



FROM THE EDITORS

REASON AND FAITH

The Encyclical Letter *Fides et Ratio* by John Paul II, promulgated in 1998, produced an extraordinary response from intellectual milieus all over the world, first in the form of numerous commentaries on the text, later in innumerable books and articles discussing its different aspects, to the emergence of journals entitled *Fides et Ratio* and institutes of the same name.¹ The encyclical is addressed to the bishops of the Catholic Church, but also to all people who search for truth about themselves and the world. Although the document is mainly concerned with complex relationships between philosophy and theology, it also addresses issues important to every human being, regardless of his or her world view. Described as the totality of our natural cognitive faculties, reason is the source of merely part of our beliefs. Another, perhaps bigger one, is based on faith conceived of as trust in various authorities: parents, teachers, and experts in different fields. As experience shows, without so understood faith we would not be able to make even the first step: we would remain totally lonely sceptics as we would have to believe only those proofs that were tested by our own reason. In this connection, the pope stresses that faith in the sense of trust is of vital social importance and is inevitably present in every human life: “In believing, we entrust ourselves to the knowledge acquired by other people. This suggests an important tension. On the one hand, the knowledge acquired through belief can seem an imperfect form of knowledge, to be perfected gradually through personal accumulation of evidence; on the other hand, belief is often humanly richer than mere evidence, because it involves an interpersonal relationship and brings into play not only a person’s capacity to know but also the deeper capacity to entrust oneself to others, to enter into a relationship with them which is intimate and enduring.”²

¹ For example, the Polish Quarterly “Fides et Ratio” published since 2010 by the Fides et Ratio University Society (see Quarterly Journal Fides et Ratio, <https://fidesetratio.com.pl/ojs/index.php/FetR>), or the Washington-based Faith and Reason Institute operating since 1999 (see Faith & Reason Institute, <https://frinstitute.org/>).

² John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Fides et Ratio* to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Relationship between Faith and Reason, Section 32, The Holy See, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091998_fides-et-ratio.html).

Faith understood as trust does not protect us from acquiring false or morally wrong beliefs. Others can abuse our trust and mislead us *i n t e n t i o n a l l y*, for instance, for the purpose of manipulating us to their own benefit, or *u n i n t e n t i o n a l l y*, whenever they provide us with beliefs they erroneously hold as true. Such cases, however, are not sufficient to doubt either everything other people tell us or their good intentions towards us. What we need is to be careful in choosing our authorities and not to abandon critical thinking.

It seems, thus, that it is reason that can save us from threats caused by such faith: reason conceived broadly as our natural cognitive faculties, i.e., the faculties of *u n d e r s t a n d i n g*, *j u d g e m e n t*, and *r e a s o n i n g*, combined with *e x p e r i e n c e* in the narrow sense, which excludes private intuitions or revelations as sources of knowledge. Owing to reason, as we become intellectually mature, we also acquire a critical attitude towards the authorities we formerly trusted, we attempt to assess them, replace by other authorities, or content ourselves with cautious confidence placed in our own faculties or in experts in particular areas of knowledge we cannot master ourselves. However, what is the basis for our belief that reason so conceived of provides us with reliable knowledge and does not deceive us?

One does not need to be a philosophical skeptic to notice that sometimes our senses and our reasonings lead us astray. If we thus believe that correct use of our faculties provides us with reliable knowledge, it is because we trust them and also trust people who teach us how to interpret content acquired through natural cognitive faculties. Therefore, even most rational individuals cannot entirely eliminate from their lives faith conceived as “confidence” in one’s faculties or confidence in other people.

An interesting case in the history of philosophy is that of eminent Scottish philosopher David Hume, an agnostic, or an atheist, who combined his confidence in natural cognitive powers (in his case, they were experience and narrowly understood reason) with a general skeptical attitude.³ He believed that our cognitive faculties are ultimately a product of non-rational factors. The view of such an origin of cognitive powers is shared by many modern evolutionary naturalists, but they rarely link it to skepticism. One can thus say that in their case the trust in reason is dogmatic, or merely pragmatic. The Christian confidence in human cognitive powers is also ultimately based on faith, but it is the faith in God, the Creator of man and thus also of his reason. The fact that sometimes our natural cognitive faculties fail to provide us with reliable knowledge is due to the fact that we use them in an inappropriate way.

³ See, e. g., David H u m e, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Sleby Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960): xxi–xxiii.

Therefore, despite the limitations of faith (conceived as trust) and those of reason (conceived as the totality of our natural cognitive powers), John Paul II states in the first and most frequently cited sentence of the Encyclical: "Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth."⁴ Certainly, the Pope does not mean that reason strives for truth understood in the classical manner, while faith aspires to reach truth understood, e.g., pragmatically. In both cases, what he has in mind is *one truth* in the classical sense. In what way, however, can reason and faith cooperate as if they were "two wings"? After all, sometimes faith and reason come into conflict with each other. For instance, there are numerous cases of court verdicts on which people do not agree: some believe that the defendant was irrefutably proved guilty, others are convinced that, regardless of the evidence, the defendant is innocent; their belief usually turns out naïve, and in such cases one is risen to truth by one "wing" only, namely, by reason.

Miscarriages of justice occur even in democratic states with independent judicature and judges. It may well happen that, after some time, new evidence or a fresh evaluation of old evidence shows that a person pronounced guilty was, in fact, innocent. Thus all those who believed her to be not guilty "hit" the truth, and those who let themselves be guided by a rational assessment of evidence and found her guilty were in error. The faith of the former is usually the main incentive to look for new proofs or revise the old ones. It seems clear, therefore, that even in ordinary situations unrelated to religion, faith and reason working together may lead to one objective truth, in spite of the fact that, initially, "the truth of faith" and "the truth of reason" are contradictory.

The pope, however, is not concerned with such truths, but with the full truth about the human being. The object of faith, in the latter case, are mysteries that reason is unable to discover. Yet it is not only the manner in which they can be reached that is different: "There exists a twofold order of knowledge, distinct not only as regards their source, but also as regards their object. With regard to the source, because we know in one by natural reason, in the other by divine faith. With regard to the object, because besides those things which natural reason can attain, there are proposed for our belief mysteries hidden in God which, unless they are divinely revealed, cannot be known."⁵ This means that truths of faith and truths of reason can be considered as independent, albeit, in a sense, complementary, just as the truths of ethics and the truths of physics are both independent and complementary. One may ask, however, whether reason

⁴ John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, Section 1.

⁵ Ibidem, Section 9; see Pius IX, *Dei Filius*, Section 4, The Holy See, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/i-vatican-council/documents/vat-i_const_18700424_dei-filius_la.html.

alone is actually unable to reach the truths of faith and whether the two kinds of truth are not in fact conflicted.

John Paul II settles the first of the questions in accordance with the non-fideistic Catholic tradition by pointing to the fact that autonomous philosophical investigations conducted independently of religious faith may lead to the discovery of the personal Creator of the world, although a fuller, yet never complete, truth about God can be attained through Divine Revelation. In addition, Revelation is rationally interpreted by theology, but here the function of reason is limited: a theologian cannot question truths proclaimed as divinely revealed—just as, in normal circumstances, a specialist in jurisprudence cannot question the constitutional regulations adopted in a given state.

It happens, however, that in extraordinary circumstances, constitutions are amended, e.g., when they are incompatible with the current state of knowledge or the social situation. Are such occurrences—from the perspective of John Paul II—admissible in theology and in the philosophy sometimes described as Christian? In the encyclical, not only does the pope defend Revelation as a set of immutable truths, but he also invokes the thought of Saint Thomas Aquinas, which he considers as the model for the interpretation of these truths. He then critically evaluates modern and contemporary philosophies (including those neither atheistic nor pantheistic which call themselves Christian) contributing to the ongoing distortion of Revelation. The pope's argument has been criticized by its numerous commentators who have a higher regard for modern and postmodern philosophy. Even if one agreed with their critique, one should appreciate the role of *Fides et Ratio* as a document that, on the one hand, stresses the importance of autonomous philosophical investigations conducted independently of religion and, on the other hand, draws attention to the inevitability and omnipresence of faith conceived as trust put in others, i.e., to both the personal dimension of faith and the objective limits of reason which, from the Christian perspective, can be crossed thanks to Divine Revelation. Actually, reason discovers its own limits when it discovers that, even in the area of uncomplicated mathematical operations, there are truths that cannot be proved and when it finds itself unable to tell us what we are to do in the face of such a fact.

In the present volume of *Ethos*, the authors attempt to throw light on beliefs that are supposed to be truths one cannot prove, e.g., claims about the existence of miracles or human freedom. The authors also discuss specific questions which fall in the broad spectrum of issues situated between those of reason and faith. References to the thought of John Paul II are, as it were, natural in our journal, but since the time of his pontificate, the Church has moved on and, therefore, the authors also draw on and analyze certain ideas proposed by Pope Francis or address questions unrelated to religion.

An important section in this volume is devoted to the late Doctor Stanisław Majdański († 2023), an eminent specialist in science studies and semiotics, who creatively explored issues situated at the borderline between the disciplines of logic and metaphysics, but was also fascinated with ethics—hence his close connections to the John Paul II Institute, Tadeusz Styczeń, and Karol Wojtyła himself. In his personality, Doctor Majdański combined a deep and authentic religious faith with an extraordinary perspicacity of reason and intellectual creativity. He was no “armchair philosopher,” he preferred engaging in a conversation and generously sharing his ideas with others to writing yet another paper, and it was perhaps in that way that he best exemplified his personalist attitude. It is to him that we dedicate the present volume of *Ethos*.

Piotr Gutowski

Translated by *Patrycja Mikulska*