FAITH AND REASON: A NEW PERSPECTIVE

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Insofar as faith is possible, it is irrational; insofar as faith is rational, it is impossible. . . . A belief can be based on faith *or* reason, but not both. . . . [A]s soon as a belief is rationally demonstrated, it ceases to be an article of faith. . . . [F]aith is possible only in the case of beliefs that lack rational demonstration. . . . [F]aith must entail belief in the absence of rational demonstration. . . . To believe on faith is to believe in defiance of rational guidelines. . . . [The concept of faith [is] irreconcilably opposed to reason. . . . (Smith 123)

These words of George Smith, in <u>Atheism: the Case Against God</u>, express a belief shared by many philosophical, scientific, and religious thinkers. Sam Harris, in his recent bestseller <u>The End of Faith</u>, reprises: "[w]here we have reasons for what we believe, we have no need of faith; where we have no reasons, we have lost . . . our connection to the world" (225). I believe, instead, that faith and reason must function together, and that this fact imposes important constraints on both faith and reason.

In what sense do I use the term 'faith?" Religious faith combines at least four elements. There is, first, a moral or volitional commitment to truth – an attitude of value for the truth, and for the process of finding truth – second, an intellectual assent to specific truth-claims (for convincing but not irrefutable reasons), third, personal trust in one or more entities, personal or non-personal, and fourth, an existential decision of dependence – a choice to live and think as if certain things are true, rather than others. The second pair of elements may be unique to religious faith, but I would argue that the first two (a volitional attitude toward truth, and an intellectual assent to certain beliefs in the absence of absolute certainty) are inseparable from any tenable approach to reasoning about the world.

First, then, philosophical, scientific, Christian, and other Western religious thought begin with one shared idea. This is that some degree of 'truth' about the world is, or may be, accessible to us, and that we are in some way morally responsible to search for and respond to it. As Harris writes, "[n]othing is more sacred than the facts" (225).

There is striking similarity between the words of scientists, philosophers, and theologians on this point. When they agree on nothing else, they agree that, like good detectives, we are obligated to follow the evidence wherever it leads us. Richard Dawkins writes:

> Safety and happiness would mean being satisfied with easy answers and
> cheap comforts, living a warm comfortable lie. The . . . alternative . . . is
> risky. You stand to lose comforting delusions. . . . To set against that risk,
> you stand to gain . . . the joy of knowing that you have grown up, faced up to
> what existence means. . . . (13)

C. S. Lewis agrees:

> [C]omfort is the one thing you cannot get by looking for it. If you look for
> truth, you may find comfort in the end: if you look for comfort you will not get
> either comfort or truth – only soft soap and wishful thinking to begin with,
> and, in the end, despair. (Qtd. in Nicholi, 45)

And the Bible speaks of those who perish because they reject, not simply truth but "the *love* of the truth" (II <u>Thessalonians</u> 2:10; italics mine) and commands: "Buy the truth, and do not sell it" (<u>Proverbs</u> 23:23).

This commitment to the idea that what is, is, whether I like it or not, links religion, science, and philosophy. Yet such a moral and volitional attitude, a belief that we ought not to believe something just because we want to, cannot be logically or experimentally derived. It cannot be in any way 'proved,' or imposed upon an apathetic or reluctant mind. It is,

instead, a basic kind of 'faith' – a position the mind takes with respect to the world before, and not because of, any information it receives.

The second element of faith is intellectual assent to certain truth-claims for sufficient but not overwhelming causes, like that of a jury reaching a verdict. So here faith intersects with reason, and to understand their interaction we must clarify what we mean by reason. There are two basic conceptions of reason in Western thought, incompatible in their pure forms. They are the rationalist and the empiricist. We cannot have the best of both these epistemological worlds; we must choose between them. And both this choice, *and* the most fundamental assumptions of either approach we choose, demand an element of faith.

Within the Greek tradition, then, we find an empiricist or scientific emphasis, prominent among the pre-Socratics and, differently, among the Sophists, and a rationalist or metaphysical emphasis, associated first with Pythagoras and then with Plato. Thinkers such as Democritus and Protagoras viewed reality in ways we might loosely describe as materialist, empiricist, relativist, and pragmatic. They believed the purpose and power of reason was to understand the natural world and the human condition through a more or less common-sense method, based on the experience we gain through our senses. They were suspicious of the idea that man was capable of, or had any motive to engage in, speculation upon the existence of the supernatural or of abstract ethical concepts. In contrast to Platonic idealism, these thinkers wanted to understand the world not by exploring ideas in the mind, but by exploring the physical world and the realities of human behavior. A form of the 'instrumentalist' view of reason that Hume would famously propound was also part of this approach. Reason does not tell us what is good, what we ought to desire, what we ought to do. Rather, men use their reason to get what they already want. As Bertrand Russell writes,

> If we desire to achieve some end, knowledge may show us the means. . . . I do not believe that we can decide what sort of conduct is right or wrong except by reference to its probable consequences. Given an end to be achieved, it is a question for science to discover how to achieve it. All moral rules must be tested by examining whether they tend to realize ends that we desire. I say ends that we desire, not ends that we *ought* to desire. (60)

This view of reason can be traced to later empiricists, pragmatists, positivists, and philosophical-scientific thinkers such as Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Stephen Pinker, Michael Shermer, and Edmund Wilson, who mainly propound an approach toward thinking about the world that emphasizes what we learn from our senses, and who feel that the obvious utility and fruitfulness of science mean we should get on with doing science, rather than spend time worrying about philosophical problems it may not be able to solve.

As Robert Fogelin writes, "[w]ithout the powerful force of natural belief nothing can stop reason's inevitable slide into forlorn skepticism" (169). Moreover, the

> only thing – or at least the chief thing – that protects us from falling into incoherence, from being captured by dialectical illusion, and from succumbing to an abject skepticism is becoming engaged in the world in ways that put our thoughts under constraints that are not themselves further thoughts. (179)

And Freud writes in The Future of an Illusion: the "task of science is fully covered if we limit it to showing how the world must appear to us in consequence of the particular character of our organization. . . . Finally, the problem of the nature of the world without regard to our percipient mental apparatus is an empty abstraction, devoid of practical interest" (71).

The rationalist or metaphysical ideal of reason flourished most obviously and influentially in Platonic philosophy. Here, reason is not the manipulation of a collection of facts gathered through sense experience, but an innate, ennobling quality of the soul which gives access to immaterial as well as material realities. Indeed, the input of the senses is highly suspect, and it is 'reason,' an internal faculty of the mind, capable of dealing with abstract and universal mathematical and metaphysical certainties, which leads to the most important truths. So influential was the Platonic project that this view of reason thrived throughout the classical and Christian eras in philosophy, and finds clear echoes even in the philosophy of Kant.

The earliest Enlightenment thinkers were, in one sense, the last heirs of the Platonic legacy – the last to share the exalted confidence that reason could reduce to order and comprehensibility the whole world, and that reason could conduct us triumphantly to absolute certainty about what to believe and how to live. The image of Descartes huddled in a corner, systematically doubting everything he had ever believed, symbolizes the rationalist quest. It is fearlessly autonomous, ruthlessly skeptical of the most elementary experiences of everyday life, and thirsts for rock-solid certainty of a kind that seems both pointless and unattainable to the empirical mind.

The Enlightenment, however, was also the seedbed of the modern scientific revolution. So it is here that we find the two competing interpretations of reason taking their modern forms, and leaving behind the heady Enlightenment dream that science and philosophy, reason and physical reality, must inevitably speak with one voice. Even as the advance of science accelerated, philosophers were recognizing that we can have as our ultimate foundation either the ancient quest of the philosopher for self-evident, irrefutable truth, *or* the scientist's endless series of interactions with the physical world, which never pauses to demand justification, and strives only for incremental increases in understanding which can never reach certainty. We cannot have both. As Locke and Hume point out, we cannot demonstrate philosophically, at least not in the old, rock-solid, deductive manner of which Descartes dreamed, any of the fundamental assumptions on which science rests – that induction is valid, that things are still there when we close our eyes, that our senses tell us real facts about things outside our minds, that we have some type of moral obligation to conduct science honestly, etc. Meanwhile, to begin with the data accessible to science in attempting to conduct or justify philosophy is to beg the question – to skip over the most difficult and fundamental issues in philosophy. Popper highlighted this even as he succeeded in erecting a remarkably sturdy philosophical scaffolding for the scientific method. Popper acknowledges that if we want to profit by the obvious advances of science, we must relinquish the old rationalist passion for the irrefutable and indubitable, and embrace assumptions that can enable us to progress, like an asymptote, closer to the truth – though like an asymptote we will never quite arrive.

Broadly speaking, these competing conceptions of reason are reflected in the widening gap between the Anglo-American and Continental traditions in nineteenth and twentieth century philosophy. Empiricism has tended to flourish in Anglo-American circles, restricting philosophy within narrower and narrower boundaries, and emphasizing philosophy in relation to, almost as a preliminary to, linguistics, mathematics, and science. Meanwhile, Continental philosophy has remained broader, more flexible, more anthropocentric, and more focused on the 'big questions' that philosophers have written about for centuries.

Continental thinkers, imprisoned by Kant within their own minds and having exhausted all attempts to find a way out, embraced the bold choice to create meaning out of chaos by taking Kirkegaard's 'leap of faith' into one's own lonely version of reality. As Roger Scruton writes, the

> subject's venture towards the object ends at last in a strategic retreat . . .
> hugging his precious freedom, the self escapes at last from the not-self, into
> the crevice of not-being from which all this play of shadows once emerged.
> Better, perhaps, to have told another story. (238)

Russell puts it this way in his A History of Western Philosophy:

> Modern philosophy begins with Descartes, whose fundamental certainty is the
> existence of himself and his own thoughts, from which the external world is to
> be inferred.   This was only the first stage in a development, through Berkeley
> and Kant, to Fichte, for whom everything is only an emanation of the ego.
> This was insanity, and, from this extreme, philosophy has been attempting,
> ever since, to escape into the world of every-day common sense. (xxi)

Meanwhile, thinkers within Anglo-American philosophy have increasingly seen philosophy as a tool of very specific and limited utility in our age of proliferating information and intensifying specialization. Even with the collapse of the logical positivist project, the focus on studying language in order to sort 'first order' from 'second order' questions predominated. Joseph Brennan explains, "According to philosophy as linguistic analysis, the task of philosophy is the clarification of *meanings* rather than proclamation of *truths* about the nature of the world" (9). The remaining function of philosophy, in other words, was to determine which statements are really about the world, and so can be true or false, and which are only about words. Once this is done, it is time for science to answer our now clarified questions about reality.

Here, then, is our choice. We may decide to view reason as almost synonymous with the scientific method – a robustly common sense attitude to the world in which we accept the existence of what our senses reveal, and go from there. But in this case, reason's ultimate foundation is laid on principles which demand, from a strictly philosophical standpoint, as much 'faith' as many religious tenets. We embrace the beliefs that the world we perceive with our senses exists, that true ideas are ideas which help us successfully interpret and negotiate that world, and that the scientific method is a useful tool in finding truth. We cannot test or prove these beliefs by using the scientific method itself. Neither can we defend them on pure philosophical grounds – they are by no means self-evident or necessary in the same sense that 'two plus two is four' or 'something cannot be both A and non-A' are.

Rather, we accept these beliefs so we can get on with more productive thinking. We accept because we feel inclined to trust this approach to the world, instead of something more abstract and complicated. We accept because as we fit facts about the world into this framework, it seems to work. We accept because the effort to get behind these beliefs to anything more fundamental seems pointless or futile. We accept because these beliefs will provide a basis from which to live our lives and think our thoughts. We accept, in other words, on what may fairly be called 'faith' – belief for good, though not irrefutable, reasons.

Alternatively, we may choose the more exalted definition of reason as a process that begins with determined doubt and progresses toward irrefutable certainties. We may embark upon the Cartesian project of radical doubt, the quest of Socrates for the final answer after which

no further question can arise. But this has been tried so many times that it is fair to say we will find no way to save ourselves from a tumble into the void of absolute and incoherent skepticism. Forbidden to permit the contaminating presence of any input from outside ourselves, we find ourselves unable to determine the existence of the external world, to vindicate any confidence in our own thought processes, to feel convinced that a continuous self exists, or to find any valid reason for what we are doing. And so this path too leads back to the necessity for 'faith,' not only because, in order to survive, we will be obliged to continue living as though many things we cannot prove are true, but because even to continue *thinking,* we will find ourselves thinking as though many things we cannot prove are true.

Those who carry the empiricist view of reason to its ultimate extreme see all the faith on the side of the rationalists, who have given us the Realm of the Forms, monads, physical objects as ideas in the mind, ghosts in machines, and other mysterious and elusive entities. The most committed and rigorous rationalists, meanwhile, see faith on the side of the empiricists, who glibly announce that the physical world is real, that our senses communicate accurate information, that we can know other people have minds, and that many other beliefs we share with five-year-old children should be accepted regardless of our inability to refute the challenges of philosophical skepticism.

When we use 'faith' and 'reason' to divide the world of ideas, we make things too easy for ourselves. Once we look beyond this largely artificial distinction, we can grapple with other distinctions that force us to think more deeply, precisely, and coherently about the world.

Those who embrace 'reason' as opposed to 'faith' have no right to escape a rigorous investigation of what they mean by reason, what if anything else may contribute to our understanding of the world, and what moral or methodological ground rules motivate and constrain the construction of a worldview based on reason. And those who embrace 'faith,' certainly in any Biblical or traditional sense, must not ask for special treatment, or retreat too hastily beyond the reach of question or challenge.   Their faith is more, but certainly not less, than the claim that certain things are true about the world. As Michael McConnel writes:

> Open and honest opponents . . . force us to justify our premises, clarify our conclusions and defend the ground for our beliefs. . . . Instead, . . . [some] adversaries . . . set aside discussions of concepts like 'truth' and 'falsehood' and [substitute] claims of equivalence and perspective. . . . If religion is nothing more than personal preference, it will not be threatened because it will not be threatening. The easiest way for believers to escape conflict is to wrap themselves in subjectivity. . . . [We must not acquiesce] in the idea . . . that 'religion' is a personal thing that should be treated with kid gloves rather than a claim of truth that must be argued and defended. . . . My position should be subjected to the same searching inquiry that any philosophy or worldview receives. I am not telling you about my religion. I am telling you what I think is true. I have an obligation to explain why. . . . My advice to . . . young men and women . . . is this: stick to what is true, respect the efforts of others to find the truth even if they are still far from it, and never, never give in to the proposition that it is just a matter of personal 'faith.' (Anderson 200-204)

The richness of the Western philosophical tradition, and the explosion, in the last few

centuries, of new ideas in science, technology, history, politics, postmodernist and other philosophical movements – all this makes it increasingly important that we think clearly and speak honestly. So many of the most important ideas we discuss today – religion, war, peace, justice, law, responsibility, hope, and, yes, faith and reason – have accumulated many overlapping, and some conflicting, definitions and connotations. The process of clarifying what we mean by the words we use, and determining on what grounds we hold the beliefs we do, can strip away a great deal not only of confusion and misunderstanding, but also of arrogance, presumption, prejudice, and sloppy argument.

The relationship between faith and reason is once again a hot topic in politics, ethics, science, and religion. Too often, though, we use the terms 'faith' and 'reason' as if each term had a common, specific and coherent definition, as well as widely shared connotations. I believe that even a cursory re-examination of these important ideas demonstrates that they are, instead, concepts with several competing definitions apiece, and that we must think carefully about how we view each of them before we can fruitfully or honestly discuss the relationship between them.

When we do this, we gain a new perspective on the inextricable interdependence of faith and reason. We may perhaps even rediscover a reasonable faith, and a faith in reason.

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