

## *La Verità morale: Duplex ordo cognitionis*<sup>1</sup>

Let me remark first on the general philosophical instruction that many students receive in theological courses of study. Pope John Paul II has called philosophy one of the noblest of human tasks, and reminds us that its study is fundamental and indispensable to the structure of theological studies and to the formation of ministers of religion and, especially, of priests. It has been my experience, however, that many theological students in seminaries and elsewhere come to their theology lessons without a firm grasp of the basic philosophical categories that are indispensable for the study of Catholic doctrine. Indeed, the almost exclusive employment of the historical method impedes the students from recognizing how "logic, the philosophy of language, epistemology, the philosophy of nature, anthropology," and metaphysics are vital to the various branches of theology (see *Fides et ratio*, #91). The need for philosophy within theology is not merely historical, but genuinely systematic and methodic, implying that authentic philosophy in the Catholic tradition ought to be a constitutive element of all theological formation.

Too frequently philosophy is either treated as a mere generic category fillable by any "credits" in the field whatsoever, irrespective the tradition of thought that is represented by the instruction received. This obviously implies a view of philosophy as naturally either syncretistic or agnostic. Alternately, the Catholic tradition of philosophizing often is reductively interpreted in a merely historical way—as though what were important about the Catholic philosophic tradition were merely its material role in the developments of the past, and not its formal and essential mediative function within life and theology as a whole. The point is not that historical engagement is harmful *per se*, but that it neither is nor can be a substitute for the speculative integrity required in philosophy and theology.

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Realist philosophy and metaphysics provide an absolutely indispensable foundation for the appropriation of sacred truth, and in the development of both systematic and moral theology. Yet often theologians lack a basic philosophical formation, even about what would be required to attain a thorough and accurate knowledge of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. For example, the main philosophical concepts of nature, person, being, substance, matter and form, cause, end or finality, relation, soul, wisdom, virtue, vice, etc. remain, I surmise, foreign to the majority of our Catholic theologians.

In order to supply theologians with the kind of formation required for the work of evangelization, they will require a complete formation in the Catholic tradition. Among them should not be found those who, because they want to explore new paths for scholarship, "simply deny the universal value of the Church's philosophical heritage" (*Fides et ratio*, #69). Indeed, it would not seem too much to ask that the professors of philosophy who teach theological students exemplify what Pope John Paul II recalls as characteristic of the best tradition in Catholic intellectual life: *philosophari in Maria*.

Three quotations of Pope John Paul II from *Fides et ratio* notably help to underscore the proper role of philosophy within theological instruction, and so help us better understand the *duplex ordo cognitionis*. First, *Fides et ratio* affirms:

the need for a philosophy of genuinely metaphysical range, capable, that is, of transcending empirical data in order to attain something absolute, ultimate and foundational in its search for truth. This requirement is implicit in sapiential and analytical knowledge alike; and in particular it is a requirement for knowing the moral good, which has its ultimate foundation in the Supreme Good, God himself (*Fides et ratio*, #83).

The importance of metaphysics for moral theology is clearly underscored here. The classical formulation for this insight is that in order for practical truth to be conformed to right appetite, right appetite must first be engendered through a knowledge of the end. Such a knowledge is in essence speculative while through extension it becomes practical. Lacking the transcendent metaphysical dimensions of human knowledge, the truth that the natural law participates the eternal law itself ceases to be knowable. Pope John Paul II further teaches, and here follows the second text from *Fides et ratio*, that:

The word of God refers constantly to things which transcend human experience and even human thought; but this "mystery" could not be revealed, nor could theology render it in some way intelligible, were human knowledge limited strictly to the world of sense experience. Metaphysics thus plays an essential role of mediation in theological research. A theology without a metaphysical horizon could not move beyond an analysis of religious experience, nor would it allow the *intellectus fidei* to give a coherent account of the universal and transcendent value of revealed truth.

If I insist so strongly on the metaphysical element, it is because I am convinced that it is the path to be taken in order to move beyond the crisis pervading large sectors of philosophy at the moment, and thus to correct certain mistaken modes of behavior now widespread in our society (*Fides et ratio*, #83).

The mediative role of philosophy within theology is irreplaceable. The basic principles, structure, and transcendent origin of created being are philosophic elements presupposed by the message of the Gospel. These "preambles of faith" are essential to the intelligibility and communicability of the deposit of faith as such. For this reason fideism or indifference to philosophical education does integral harm to the theological project. The tendency either to reduce the Catholic philosophic tradition to mere historical appreciation of medieval thought, or

to deny it any normative systematic role within theology, implicitly relegates the act of faith to the sphere of a merely contingent “religious experience” too easily relativized and treated according to naturalistic methods. It was precisely to counter these tendencies that *Dominus Iesus* was issued, and one may see the same essential problematic formally presented in the teachings of *Fides et ratio* here cited, as also in *Evangelium vitae* and *Veritatis splendor*. Before leaving Boston for Rome, I was asked to offer counsel about the use of embryonic stem cells in scientific research funded by the federal government. It should be clear to everyone that the only bulwark against the adoptions of an expedient pragmatism is a metaphysical appreciation for the hylomorphic composition of body and soul.

The third point specifically insisted upon within *Fides et ratio* stresses the need for *realist* philosophy:

that philosophy verify the human capacity to know the truth, to come to a knowledge which can reach objective truth by means of that *adaequatio rei et intellectus* to which the Scholastic Doctors referred. This requirement, proper to faith, was explicitly reaffirmed by the Second Vatican Council: ‘Intelligence is not confined to observable data alone. It can with genuine certitude attain to reality itself as knowable, though in consequence of sin that certitude is partially obscured and weakened’ (*Fides et ratio*, #82).

The need for realism, for an account of the human person’s primal intellectual contact with reality, is paramount. Especially given the widespread and various forms of postmodern nihilism, deconstruction, and relativism, it is important to vindicate the authentically first principles of being and knowledge. This is an essential dimension of the position of the Church in the world at the beginning of Christianity’s third millenium. If nothing can be known of reality, then neither moral responsibility nor the reality of God nor the testimony of the apostles will or can be credited. This is an issue of vindicating the knowledge of being as such, and hence

of exposing students to the nature and importance of metaphysical objectivity. As the Holy Father suggests, this is a privileged moment for anthropology itself, in which the natural rudiments of the dignity of the person become apparent.

The negation of metaphysical objectivity that is fashionable today defines and implies certain “mistaken modes of behaviour now widespread in our society.” Only metaphysical truth, and the vindication of metaphysical objectivity implicit therein, are adequate to correct these errors. It follows that this must constitute an essential element in theological formation. Yet skepticism about the reliability and importance of metaphysical knowledge is not only widespread in contemporary secular society, but at times permeates theological method itself. Often it is proposed that the Fall has so undermined the epistemic reliability of human reason as to vitiate the capacity to know absolutely. It is thought that one may somehow “bracket” the issue of metaphysical objectivity, and then continue to use reason within theological discourse as though truth and logic were sufficiently addressed merely by pointing at the data of revelation and subsequently interpreting it according to any given categories whatsoever. One cannot avoid the realization that this utterly undermines and is contrary to the very nature of the doctrine of the faith, because it implies that the Word spoken by God and revealed to us in the person of Jesus Christ is one whose transcendent truth is not meant to be affirmed by the human mind. Frankly, what is it that the Second Person of the Trinity assumed if not human nature? And if human nature is unintelligible in its own right, what possible *sense* can be given to the doctrine of the Incarnation of the Word? If being is unintelligible then the revelation of God—who is perfect being— will be perfectly unintelligible.

St. Thomas Aquinas employs a masterful principle, which may be summarized in this way: that every negation presupposes a prior affirmation.<sup>2</sup> The negation of the mind’s primal

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<sup>2</sup>See Aquinas, *De Potentia*, q. 7, a. 5: “The understanding of negations is always based on affirmations, as is manifest by the

openness to and contact with reality is a negation for which no proportionate affirmative evidence either exists or ever could be found. Any proportionate evidence, whether physical, conceptual, or even mystical would, in some way, *be*, and as such constitute a knowable reality. But one must proceed further to reach the actual roots of such fideist irrationalism. If it is said that the mind's contact with reality is prohibited by a priori categories of the mind, or by its cultural prejudices, or by its historical limitations, or most radically by the damage done to the human person as a result of original sin, one must point out the following: one's knowledge must extend beyond any given boundary as a condition for identifying it as such. How is it *known* that there are such categories, prejudices, and limits? This issue ought to be brought to light as a proposition regarding *truth*.

The doctrine of the faith is true, that is to say that it corresponds with what actually is the case. But the very idea of truth requires us to affirm that the human intellect is not defined by some given material content or structure of its own, for were it so defined it could not conform itself to whatever is the case so as to know it. If the claim is made that the human intellect is possessed of some material content, structure, or category, which blocks its immediate contact with reality so as to render the idea of truth inapplicable to human knowing, one must ask how it is known that this material content, structure, or category actually obtains? The situation of the person who denies that metaphysical objectivity which is essential to the very idea of truth is not only one of self-contradiction, but of permanent agnosis. It is as though one were to say to someone who did not know one's mother, "is this photograph a good likeness of my mother?" The interlocutor, having no direct knowledge of or access to the "original" on which the photograph is based has no possible way of confirming whether the photograph is a good likeness or not. But the one who claims that the human mind is limited by its material content or structure so that being is unintelligible is making a real claim about the mind in a context in which there is no reason to affirm that the real nature of the mind is available to knowledge. On

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**rule of proving one by the other."**

such a hypothesis there is no way for the person to know that the material structure and content of his mind *permits* self-knowledge, for such self-knowledge would require that the mind be fundamentally capable of knowing what is the case. If it isn't capable of knowing what is the case, it may be conditioned contrary to what is the case even in its own regard—on such a hypothesis this would be impossible to know. This is to indicate that by the very nature of the claim it cannot be supported by any reason or affirmative evidence.

One can only obtain in any conclusion that which has already been given in the premises. Therefore one who claims to draw inferences about reality from premises which contain no real evidence is guilty of the most manifest sophistry. But the situation is far worse than this. With the idea of truth destroyed, it will be suggested that a “pragmatic” conception of “truth” suffices which is defined by “enrichment of life” or “human fulfillment” rather than the adequation of the mind to reality. Yet one who denies metaphysical objectivity implies also that the mind cannot know in what these consist. Accordingly, cultural and ideological prejudice may then assume a canonic and normative status as the basis for the interpretation of revelation. Different arbitrarily assumed interpretative postures then generate a succession of theologies *du jour*, whose only normativity consists in their temporary prominence in the consciousness of some individual or group. Since arbitrary preference is indefinitely variable, divine revelation is essentially beclouded and obscured, reduced to any trope placed upon it under the guiding influence of a metaphysically invertebrate pluralism. While real pluralism occurs within the analogical community of discourse which proceeds from divine revelation and natural *truth*, false pluralism constitutes a species of solipsism, in which the truth far from measuring the mind is measured by it. Just as Humean agnosis about nature leads logically to the denial of the conceivability of miracles (for knowledge of the miraculous implies sufficient knowledge of nature to determine that some event or act—e.g., raising Lazarus from the dead—exceeds natural capacity), so agnosis regarding being and nature implies the impossibility of affirming the supernatural as such.

The very doctrine of the Incarnation implies a twofold order of being, truth, and knowledge: that of created nature (assumed by the Word) and that of the Uncreated God and His grace. As the Fathers teach, what is not assumed cannot be redeemed. If we know nothing of human nature we can say neither what it is, nor whether it is, nor whether it has been assumed. As Henri de Lubac puts it, "in my view, which is that of every Catholic, any idea of a claim of created nature in relation to the supernatural should be absolutely excluded."<sup>3</sup> This avowal is all the more arresting and impressive coming from an author who did not concur with Aquinas's teaching in *De malo*, q.1, art. 5, ad 15 that the deprivation of the beatific vision in a hypothetical state of pure nature would not be a punishment. Hence even an author who associated with denial of the claim that human nature could in a different order of providence be ordered to a lesser felicity apart from grace here affirms that the order of nature is distinct from and has no claim upon the supernatural. Thus clearly for so long as one's feet are solidly within the Catholic tradition, the twofold order of nature and grace is defining. If the truth of human nature is wholly inaccessible to the mind, then the continuity between the one who is created and the one who is redeemed becomes unknowable. Yet if the one who is created is *not* the one who is redeemed, then Christianity is not a doctrine of salvation but of complete transmutation of nature. Moreover, the natural law is nothing other than a rational participation in the eternal law, and hence is itself a mode of the divine government of the world. But this means that denial of natural truth is a derogation of God's creation and providence. When we thank God in prayer for the creation, for what are we thanking God? Clearly we must have experience and knowledge of being, nature, and natural perfection as the condition for appreciating the doctrine of the creation, for *reading* Scripture (written in human language) and for understanding what redemption or elevating grace or the supernatural *are*. For all these reasons and more, metaphysical objectivity is essential to Christian doctrine and anthropology. A theological formation that fails in its

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<sup>3</sup>Cf. Henri de Lubac, *Augustinianism and Modern Theology* (Paris: Aubier, 1965), at the close of the first chapter regarding Baius.

metaphysical component, is a theological formation predicated upon an error that vitiates the whole theological life and that disorders our natural understanding of creation, and the moral order embedded in it.

While this essay stresses the principal role of metaphysics in theological formation, it must be remembered that the doctrine of nature has metaphysical roots, is bound up with the approach to metaphysics, and manifests the eternal law (hence *Fides et ratio* #91, on natural philosophy). So the teleological ordering of nature and being which is essential to the natural moral law (and which is implicit in the moral analysis of action and the classical treatment of the virtues) is an integral element of the Catholic tradition's metaphysical realism and so also is of prime importance for theological formation. Just as we have here argued that metaphysical realism and objectivity are absolutely required elements for theological truth, a similar argument could well be made regarding the essentiality of teleological structure for the moral life, for moral theology, and for the understanding of perfection in the spiritual life. In short, no metaphysics, no *verità morale*.

The Catholic philosophic tradition has a great deal to give to the whole world, and is specially important for what it is called to contribute to the work of ongoing evangelization. The truth matters. The essence of Catholicism always has been to affirm all truth both natural and supernatural, human and divine. Those actively involved in the ministry of the Church ought to receive a theological formation rich in this affirmation. In this way they will be well prepared to preach the truth of the Gospel to a world whose horizon of hope too often is needlessly constricted by antimetaphysical prejudice, and whose appreciation for creation too frequently fails to acknowledge human dignity and the ordering wisdom of God. In order to move from the order of intention to execution, I respectfully request, Bishop Sanchez, that this Pontifical Academy adopt the proposal for a study of the philosophical notions required for one to read with comprehension the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

**PROPOSAL:** That the Pontifical Academy of Saint Thomas Aquinas identify the philosophical categories required to read with comprehension the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and that a document be prepared to disseminate the list, along with some indications of the classical sources for inquiring about their use in expounding Catholic doctrine.