

**Faith, Reason, and Science:
towards a renewed Christian Humanism?**

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Theology, philosophy, and science have been in conversation with each other for centuries. Although the conversation has not always been smooth and agreeable, it has never completely abated, and has nearly always been fruitful at least in so far as it helped protagonists of these disciplines recognize and discard deeply seated prejudices. History has repeatedly shown how scientists can be misguided in such debates by an idea of theology that is nothing more than a caricature, a misrepresentation that is often produced and propagated by profiteers who care nothing about the truth. The same thing can be said about theologians being misled by caricatures of science, and about philosophers being misled by caricatures of theology and of science. In fact, caricatures can, and often do, infect all the possible relations between these disciplines, and considerable care is needed to overcome those deep prejudices that emerge and re-emerge in various forms in the course of history. One may add here that the kind of care needed here is probably not very different from the one required for genuine interreligious dialogue. An institution like Heythrop College, situated at the heart of one of the major cities of the world, and forming part of one of the largest universities in Europe, represents an excellent place for the continuation and the appreciation of such respectful conversation between these disciplines. The College serves as an indispensable locus for a process of continual purification of our faculties of cognition and evaluative judgement, a

process whereby the scientific mentality that dominates so much of world affairs can not only remain in touch with humanistic concerns but also be enriched.

The idea of humanistic concerns is undoubtedly vague. Its root notion of humanism does not seem to have clear boundaries, and any attempt to determine its ancestry as we move back through the centuries will inevitably show considerable variation in emphasis. One way to understand humanism has been to see it as a reaction to Medieval Scholasticism.

Humanists of the fourteenth century, keen on retrieving the elegance and spirit of classical literature and the religious and moral views of non-Christian antiquity, started seeing this kind of scholarship as one that retrieves the entire human cultural output without restrictions.

This attitude generated the idea of rebirth or Renaissance: the idea of going beyond the horizon of established orthodoxy to retrieve pre-Christian values that the establishment had forgotten or wilfully discarded. As such, humanism expresses a cultural view that considers itself built exclusively on what is human, without reference to the Bible. Because of this distance from the established Christian roots of Europe, humanism has tended to align itself with secularism, and this trend has remained strong through the centuries even up to our times. Humanism is today often seen as equivalent not just to secularization but to secularism: in other words, it is often seen not merely as the engine that transforms society from a state where Christian values and institutions have a major role to a state where they do not. It is often seen rather as an ideology or political program that is essentially anti-religious, intent on taking over the public contribution of the Christian Churches to render them insignificant and thereby to eliminate them completely.

In spite of this strong anti-Christian element within humanism, however, we need to recall that, since its origins, there has always been Christian versions of it that have highlighted the compatibility between the Biblical message, the work of the Church, and the genuine positive values of antiquity. Petrarch, who spearheaded humanism in fourteenth

century Italy by inaugurating serious philological and historical criticism, was a religious person. The same can be said of other prominent humanists, such as Erasmus and Thomas More. Even after the sharp rise of modern science, we still find versions of Christian humanism emerging and being accepted as respectable worldviews that acknowledge humanity's dignity in its relation to God rather than in opposition to God. The most prominent among these Christian humanists in recent times, one directly linked to the scientific mentality, is probably Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, who out-humanizes the non-religious humanists, as it were, by proposing a breathtaking hominization of the entire universe, the culmination of cosmic evolution, the full significance of which is available only through the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation. Following Teilhard's example, many current researchers within the debate between faith and science have made other attempts to show how humanism is neither anti-Christian nor necessarily reductionist and naturalistic in the philosophical sense.

Such attempts at formulating a healthy and fruitful symbiosis of science, faith, and philosophy, are certainly interesting and praiseworthy but they still seem to lack something very important. They all seem to have systematically neglected the existential side of human life. Consider the kind of science-related topics that top the list in current discussions: these are nearly always associated with specific scientific discoveries that apparently oblige theologians to update their work. Moral theologians are incessantly concerned about human reproductive science and technology. Theologians of creation are being challenged by the alarming statistics on global ecological instability. Theological anthropologists are struggling to save the soul from the onslaught of the neuroscientists. Specialists of the doctrine of the Incarnation and of the doctrine of Original Sin are again at work because of developments in evolutionary anthropology. All these frontier-issues, although somewhat diverse, are essentially of the same type. They are all theoretical, in the sense that they are concerned with

the need to rework theological *explanations*. There can be no doubt that such frontier-issues are important, and that the energy invested in these areas is well directed. Efforts of this kind represent, in fact, the crucial task of rebuilding intellectual bridges between the various parts of our conceptual scheme. They counteract the perennial danger of having humanity slide into irreversible intellectual fragmentation.¹

In spite of their importance, however, theoretical frontier-issues do not represent the only kind of perspective one can take as regards faith, reason, and science. Over and above these theoretical issues, there are other frontier-issues that can be called practical. These are often neglected because they do not deal with what scientists or theologians say. They deal rather with what scientists and theologians do. As recent work in the history of the natural sciences shows, it is a mistake to see scientific theories as timeless entities totally detached from the philosophical, theological and cultural environments that constituted the cradle in which they were born. An entire cultural paradigm affects, and is in turn affected by, the discovery and formulation of any given major theory. Moreover, cultural paradigms affect individuals not only in their thinking but also in their doing. And this fact is what gives rise to issues that are of a practical nature—less concerned with how to describe the world, and more with how to live.

Therefore, my project in this paper is to explore this particular, somewhat neglected dimension of the ongoing debate between theology, philosophy, and the natural sciences. I will do this by first determining two important areas of this practical dimension, and then, in section two, by considering and eventually blocking some possible objections. I will conclude by drawing some concrete proposals on how to take this discussion further.

1. The eclipse of the person

A new influential paradigm emerged in seventeenth century Europe, which came to be called the mechanistic worldview. Put simply, this view held that all objects are made up of particles, and all effects are the result of push-pull, law-governed forces between these particles. Inaugurated by René Descartes and quantified by eminent men of science like Isaac Newton and Pierre-Simon de Laplace, this outlook had a deep impact on how people understood the world and their place in it. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw many Christian philosophers and theologians respond to this paradigm, and much work was dedicated to the frontier-issues it provoked. There were important debates on the nature of the human soul, on the clash between determinism and freedom, and so similar issues. Since then, science has moved on a great deal, and today's physics practically disproves the mechanistic worldview. This development in science, however, does not mean that today's scientific paradigm has no serious challenge to offer the theologian and the philosopher.

Consider, for instance, Charles Darwin's impact. He discovered that, when organisms have traits that are hereditary, vital for survival, and capable of mutating randomly, those organisms, as a species, will evolve by natural selection. Since the publication of his theory, the form of explanation he used has been extended in various directions beyond the strictly biological realm. Just as Isaac Newton had given rise to a cultural paradigm, known as Newtonianism, so also Darwin has given rise to Darwinism. Many things can be said about this new paradigm, about how it affects psychology, economics, ethics and other areas, but I want to focus on one issue only. I want to illustrate how this paradigm tends to shift global attention away from what happens to the individual person. It does this, I will argue, by drawing attention to aspects that are, with respect to human beings, either microscopic or macroscopic. In other words, because of this worldview, people become engrossed in what happens to the gene or engrossed in what happens to large groups, of which the individual is

just a tiny part, and they tend to forget the individual person as such. Let us consider these two opposing trends in some more detail.

Gregor Mendel's pioneering work on the unit of biological heredity, the gene, was of central importance for the merging of evolutionary theory with molecular biology. Because of this successful merging, some popular-science writers have gone so far as to say that only genes count. Describing genes as having feelings, wants and desires like humans, they have claimed that genes are literally selfish, having elaborate plans on how best to survive at all costs. On this view, human individuals become mere vehicles for genes. Genes use humans to survive—and that is all there is to life. This view, although apparently fantastic, can affect fundamental cultural trends because its defenders often present it as based on solid science. Genes become more important than people. Your worth is the worth of the genes you carry, nothing more. For centuries, the dignity of the human individual has been the basic concept for understanding justice within social, legal and cultural interaction. Now, all this has to change. In the words of Immanuel Kant, the human individual should never be considered a means to an end. Now however science seems to establish, as a matter of brute fact, that the individual is indeed a means—a means for genes to propagate. Since this is scientific truth, so the story goes, we just have to accept it. The upshot is therefore unavoidable. The evolutionary paradigm makes humans lose their importance and their dignity. They lose their faces.

Surprisingly, this paradigm has also the opposite effect. It undermines the importance of the individual by pulling towards macroscopic considerations. As explained above, the scientific theory of evolution involves the study of changes in traits of organisms through long stretches of time. Its focus is on what happens to large groups in the long run; the values that count are average values. Because of the very nature of the theory, therefore, the main focus of attention starts hovering way above the individual. The theory makes us lose interest

in what happens to the individual; and this affects culture in general. A new voice tells us, ‘Attend to the individual’s progress and way of life, and you are losing your time; for all you know, that individual’s struggles and achievements will be neutralized, swallowed up, by opposite trends within the group. What you should consider is what is happening to vast numbers taken together. Hence, forget individual care; embark on population studies.’

What has been said so far should not, of course, diminish our genuine appreciation of the scientific theory of evolution as such. The evidential support for this theory within its proper domain is as robust as the support of any other accepted theory. Moreover, its heuristic potential and explanatory power are very impressive. Nevertheless, one needs to stress that the cultural paradigm it has generated so far tends to obscure the dignity and importance of the individual person. This cultural trend needs to be addressed and corrected before it sets in and becomes irreversible, before the human person vanishes completely behind gene talk or statistical tables.

2. The loss of the art of living

A second frontier issue arises also not from current science itself but from what current science generates at the cultural level. Recall first how the various scientific disciplines constitute not a democracy but a hierarchy, the top places being occupied by the mathematical sciences, the so-called hard sciences. This hierarchy, which is allegedly the only guardian of objectivity and truth, has a significant effect on culture. For instance, the fascination with the mathematical sciences drives ethics towards utilitarianism. It drives philosophy of mind towards naturalism or scientism. It tends to divide intellectual activity into two clear camps, hard and soft. Science is hard; literature is soft. Reason is hard; emotion is soft. Empirical is hard; idealistic is soft. Analysis is hard; synthesis is soft. Self-sufficiency

is hard; dialogue is soft. Facts are hard; interpretation is soft. Logical is hard; metaphorical is soft. Mechanical is hard; organic is soft. Objective is hard; personal is soft. The combination of all these trends affects the kind of education students receive at university level.

Knowledge-transfer is given priority. University education fills students' minds with descriptions of chemicals and processes, with quantities and equations, with dates and definitions. What is highlighted is objective knowledge. What is neglected is personal life. In academia, questions about what a good life is and how to achieve it, and questions about how to do good and avoid evil, have been exiled.

Universities have essentially embraced knowledge and rejected wisdom. While knowledge is the result of a group effort, accumulating within society bit by bit, wisdom, on the contrary, is a personal affair. It is a feature of the individual. There is no stack of wisdom. There is no library of wisdom corresponding to our libraries of knowledge. Each person needs to attain wisdom as an individual achievement, perhaps helped by direct example from others. While knowledge is learnt piecemeal, often in the form of distinct propositions, wisdom is a unifying feature of the person, bringing the various elements of one's knowledge and the various experiences of one's life together into a coherent whole. Unlike knowledge, wisdom is a habit of life that unites a reflective attitude with practical concerns. With it, individuals have the skill to evaluate complex situations of life and to attain a good life, given their personal possibilities. While knowledge is often associated with quantity, wisdom is often associated with quality of life.²

The consequences of embracing knowledge and rejecting wisdom can be serious. While globalization favours economic development and context-independent knowledge-transfer, the art of living a good life is being systematically marginalized. And this creates a frontier-issue related to education, a frontier-issue that is, just like the one mentioned before, not theoretical but practical. The two issues, in fact, are related. The vanishing of the human

individual, through exclusive interest in either the microscopic or the macroscopic level, goes hand in hand with the neglect of the individual's efforts to realize a good life at the personal level. The fact that the two frontier-issues are closely related suggests that there could be a common solution, one that depends on reintroducing within university education the teaching of virtue, by which students can grow to see themselves as valuable and responsible individuals within society and can learn how to achieve a good life.

3. Possible Objections

Before spelling out this response in some more detail, it is important to foresee at least two possible objections, one mainly philosophical, the other theological.

Let us start with the idea of acquiring knowledge for its own sake. According to a venerable tradition in Western philosophy, wisdom is the seeking of truth for its own sake (called by Aristotle, first philosophy, *he prote philosophia*). This is distinct from another kind of wisdom that is known as practical wisdom (*phronesis*). Seeking truth for the sake of some project gives priority to the project rather than to the truth being sought. Hence, this kind of seeking truth cannot be the highest. Only if our attention is absorbed completely by the truth, can we be on the path of the highest wisdom, and this happens when truth itself is the end of our search. Moreover, through the centuries after Aristotle, seeking truth for its own sake has become associated with theoretical science. Why, then, should we make universities diminish their teaching of objective theory? Real wisdom lies in the transcending of personal interests and personal problems. It does not lie in being preoccupied with oneself.

This objection looks compelling. On further analysis, however, it turns out to be quite harmless. We need to recall that to live a good life is not the same thing as engaging in some mundane project. People concerned with living a good life are engaged in the project of

bringing to life what theory delivers, quite literally. They are engaged in the incarnation of contemplation. Recall Plato's myth of the cave. In this story, there is an interesting detail that is often neglected. A prisoner in a dark, underground cavern is liberated, climbs out of the cave and discovers the true light. He does not, however, remain out there, relishing the goodness of truth. Plato continues his story by telling us that the enlightened prisoner makes his way back into the cave and tries to tell his fellow prisoners about his discovery.³ The contemplation of the truth, therefore, is incomplete if it does not return and affect the original state we were in before starting. Plato revisits this idea when discussing the nature of the soul. For him, it is evident that wisdom lies in the harmony that the highest part of the soul establishes between all the other parts of the soul, and eventually with all the bodily faculties and tendencies. Wisdom lies essentially in establishing the right kind of order or harmony. Even Aristotle, in fact, acknowledges that the wise person should not lack the skill of living well.⁴ My proposed response is, in fact, an invitation to return to Plato, at least on this point, and to give the striving for harmony within the self its due importance. As one Stoic philosopher wrote, 'just as wood is the material of the carpenter, bronze that of the statue maker, so each individual's own life is the material of the art of living.'⁵

A second objection might come from theology. My proposal consists in focusing on the individual, rather than on, for instance, large numbers of individuals. An objector might see this point as going against some basic ideas expressed in the Bible. Consider the attitudes that self-care can generate, attitudes like spiritual egoism, whereby one is totally absorbed by concerns about one's own salvation, one's own excellence, and cares nothing about the salvation of others. Self-care can generate a spirituality of detachment from the world, of disengagement, of disinterestedness, somewhat like the attitude we see represented by the priest and the Levite in the parable of the Good Samaritan. It can make people turn their faces away from the kenosis of Christ, downplaying the neighbour's plight and the self-giving

nature of God revealed in Christ, and it can enslave them instead within pathetic, spiritual navel-gazing. Such consequences are certainly very serious, especially from a Christian point of view. The idea, therefore, of promoting the skill of living cannot be totally right.

This objection has indeed some truth in it. Does it, however, really undermine the proposal? To see why it does not, we can start with Our Lord's injunction in Matthew's Gospel: 'first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.'⁶ This directive is undoubtedly about the care of the self. One can therefore detect some tension between this point and the parable of the Good Samaritan. On the one hand, Jesus is telling us to polish up our own interior life, to be genuine, and to consider this task our first priority. On the other hand, he is also telling us that a false sense of self-concern is deadly, in the spiritual sense, especially when it makes us act like the priest or the Levite in the parable of the Good Samaritan. How can this tension be resolved? For the solution, we need to look at Jesus himself. His life teaches us how to be authentic, even perfect as the Father is perfect, and yet not enclosed within ourselves. Concern with one's self need not be egocentric. When genuine, this concern should flow out, of its very nature, into concrete action in line with the common good. If I care about whether I am a good person or not, I can offer help to my neighbours where and when they really need it. I will even be able to help them in a deeper, more enduring way—help them become good persons. If, on the contrary, I do not care about whether I am a good person or not, I would be blind. I would not even see what my neighbours need. Hence, the individual takes priority. The individual's virtuous life is the source, not the product, of the community's wellbeing. This is essentially a New Testament idea. In the mystery of Christ, God has revealed His concern with the welfare of the individual. Christ's salvific act is God's personal way of involving himself with humanity. He tore the heavens open and came down. In that act, God highlights his shift in concern. In the Old Testament, the main attention was on the salvation of the

chosen people as a whole. In the New Testament, the main attention is on Jesus, and on those who personally, individually, express their faith in him. This is what theologians refer to when they speak of the scandal of particularity, which sets Christianity apart.⁷ And this point adds considerable support to the proposal put forward in this paper.

4. Some practical consequences

This proposal is mainly concerned with students doing their first degree at university. Fortunately, this sector of society is growing. More and more young people have the opportunity of studying for a degree at university; and first degrees, let us recall, are not primarily the first step towards a career in research. They are, or should be, in large part a preparation for life. When we say that university education should help students grow in wisdom rather than be satisfied with the mere transfer of knowledge, we are in fact calling for a new attitude. We are urging an updated form of Christian Humanism, which addresses a number of issues simultaneously, issues that are often seen as separate.⁸ First, the proposal is relevant as regards the information explosion. During these last decades, the amount of accessible information to any individual has increased enormously. But the skill to choose between more valuable and less valuable information has not increased at the same rate. The proposal defended in this paper is meant to deal with precisely this lack. Secondly, sociologists of religion have identified a rising interest in spirituality across the globe—spirituality in a very broad sense, including, for instance, white magic, psychic powers, universal energy, Ignatian discernment, mystical union with God, and other such topics. The proposal defended in this paper is one way of helping young people bring order, a reasoned order, into this uncharted cultural landscape. Thirdly, the care for creation: the individual's skill to bring order into his or her life includes growth in the right relation towards the

environment.⁹ Order within the life of the individual overflows and becomes order within the life of the community, and, further afield, order in the life of the global village.

On a more practical level, immediate action seems to be needed in three main areas. First of all, a point about science itself: Christians of all kinds need to desist from demonizing science. They need, rather, to be instruments for the rediscovery of the full richness of the scientific experience. They need to give credit where credit is due; to encourage scientists and help them appreciate the dignity of their vocation; to help bring back into the laboratory the historical and ethical dimension of science; and to recall how science is itself the vehicle of a specific kind of virtue, which may be called heuristic courage. Secondly, the international community needs to rediscover the idea of transcultural virtues, those that are closely associated with basic, human, biological needs, with transcultural aspects of human living and dying, with transcultural ideals of freedom and authenticity, and with transcultural aspects of religious experience. For this important task, different traditions, different viewpoints, should be consulted—the more viewpoints there are, the better the result. Thirdly, Christianity-inspired institutions of higher education need to rediscover the importance of their students' affective dimension. Unfortunately, what normally happens is that the students' emotional development is never considered part of the aim of university education. Therefore, something on this front needs to be introduced. Firsthand experience of different ways of human living, for instance experiencing the life of the poor, can benefit students enormously by provoking an emotional response, which can later be discussed and evaluated. Some study of literature within an overly technical curriculum may also have an important role to play. It could help to offer a virtual world in which students can be guided to understand their emotional response to various possible human situations.

The foregoing arguments point towards the following idea: further international collaboration needs to be sustained to determine more clearly the characteristics of wisdom

from the viewpoint of various cultures. One may start by determining a list of trans-cultural virtues, this being done with due sensitivity towards the culture where the inquiry is situated. The virtues being sought here are those associated closely with the basic, biological features of human beings, such as parental care, growing up, dealing with authority, facing the prospect of death, and so on. This list can then be used to formulate efficient strategies for the teaching of wisdom as discussed in this paper. The hope is that the international pooling of resources on these issues will show convergence, and that the results will be beneficial for the globalized world of the 21st century. Such a project, in line with the basic inspiration behind the 1599 influential Jesuit educational programme, the *Ratio Studiorum*, can be the beginning of the compilation of a practical handbook dealing with student character-formation, and intended for university lecturers in Jesuit institutions worldwide.¹⁰

References

- 1 A statement about this, for the context of Jesuit higher education, is: Pedro Arrupe, ‘Theological reflection and interdisciplinary research’ in: Pedro Arrupe, S.J., *Jesuit Apostolates Today*, J. Aixela S.J. (ed.) (Institute of Jesuit Sources: St. Louis USA, 1981), pp. 33–42 (especially p. 37).
- 2 I discuss this further in chapter six of *Science and Virtue: An Essay on the Impact of the Scientific Mentality on Moral Character*, (Ashgate New Critical Thinking in Philosophy), Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2006.
- 3 *Republic* VII, 516e–517a.
- 4 *Nicomachean Ethics* VI, 1140a–1141a.
- 5 Epictetus, *Dissertationes* 1.15.2

6 Mt 7:5 (NIV).

7 E.g. Karl Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik* IV, 1; Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dominus Iesus*, §15.

8 Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, §78.

9 John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, §37.

10 A previous version of this paper was one of the presentations at the international conference entitled ‘Shaping the Future: Networking Jesuit Higher Education for a Globalizing World’, held at the Universidad Iberoamericana, Mexico City, in April 2010.