



In the previous essay, I presented faith and reason as two wings on which the human person is meant to soar into the contemplation of truth. The first step in learning to fly with both wings is to come to a deeper understanding of reason that goes beyond the common and narrow account that equates reason with science and only with science.

Let us begin with a definition of science. The Science Council of the United Kingdom proposes the following definition of science on its website: “Science is the pursuit and application of knowledge and understanding of the natural and social world following a systematic methodology based on evidence.”¹ It is likely that scientists from throughout the world would agree with this definition.

Because contemporary people tend to reduce reason to science as so defined, truth too, tends to be reduced. What is truth? In our society, when most people hear the word “truth” they automatically understand it to mean scientifically verified facts or information. A deeper understanding of reason, we shall see, leads to a deeper understanding of truth.

There is a major price to pay for holding a scientific account of reason and truth. For if reason is limited to science, and truth is limited to scientifically verified facts, then it very much seems there are no true or rationally verifiable answers to questions about God, about morality, or about the meaning of life.

First, concerning God. According to the definition of science given by the Science Council, science deals with the natural or social world. God, however, is beyond the natural or social world. Science, therefore, by its very definition cannot settle the question of God’s existence or attributes. If reason is limited to science, then by definition, reason also cannot settle these questions.

Second, concerning moral claims. Given the methodology of science outlined by the Science Council, moral questions cannot be settled by

science. Many believe that science and morality are completely separate. The former deals with facts, using its own proper methodology, while the latter deals with values and has its own proper methodology.

Third, questions about the *meaning* of life or *meaning* of reality cannot be settled by science. For science, it seems clear, is not designed to raise such questions, propose answers to them, or verify those answers. If we ask a physicist, biologist, or chemist what life is all about, we may get

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an answer. But it is not the physicist speaking *as a physicist* or a biologist *as a biologist* who proposes that answer. Psychologists sometimes raise the question of meaning, and argue that the issue is of central importance to human health and therapy, but even the psychologists who explore the issue tend to claim that meaning is utterly subjective. In other words, there is no objectively true and scientifically verifiable answer to the question of life’s meaning. Rather, each person constructs his or her own meaning like a spider spinning a web out of itself. If science is all we have to go on, then what shall we say about the meaning of life? There is no scientific answer to the question, and since reason is limited to science, there can be no rational answer.

As it is understood today, reason knows nothing about God, can settle nothing about morals, and knows nothing of life’s meaning. Unfortunately, these are not merely theoretical implications. Large numbers of people in our society, especially many students on our college campuses, go through life with the assumption that there is no rational and objective answer to the questions of whether or not God exists or of what His attributes would be. It is often taken for granted that there is no way to settle moral questions other than with a

vote. Many are convinced that there is no universal, true, rational, accessible, verifiable answer to the question of what life is all about. The reduction of reason to science has left multitudes of people without a moral or spiritual compass. Their lives become subjective journeys where they alone determine where they are going. When this Godless, guideless, meaningless form of existence is put forward as a philosophy, the philosophy is called *nihilism*. It is a belief in nothing as ultimate. In his encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, Pope St. John Paul II described nihilism as a significant issue of our times. He realized that a common and shared civilization could not be sustained on such a basis.

However, there is no need to embrace such a narrow or reductionist account of reason. We should return to another account of reason that is more ancient, richer, and more open to reality as a whole. Reason, on this account, is *sapiential*. Reason here is the capacity for *wisdom*. Wisdom is an all-embracing understanding of reality as a whole in light of ultimate causes, especially in light of the *end* or *goal* of all things. In order to be capable of such wisdom or such an all-embracing understanding of reality, reason must be receptive to reality in *all* of its aspects: the quantifiable and the non-quantifiable, the measurable and the immeasurable, the observable and the non-observable, the tangible and the intangible, the sensible and the intelligible.

As the ancients were aware, reason is not prejudiced against God, against moral truth, or against the meaning of life. Rather, reason understood as wisdom, is open to such questions, seeks answers to them, and is capable of finding true answers to them. Wisdom does not deny modern science, but goes beyond it. Modern science alone, especially when it denies that there is an end to all things, can never deliver wisdom. Something more than science is needed for wisdom, and something more than science is available. Reason is this something more, and reason is capable of an open and fruitful inquiry into reality as a whole.

The Church understands reason in this ancient, richer, and more open sense. Because the Church understands reason as wisdom, the Church teaches that human reason is capable of arriving at some limited knowledge of God's existence and attributes, at solid insight about moral truth,



and at a deep grasp of the meaning of life. Furthermore, reason understood as wisdom is open to receiving a divine revelation if God should so deign to give us one. It is even capable of detecting signs of authentic divine revelation and distinguishing this authentic revelation from counterfeit rivals.

On the sapiential account of reason, truth is more than just scientifically verified facts. We can distinguish between Truth with a capital "T" and truth with a small "t". Truth with a capital "T" is *an understanding of reality as a whole*. Truth with a small "t" is one of the truths or facts about the world. Science helps to verify many facts about the world, it delivers many truths, and no wise person wants to deny solidly established scientific facts. But if reason is something more than just science, if reason inherently seeks Truth and wisdom, then reason is inherently driven to an understanding of it all—the meaning of reality. **TOE** notes »

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