presupposes that the criteria of justification are universal. Is the Pope a foundationalist in the third sense?

Some elements in the encyclical seem to point in this direction. For example, the Pope says that "to argue according to rigorous rational criteria is to guarantee that the results attained are universally valid" (§75).⁴⁷ Moreover, the autonomy of philosophy in relation to theology, which the Pope fully endorses,⁴⁸ can seem to require universal, tradition-independent criteria of rationality. By "philosophy," the Pope does not mean a particular, historically constituted tradition of enquiry. Philosophies exist and have existed in the East as well as the West, and "every people has its own native and seminal wisdom which . . . tends to find voice and develop in forms which are genuinely philosophical" (§3). If there are no substantial, universal standards of rationality, what constitutes philosophy as such? What is it that makes certain forms of inquiry "genuinely philosophical" as opposed to (say) superstitious or ideological?

Furthermore, the Pope claims that "it is possible to discern a core of philosophical insight within the history of thought as a whole" (§4). As examples of such insights, he mentions here "the principles of non-contradiction, finality and causality," as well as "certain fundamental moral norms which are shared by all," and speaks of how reason "intuits and formulates the first universal principles of being." This can seem to imply the existence of universal criteria that embody what the Pope calls "right reason" (*recta ratio*).

However, does the claim that reason is universal necessarily entail

⁴⁶ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*. See also Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 47–49.

⁴⁷ In the encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, there are also clear indications of John Paul II's attitude toward universal reason: "The natural law involves universality. Inasmuch as it is inscribed in the rational nature of the person, it makes itself felt to all beings endowed with reason and living in history" (§51).

⁴⁸ See §75, §77, and §79.

that there are universal criteria of rationality (in the demanding sense specified above)? Perhaps not. Maybe there is a universal epistemic rationality—a “right reason”—that cannot be reduced to a set of rules or criteria, or only to a set of rules or criteria so extensive and complicated that it would be of no use for guiding epistemic behavior. If this is the case, there must certainly be some common patterns in rational epistemic behaviors across cultures. However, the rational resolution of disagreements would not proceed with reference to a set of universal rules or criteria.

It seems to me that MacIntyre’s account of “the rationality of traditions” exploits this possibility.⁴⁹ In my reading, MacIntyre is not an enemy of “universal reason,” but a sophisticated ally (although there are some unclaritys in his position⁵⁰). His aim in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* is to “provide an account of the rationality presupposed by and implicit in the practice of those enquiry-bearing traditions with whose history I have been concerned.”⁵¹ Although the traditions to which MacIntyre refers have different criteria of rationality, they display common patterns in their development over time, patterns that, according to the philosopher, embody an implicit, common account of rational enquiry. The existence of such an implicit “rationality of traditions” could explain the “core of philosophical insight” held in common—according to the Pope—by all rational traditions. It is hence possible that *Fides et Ratio*’s endorsement of “universal reason” could be understood in MacIntyrean terms: rationality-as-such does exist, but it is always historically and culturally embodied and cannot be specified (at least not fully so) in terms of tradition-transcending criteria.

It must be asked, however, whether a MacIntyrean account of rationality can support the claim of the First Vatican Council—unambiguously endorsed by *Fides et Ratio*⁵²—that “God, the beginning and end of all things, can be known with certainty from the

⁴⁹ MacIntyre, *Whose Justice?* ch. 18. See also MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990).

⁵⁰ See John Haldane, “MacIntyre’s Thomist Revival: What Next?” in *After MacIntyre: Critical Perspectives on the Work of Alasdair MacIntyre*, ed. John Horton and Susan Mendus (Cambridge: Polity, 1994), 91–107.

⁵¹ MacIntyre, *Whose Justice?* 354.

⁵² §53: “The Council began with the basic criterion, presupposed by Revelation itself, of the natural knowability of the existence of God.” See also §67: “Acceptance of God’s Revelation necessarily presupposes knowledge of these [naturally knowable] truths.”

things that were created through the natural light of human reason.”⁵³ This claim seems to imply the existence of one or more sound demonstrative arguments for God’s existence, in principle available to any person in possession of the natural light of reason. Postliberal and other theologians who endorse MacIntyre’s tradition-dependent model of rationality are usually skeptical about the existence of arguments of this type. William Placher writes: “Appeals to explanations and arguments accessible to ‘any intelligent, reasonable, responsible human being’ presuppose the kind of universal standard of rationality that the Enlightenment championed.”⁵⁴

Are there arguments that can elicit rational acceptance from “any intelligent, reasonable, responsible human being”? The main problem with this idea is that arguments start from premises, and which premises a rational person finds acceptable depends on the background beliefs that he has. For a rational person in tradition A, a certain premise will appear plausible in light of the background beliefs of that tradition, while the same premise might appear implausible for a rational person in tradition B, whose background beliefs are different. “Strong foundationalism” promised to solve this problem by proposing a universal criterion for the rational acceptability of any premise—namely, that the premise in question must be indubitable or incorrigible, or logically derivable from some other propositions that have these properties. So there are certain premises that any rational person will accept irrespective of what other beliefs he happens to have, and only premises of this kind are legitimate as absolute starting points for arguments. However, if strong foundationalism is untenable, and if there is no other theory that can solve the problem that strong foundationalism was created to solve, it is unclear whether there are arguments—at least of an interesting kind—that must be accepted by any rational person irrespective of which background beliefs he has.⁵⁵

It is quite possible, however, to accept this conclusion and still

⁵³ Heinrich Denzinger, *Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals*, 43rd ed., ed. Peter Hünermann, English ed. Robert Fastiggi and Anne Englund Nash (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), no. 3004.

⁵⁴ William Placher, *Unapologetic Theology: A Christian Voice in a Pluralistic Conversation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1989), 19.

⁵⁵ See the discussion of starting points and presuppositions in Charles Morerod, O.P., “All Theologians Are Philosophers, Whether Knowingly or Not,” in *Theology Needs Philosophy: Acting against Reason Is Contrary to the Nature of God*, ed. Matthew L. Lamb (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2016), 14–17. See also Ralph McInerny, *Aquinas* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004), 30.

claim that some theistic arguments are “accessible” to any rational person as long as we do not understand “accessibility” in a too demanding or hyper-inflated way. Suppose there is a certain kind of fruit—a very good and nourishing one—that grows on trees all over the world. However, in some places, people have come to believe, as a result of a false but seemingly credible rumor that has spread, that this fruit is extremely poisonous. People in those places will abstain from eating and even touching the fruit, since they believe that doing so would kill them. In this scenario, the fruit is accessible to everybody but a false belief prevents many people from accessing it.

An analogous situation could obtain with respect to knowledge of certain premises needed for demonstrating the existence of God. Perhaps there are no premises that all rational persons will accept irrespective of background beliefs, or perhaps those premises that all rational persons will accept are insufficient for an argument to God’s existence. Still, it is possible that there are a sufficient number of premises such that any rational person *would* accept them unless he or she is prevented from doing so by some false beliefs that he or she has. Take, for example, the empirical premise of Aquinas’s First Way: “change is a real feature of the world.”⁵⁶ I contend that this premise is “accessible” to any rational person in the sense that knowledge of its truth is easily available to anybody, like the fruit in the analogy above. Of course, Parmenides did not accept that change is a real feature of the world, and his arguments against this truth are not that easily dismissed.⁵⁷ However, if change *is* a real feature of the world, then either Parmenides’s arguments must be based on some false premise or premises or they must be invalid, in which case Parmenides had a false view of their cogency. In either case, what prevented him from accepting that change is a real feature of the world was the fact that he had some false beliefs. It is very reasonable to assume that, if he had *not* had those false beliefs, he would have accepted the reality of change.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ In Aquinas’ words: “Certum est enim, et sensu constat, aliqua moveri in hoc mundo” (*ST* I, q. 2, a. 3). Aquinas’s First Way is a version of an Aristotelian argument that Edward Feser has given a convincing contemporary formulation. It is Feser’s version of this argument that I have in mind in what follows, and I have borrowed his formulations of key premises (Edward Feser, *Five Proofs of the Existence of God* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2017], 35–37).

⁵⁷ For discussion and refutation, see Edward Feser, *Scholastic Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction* (Heusenstamm: Editiones Scholasticae, 2014), 31–36.

⁵⁸ Note that the fact that a person has false beliefs is not necessarily a proof of irrationality or epistemic culpability. Sometimes false beliefs can be acquired as

It is possible that *all* the premises needed for the argument from change to go through are accessible to any rational person in this sense. So, perhaps the metaphysical principles that the argument requires for its success⁵⁹ are such that they, like the premise about change, will be accepted by any rational person who understands them *unless* that person has some false beliefs that prevent her from accepting them (and, of course, unless some irrational factor, such as “volitional depravity,”⁶⁰ prevents such acceptance). In other words, the circumstance that some people reject some of this argument’s premises on the basis of some false beliefs that they have does not entail that knowledge of those premises is not universally accessible.

It should be noted that this proposal for how to understand what a universally accessible argument is presupposes something like the Thomistic realism recounted in the previous section. This is because there must be an objective fact of the matter as to whether a certain belief is true or false; truth cannot be relative to conceptual schemes or cultural context. Moreover, the teleological conception of the intellect that Thomism espouses makes it unproblematic for Thomists to hold that false beliefs represent objective cognitive failure, not in the sense that the person who believes a falsehood must necessarily be epistemically culpable—for instance, by having neglected some epistemic duty or the like—but simply in the sense that his intellect has missed its *telos* and been led astray. MacIntyre writes:

False assertions, when believed, interpose themselves between the individuals who assert them and the realities of which they speak. In doing so they are always apt to disable those individuals in their everyday activities as well as in their enquiries. . . . To assert that “p is false” is to ascribe to the assertion of p and to belief that p an *injurious causal property*. . . . So long as I believe and judge that p, when p is in fact false, I debar myself from recognizing how things are.⁶¹

a result of bad luck, or a person can inherit—without personal culpability—false beliefs from his community or tradition.

⁵⁹ Such as the premise that “change is the actualization of a potential” and that “the occurrence of any change presupposes some thing or substance which changes” (Feser, *Five Proofs*, 35–37).

⁶⁰ Griffiths, “How Reasoning Goes Wrong,” 152–57.

⁶¹ MacIntyre, “Truth as a Good,” 202–3 (emphasis added).

The good news is that false beliefs are like blindfolds: they can be removed, enabling the person whose access to objective reality they have blocked to recognize “how things are.” This is the aim of rational debate. MacIntyre has explained how such debate can take place between traditions of enquiry that approach reality armed with different and incompatible background beliefs, and even with conceptual frameworks that are incommensurable in certain respects.⁶² If Thomistic realism is true, some conceptual frameworks are objectively more apt to capture the intelligible order of mind-independent reality than others and it is in rational debate that concepts are trimmed for this task or rejected as inadequate. The goal of this process is to open the intellect to the structure of the objective world by removing false conceptions and inadequate conceptualizations.

Let us take an example. A common objection to the above-mentioned theistic argument from change is that it presupposes an obsolete conceptual framework. The objectors say that the distinction between potential and actual being—presupposed in the premise “no potential can be actualized unless something already actual actualizes it”⁶³—is explanatorily redundant in light of the modern natural sciences. If Thomistic realism is true, there is an objective fact of the matter as to whether the distinction between potentiality and actuality is really redundant, or whether it is needed to make sense of the world and the practice of science itself.⁶⁴ If the latter is the case, then we must say that those who reject the mentioned premise on conceptual grounds have been prevented—by a false belief about conceptual inadequacy—from recognizing how things really are. Again, the way to remedy this is through rational debate. A universally accessible argument cannot be expected, by itself, to clear away all conceivable obstacles to its acceptance, whether in the form of false beliefs or inadequate conceptual frameworks. That there are many (interesting) arguments capable of this is a dream that died with strong foundationalism.⁶⁵

⁶² MacIntyre, *Whose Justice?* ch. 18.

⁶³ Feser, *Five Proofs*, 35.

⁶⁴ Feser, *Scholastic Metaphysics*, 36.

⁶⁵ My claim here is compatible with the possibility that there are *some* interesting arguments—perhaps also arguments for the existence of God—that all rational people must accept, irrespective of beliefs.

Against the background of the suggested way of understanding universal arguments, it becomes clear why reason—as *Fides et Ratio* forcefully argues—cannot do without the guidance of faith. Left to its own devices, reason very easily ensnares itself in webs of false beliefs that obstruct its view of reality. This is the result of reason’s fallenness. The Fall “so wounded reason that from then on its path to full truth would be strewn with obstacles,” but “the coming of Christ . . . redeemed reason from its weakness, setting it free from the shackles in which it had imprisoned itself” (§22).

The positive effects of faith on reason have both subjective and objective aspects. Faith purifies reason by instilling humility and protecting it against presumption (§76). Faith, however, also helps reason by presenting it with new objective content. It offers to humans “the ultimate truth about their own life and about the goal of history” (§12), a truth that “stirs the human mind to ceaseless effort” and “impels reason continually to extend the range of its knowledge” (§14). Faith, hence, gives reason cognitive directions about its inquiries and about which philosophical views to avoid as dead ends. By doing so, faith disentangles reason from webs of beliefs that close our minds to objective reality. Faith is therefore correctly seen as a light that can assist philosophy as it struggles through rational debate to overcome the obstacles that false beliefs and inadequate conceptual schemes constitute. “Faith liberates reason in so far as it allows reason to attain correctly what it seeks to know” (§20).⁶⁶

The weakness of reason separated from faith does not mean that the validity and soundness of philosophical arguments, or the universal availability of the premises from which they proceed, in any sense depend on faith, grace, and revelation. Thomas Joseph White explains:

Perhaps, in our frail and fallen state, it is only under the stimulating and strengthening effects of grace that weakened reason is healed. It does not follow that there are no such things

⁶⁶ As Pope Leo XIII put it: “The Christian faith, reposing on the authority of God, is the unfailing mistress of truth, whom whoso followeth he will be neither enmeshed in the snares of error nor tossed hither and thither on the waves of fluctuating opinion. . . . Faith *frees* and saves reason *from error*, and endows it with *manifold* knowledge” (Encyclical Letter *Aeterni Patris* [on the Restoration of Christian Philosophy], §9, w2.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_04081879_aeterni-patris.html).

as essentially necessary rational arguments, but only that in openness to a philosophical argument more is at work than the operation of a mere neutral rationality.⁶⁷

In the words of John Paul II: “If human beings with their intelligence fail to recognize God as Creator of all, it is not because they lack the means to do so, but because their free will and their sinfulness place an impediment in the way” (§19).

Conclusion

Drawing on the resources of Catholic tradition, *Fides et Ratio* manages to hold together two theses. The first is the primacy of faith, and the second the universality of truth and reason. Even though reason is needed to “purify” faith and to explicate the contents of divine revelation, faith still provides a higher vantage point, and reason must submit to faith’s guidance. On the other hand, natural reason has the capacity to attain truth—even truth about God and the “first principles of being”—by operating according to its own rules and inherent principles. The autonomy of philosophical inquiry must therefore be respected.

Paradoxically, in contemporary theology, the second thesis is more likely to meet resistance than the first. As Christian beliefs lose their credibility in the eyes of the majority in Western societies, it is tempting for theologians to give up on universal reason and emphasize Christian particularity. It can seem that the only viable way to defend counter-cultural adherence to Christian beliefs is by means of a *tu quoque* argument: “Yes, the Christian tradition cannot pass muster before the bar of a supposedly universal reason, but neither can any other tradition, including secular modernity.” Exemplifying this attitude, John Milbank writes: “At the limits of disagreement it will take the form of a clash of rhetorics, of voices addressing diverse assemblies. And decisive shifts within traditions, or from one tradition to another, have to be interpreted as essentially ‘rhetorical victories.’”⁶⁸

Pope John Paul II avoided falling into this trap of “contending discursive strategies and their agonistic posittings.”⁶⁹ Instead, he chose

⁶⁷ Thomas Joseph White, “Whether Faith Needs Philosophy,” *First Things*, July 2011, firstthings.com/article/2011/07/whether-faith-needs-philosophy.

⁶⁸ John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1990), 347.

⁶⁹ Hütter, “The Directedness of Reasoning,” 164.

to defend reason *from the standpoint of faith*, emphasizing reason's universality and its capacity for attaining metaphysical truth while at the same time making clear that faith provides the bigger picture. In this article, I have argued that the Pope's *apologia* for reason is of great importance today and that his commitment to universal reason—correctly understood—withstands the “demise of foundationalism.” The Pope brings out the importance of metaphysical realism for a correct understanding of human nature and shows that faith itself can be correctly understood only against the background of humanity's universal quest for truth. Revelation, received in faith, gives the answer that reason seeks. If there were no asking—no philosophical quest for truth—then whatever revelation would give us, it would not be an answer. N·V