



THE DEVALUATION OF REASON: URGENCY FOR THOMISTIC THOUGHT AT THE UNIVERSITY OF THE 21ST CENTURY

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1. THE DEVALUATION OF REASON

Reason is the spiritual faculty of the soul through which we become like God (*logos*) and we conform to reality, we “become, in a way, all things”, things which are nothing else but the embodied ideas of God. The experience of all human beings—an interior experience, spiritual, spontaneous— confirms that we know reality and also the reality of love, of justice, of our soul, of liberty, of spiritual realities, of God in the end, based on the data with which our senses provide us. Upon this reason faith acts.

I think that when reason shined in the first man, the first thing he did was to wonder, not to do pragmatic calculations. To wonder before reality, before the grandeur of the other human being (the woman). And with the wonder, there would emerge admiration, intimate happiness, and the love, the respect, and the spontaneous elevation towards his Author. It is the logical behavior of an intelligence in all its purity. Only afterwards would come— through the temptation of the Evil One— the disordered desire for domination and, with it, the sickness of reason.

As Plato and Aristotle said, wisdom begins with wonder, which awakens love (*filo-sofia*). The awe in front of the mystery is the starting point to know what is properly human. The awe harmonizes very well with love and faith, because reason is united to the other faculties. In this harmonious union, man is elevated, like an eagle, over the earth, towards his Homeland. Reason and faith and love go united.

But original sin broke this harmony. Modern philosophy makes explicit this rupture between faith and reason, making it absolute; but also then it began the process of the devaluation of reason, negating the possibility of knowing transcendent reality. This reason, alien to faith and metaphysics, would be the master of the world (“knowledge is power”), imposing its dogma: there is only one truth, the scientific-experimental. The rest—in reality the things that are more important to us, those connected to meaning— is the fruit of belief, a matter of opinion and relative. Thus, we can be tolerant.

But instead of tolerance came the fanaticism of the French Revolution, the revolutions of the 19th Century, the world wars of the 20th Century, and “the third, piecemeal” (Pope Francis) of the 21st. Benedict XVI was correct: there would be no peace if relativism is not dismantled.

Because relativism and scientism came together. Husserl, in *The Crisis of European Sciences*—it was already evident the triumph of Hitler and the threat of the new war— criticizes the devaluation of reason that exists in two attitudes: **the lack of meaning in**

experimental reason, and the lack of rationality and order in relativism. Husserl called for the recuperation of the *Logos* of classic philosophy, **which explains meaning from the perspective of rationality**, that meaning which humanity seeks unconsciously and gives unity and order to scientific knowledge. It is necessary —Husserl affirms— **to maintain united rationality and the meaning of existence.** Rationality was destroyed by relativism and meaning is ignored and destroyed by positivistic reason. The tragedy has been to separate them, declaring that that which refers the meaning of existence to spiritual reality is not science, but opinion; and only that which is able to be experimented is rational, scientific, and efficient.

The University of the 20th century was founded on this dogma: rationality and the meaning of the life are opposed. And since the university is the domain of rationality, it had to exclude meaning (ethics, the dignity of the person, God...). I think that this approach explains why so many intellectuals placed their knowledge at the service of Nazism.

As this “rationality” was an unreasonableness, World War II came and afterward the philosophical critique that revealed its absurdity. Phenomenology, Existentialism, Personalism, the Frankfurt School were the movements critical of this irrational “reason.” But as we are very forgetful, promptly the calculating and bourgeois reason, alien to meaning, became master again of the society and of the University.

We remember May of 1968 and the slogans of the Sorbonne:

“It is forbidden to forbid”

“Power to the Imagination”

“We want nothing of a world in which the certainty of not dying from hunger comes in exchange for the risk of dying from boredom”

“We are realists, we demand (do) the impossible”

“Forget everything you have learned. Begin to dream.”

“My desires are the reality”

“Embrace your love without letting go of your gun”

“In exams, respond with questions.”

“Yes to Heraclitus. No to Parmenides”

Years before, Jacques Maritain and his girlfriend, Raissa, seekers of truth, had decided to not continue living if they did not find that life had meaning. The faith that they found through their friendship with Leon Bloy and others saved them. In May of '68 there were many people who thirsted for truth, or, at least, fed up with this bourgeois “rationality” but who did not find, perhaps, friends like Bloy.

Marxism, allied with Existentialism and Freudianism, knew to take advantage of this repugnance towards the absurd, sower of unrest, and turned those youths, into violent fighters. There will never lack social injustices and it is proper that the youths rebel. The “radical feminism” of Simone de Beauvoir was born and its battle against motherhood and the family, understood as oppressive means. They failed to find the reason of the

unreasonableness, and they blamed reason for everything. However, reason was not the culprit, but rather this devalued reason, alien to meaning, the reductive and domineering technical reason that Husserl had already criticized. And, in order to criticize it, they claimed as theirs again relativism, sentiment, the imagination and liberty without reason. Ultimately, like always, many looked for (others no) the *Logos*, the meaning of life, but not adequately.

Passing '68. Marxism and “the ideologies” die, or better, they transform into others: Neoliberalism, Market, Democracy, Wellbeing, Globalization, Gender... And we arrive at the 21st century where it appears that, effectively, Heraclitus has triumphed in this “Liquid Society” (Bauman). But there is a permanent constant: it always involves the negation of being, of truth, it is always the devaluation of reason, and, hence, the human person, because it always involves the opposition to the plan of God the creator, to nature. And, with the foundation negated, we cannot sustain ourselves, we are distressed, in a Parmenides like deathly way, we are stationary, passive, blocked, without profound change.

2. THE MISSION OF THE UNIVERSITY

“What is the person coming to the University looking for?”

Romano Guardini began a conference on the “Responsibility of the student to the culture” with this question, in 1954.¹ He responded with four objectives which, according to him, demonstrate the meaning and the mission of the University.

In the first place, “the student wants to grow,” to achieve personal fulfillment and this includes much more than the program of studies. I think back to the University of Paris and St. Albert the Great, St. Thomas and St. Bonaventure, how they were helped to grow; and years later, St. Ignatius, St. Francis Xavier, St. Peter Faber and other companions; and years later, Maritain and Raissa...

In the second place, the student wants to prepare himself for a profession, the basis of their future life. A very worthy goal would be to understand that profession as a service to the society and not merely as a means to make money. On this point, the University, says Guardini, **should require seriousness in intellectual responsibility. That is to say, it is not about accumulating knowledge but rather assimilating it,** furnishing minds, forming criteria, because what is needed are sensible and prudent professionals who are competent.

In the third place, the student wants to investigate: to search for truth, for itself, without wondering about the applicability of the findings. An exciting and fateful undertaking because it has no end, since each new discovery opens even more. Here precisely is the seriousness in looking for truth, without interest. Freedom in truth.

¹ Munich. Recently published under the title, *Three Writings on the University*, Navarra, EUNSA, 2012.

In the fourth place, the student searches for **truth, simply**. Without truth the University “becomes sick,” affirms Guardini. But this “truth” goes beyond “the correction,” which is the truth in the contents of each discipline; it is about the “**truth**” as **such**, that is nothing other than the ultimate truth about the meaning of life.

The primacy of the ultimate truth does not displace the proximate truths of the particular sciences, what it does is to give meaning and order to the whole of knowledge. There is talk of “**Interdisciplinarity**,” and it is part of the mission of the University, but it is impossible without a guiding principle. Where should it be put? Without doubt in the foundation of being, of truth, of beauty, of the good, of unity: God. For Him, the uni-verse—the same root of “uni-versity”—is Cosmos (order) and the University should be the *Universe of knowledge*, of mutual enrichment and fruitfulness, and the key of the union is God, a God-Truth, that pours himself into (“versus”) all beings...

The sublime mission of the University: is the search for, in common and in friendship, truth, symphonic, that fulfills man, gives him meaning and prepares him for a profession at the service of the common good. Truth operating and “outgoing” in order to achieve a happy society.

In order to accomplish this the University has to be free, autonomous, with respect to the State and the Market.

Pope Benedict XVI, in the discourse that he did not get to read at the University of “*La Sapienza*” (Rome, 2008), said something similar when he pointed out three characteristics that define the university and its mission: *autonomy* (freedom in the face of political authorities or other types); *the thirst for knowledge*, proper to man, who wants to know everything that surrounds him, who loves truth; and, in the third place, the commitment *to live this truth, and to put it into practice*. Benedict XVI insisted on affirming that truth is never only theoretical and recalled St. Augustine: “*mere knowledge causes sadness*.” There always has to be practice of knowledge, not necessarily successful experimentation and measureable usefulness, but the realization of the good, both personal and social.

At the university it must be understood that Philosophy and faith do indeed benefit, and a lot, they serve without being servants except of the truth; they serve because “to reign is to serve.” To defend this is not about holding that the University should claim knowledge for the sake of knowledge. Plato and Marx criticized this, rather, it is about transforming the world and themselves. Truth is theoretical—practical. It is to know in order to do and to work, always for the common good. Truth indeed benefits, and a lot. The University has to show this.

The blessed cardinal Newman upholds that there is **no Science without Humanities** since humanities form the mind better than the sciences do, on the issue of foundation and meaning. He says that if the sciences and the technologies have flourished in the West it is, in the first place, because it was an environment and a culture in which interiority was

cultivated; thereby man found the reasons to understand the world. The University emerges for the cultivation of the spirit, and by this cultivation civilization is maintained.²

Therefore: the Mission of the University: the search for truth in order to disseminate it and to make it culture. For this, autonomy in the truth. Does the University of the 21st century fulfill this mission?

3. THE UNIVERSITY OF THE 21st CENTURY

There is a radical difference with respect to those universities that were born in order to search for truth together, both masters and disciples. The objective nowadays is not this. **Benedict XVI**, in his speech to the young university professors at El Escorial (Madrid, 2011) said, “*The University embodies an ideal that should not distort itself either for ideologies closed to rational discourse, or for subservience to a utilitarian logic of simple market, which sees man as merely a consumer*”.

He noted the same danger that Husserl denounced and it continues to be valid: “*We know,*” he said, “*that when mere utility and immediate pragmatism are set up as the principal criteria, the loses can be dramatic: from the abuses of science without limits, that goes beyond itself, to political totalitarianism that is easily fueled when all reference to something greater than the mere calculation of power is eliminated.*”

The University of the 20th century did not know how to unit rationality and meaning, despite the many critical voices and the student revolts. **Today we see it subservient to the Market**, even joyful at being considered, above all, an asset to economic production. Paradoxically, in the “era of knowledge,” it is considered valuable, not in itself, but rather **as a means to form “human capital,”** superior to financial capital. From there comes the investment of the State and business in the preparation of “qualified personnel.”

It is not that the University in the past did not have among its ends the formation of professionals, but it had it parallel to the general formation as persons. Nor is it that the Humanities have now disappeared completely, but it is the case that the pragmatic criteria of devalued reason—“servant”—predominate and shift the mission of the University towards the satisfaction of market demands, through businesses and institutions. Since these demands rule on a global scale, the methods and educative content of “business management” and “professionalism” are standardized for the educators, required for competitiveness in a globalized world. International organizations impose programs, methods, evaluations, and comparisons of academic achievement orientated to impose a hegemonic global model. Knowledge becomes a “servant” and **the autonomy of the University**, the essential to its identity, **is undermined**.

² Cf. “Christianity and Letters”, a lecture given at the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters in November of 1854, published by the Catholic University of Ireland. In *The Idea of the University* (2104), pgs. 33 and following.

“Human capital” defines the worker in terms, above all, of his ability to produce and innovate—in the disposable society this is essential. Education is asked to educate not with content, because this is becoming more and more obsolete, but rather with “skills”—a term taken from the market, with the principal skill being the innovative ability, the capacity to overcome crises and market requirements by looking for new solutions. The university degree is devalued, especially if it reflexes traditional education, and businesses are many times those who determine the academic curriculum and, even, those that provide the education for their employees. Comprehensive education is substituted by the new values of efficiency, mobility, and profit.³

Well then, **how does one reconcile rationality and meaning, truth and praxis?**

The Angelic Doctor can help us to discover the meaning in all the areas and disciplines of knowledge, even in those that he himself could not imagine, such as the new technologies; and he can help up to unite theory and praxis, contents and skills, which appear at times to be in conflict in the new methods.

4. ST. THOMAS AQUINAS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF THE 21th CENTURY

We go to him confidently because the Patron of the universities and the “*doctor humanitatis*,” as he was named by John Paul II, has to teach us how to humanize this world. Since he is the master in giving solutions to the most challenging difficulties, we pose the following problem to him: **is it possible today to unite rationality and meaning? Is autonomy of the university possible today?**

It could appear that it is not possible for all that has been said, for the unyielding imposition of liquidity by the Market, which does not support the solidity of Thomistic thought. But its solidity is not rigid, but dynamic and active, and will demonstrate that it is indeed possible.

How to reconcile rationality and meaning?

Saint Thomas faced similar problems in his century. Ultimately, it is the problem of the relationship reason-faith. In the face of the Averroist interpretations of Aristotle, the philosopher who at the time was seducing, but that, following these interpretations he seemed to be opposed to faith and to man, because he denied his individual soul, through which he was depersonalized, Thomas Aquinas searched for the truth, freely, apart from systems and fashions: he began to investigate what really was said by Aristotle. He translated his works, not trusting in the Arabic translations nor in the Averroistic interpretation, convinced that reason, without being a slave to faith, works prudently and rationally to not rely on that which contradicts it. And he showed that between reason and faith there is a natural harmony, and that Aristotle serves much better than Plato to give

³ Cf. Corrales Ayala, Salvador, *La Misión de la Universidad en el Siglo XXI*. In the journal *Razón y palabra*. Digital version www.razonypalabra.org.mx/antiores/n57/scorrales.html. In Laval, Christian: *La escuela no es una empresa, el ataque neoliberal a la enseñanza pública*. México, Paidós, 2004.

rational substance to the Christian faith. “*This was the great work of Saint Thomas,*” says Benedict XVI⁴, “*that in that moment of confrontation between two cultures—a moment in which it seemed that faith had to surrender to reason—he showed that they go together, that that which seemed like reason incompatible with the faith was not reason, and that which presented itself as faith was not faith, since it opposed the true rationality. Thus, he created a new synthesis, which has formed the culture in the successive centuries.*”

The fruitfulness of this fundamental principle of the harmony between faith-reason is very productive in all the areas of knowledge and of work: theology, metaphysics, ethics, anthropology, philosophy of nature, psychology, politics, law, the sciences and technologies in general. It is seen that interdisciplinary is possible when it is governed by a guiding principle (uni-versity, “cosmos of knowledge”). This principle can be no other than God, foundation of the universal Order. All science is a study of order in whatever area.

And, thus, we have demonstrated that the most current theories of physics —when they do not go beyond their field— do not oppose faith. The *big bang* theory is perfectly compatible with Thomistic lines; including the theories that postulate an eternal universe in time, because Saint Thomas did not see a contradiction in that God could have created it from eternity. In the area of biology, we see how his philosophy of nature is in accordance with the theory of evolution; and Aristotelian homomorphism, that Saint Thomas adopted as an explanation of material being, is perfectly compatible with scientific theories (again, always when these are maintained in their field). His Philosophy of nature and Theology, without stepping on scientific ground, supply solutions to problems that science itself, with its methods, is not capable of solving, but that, logically, arise, such as that of causality, finality, chance, providence, miracles...

Experimental science, Philosophy and Theology are areas of knowledge that are distinct and complementary, they need one another and are not opposed, inasmuch as they search for truth, which is one. The progress of science convinces us more and more of the rationality of the universe, of its order and meaning, of its knowability and of the necessity of a personal and intelligent Creator. All of this, certainly, does not enter experimental science, but far from contradicting, it complements it. The Church has promoted prominent scientists as members of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, whether they believe or not. The Church has no fear of the truth. It only bans experimentation which puts in danger the dignity of man and of nature.

Also in the field of **Social Sciences**, the fruitfulness of the faith-reason harmony can be appreciated. Let us consider **Law and Politics**. The intellectuals who intervened in the Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, being in agreement concerning them did not know how to ground them, except Maritain, a Thomistic philosopher. The root of the universality of these rights is in the natural rights of man and his dignity which, on Thomistic bases, were elaborated by the theologians of the School of Salamanca. Saint Thomas is a very practical theoretician, since nothing is more practical than the truth. His theology and

⁴ Catechesis on Saint Thomas, 16 de junio, 2010.

philosophy is always applied and applicable to concrete cases. And, thus, his theories on legitimate “authority” over children, and over “demented” people, over those who do not have faith, were decisive for the defense by Francisco de Vitoria of the rights of the recently discovered indigenous and for the enormous repercussion, theoretical and practical, of his theories in Europe and America. The School of Salamanca, with its Thomistic bases, gave efficient solutions to economical, social, political and moral problems of the society of that time and also today’s.

In regards to current hot topics such as **Ecology, Bioethics**, etc., it is also surprising to see the compatibility of his philosophy with the faith and with the current science and, at the same time, its necessity in the face of the grave dangers of biotechnology when the natural order is overshadowed. Benedict XVI says, “*When natural law is denied along with the responsibilities that it entails, the road to ethical relativism is tragically opened on the scope of the individual and to totalitarianism of the State on the scope of the political. The defense of universal human rights and the affirmation of the absolute value of human dignity are based on a foundation: is not natural law this foundation with the non-negotiable values that it indicates?*” (Catechesis on Saint Thomas. 6-16-2010)

In the fields of **Psychology and Anthropology**, one cannot deny –and St. Thomas would not deny it because he is a man open to the truth, come what may—that the contributions of scientific and experimental psychology, because man is a unity of soul and body, and corporal reality can be measured, but the essentially distinct order of the spirit remains steadfast, and it prevents the fall into the reductionism of so many schools of psychology and anthropology, with grave harm to man. The substantial unity body-soul is a source of light that dissolves the confusion of gender Ideology and other current deconstructionist fashions, which are based on a dualist anthropology. However, the good sociologist, Saint Thomas, would not justify the rigid and immobile roles of masculine and feminine in society, because nature for him is not a “principle of fixed behavior,” but rather a “fixed principle of behavior,” as Millan Puelles would say, that, as a vital behavior, it is essentially dynamic and a source of accidental changes, as those that make up cultures. What is decisive is to distinguish the essential from the accidental, and this should extend to all areas of study at the University. The moral order should govern everything, since it obeys the eternal law of God, which unifies all knowledge (Uni-versity).

Ultimately, as Benedict XVI says, “*Saint Thomas offers us a wide and confident concept of human reason: wide because it does not limit the space of the so-called empirical-scientific reason, but rather it is open to all being and, consequently, to the fundamental and indispensable questions about human life; confident because human reason, above all if it embraces the inspiration of the Christian faith, is the advocate of a civilization that recognizes the dignity of the person, the inviolability of his rights and the convictions of his duties.*” (ib.)

Thus, Saint Thomas gives us clues on how to unite rationality and meaning.

Second question: is university autonomy possible today?

Saint Thomas also confronted this problem, which came from before: the confusion faith-reason. His freedom to search for the truth, even if a pagan philosopher like Aristotle said it, brought him serious objections; even some of his philosophical theses, which by no means opposed the faith, were included in the famous condemnation of the Aristotelian theses by the Bishop of Paris in 1277, and was not removed from censure until 1325, two years after his canonization. In a time when the distinction between the Church and the State was not clear, with the danger of subordinating this one to that one and vice versa, Saint Thomas provides the basis of autonomy for both powers and of their necessary complementation. Philosophy is not “the slave of Theology,” they are different fields. Autonomy but with the dependence of both on truth, which is how true autonomy is preserved. Saint Thomas put limits on power, political and all other types (social, market, ideology). The conscience should object to that which impedes the truth.

Is this possible today at the University? It must be made possible.

Third question: Is it possible and good to educate for skills?

Today’s universities call into question the purpose of education and how to do it, the methods. It is very good to question the ends and the means, and in this also Saint Thomas has a lot to tell us. For what is education? How?

Saint Thomas understands education as “*the development of children until the perfect state of man qua man, which is the state of virtue.*” (*Summa Theologica*, Supplements III, q. 41, a.1).

To foster the perfection of “*man qua man*” is the end. The end of man qua man is happiness, that is to say, Beatitude or sanctity. This is the “**meaning**” of education. All the methods and pedagogical rationalities in order to make only good professionals: do they guarantee that man will be happy? We have seen that this is not so.

But to give happiness to the disciple, which would be the end as perfect operation, is not in the hands of the educator. He only can help the disciple to have the perfect dispositions which are the virtues (Cf. *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q.49, a.4 ad 1). The principal agent is the student himself because he has the active potency to acquire knowledge; the educator is the contributing cause, although indispensable, putting at his disposition the necessary means. This to educate for life, to be competent in the face of this Happiness.

In order for the educator to be able to help the learner to be the subject of his proper education in the virtues, he has to be virtuous himself, that is to say, to put in action the qualities in which he wants to educate his disciples: knowledge of the contents, search for truth, prudence and the other moral virtues, since principally one educates through example. He should also take into account the different capacities of each learner and the most adequate techniques, encouraging the make-do with auto-discipline and responsibility, maintaining, at the same time, appropriate relations with others.

Therefore, it is not about only teaching contents, but also about giving tools with which the learner himself can actualize his potential. It is about, in the end, helping him to be prudent, adequately deciding in any given situation, while looking towards the next end and, above all, towards the ultimate one. The educator is not there in order to teach all the solutions to the multiple problems which are raised, but rather to enable him to solve them. To acquire virtues is the end of education.

Thus, are skills opposed to contents?

No. Prudence is the principal virtue to promote, following Thomas, because without it the others are not possible (Cf. *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 47, a.6 ad 3). It is at the same time intellectual and practical virtue. There is no dilemma between theory and practice in education. One cannot disassociate virtue from content. Without virtue one cannot work well, either morally or technically. And without practicing the good, virtue is obscured. Given the unity of man, there should not be contents without action nor action without contents. Contents and skills are inseparable.

The master *e-duce*, guides the disciple from within the disciple himself. Thus, without his cooperation, there is nothing. And he will not have the will if he does not clearly see the why and does not taste it. The understanding, the will, and affection must be educated. In that way one can confront the adversity, inside and outside of oneself, in obedience to the truth. Speaking of “skills,” it would not be bad to introduce into the University the competitive method of the *disputatio*, which helped so much to exercise argumentation in the time of Saint Thomas. It would help to form students confident in the defense of the truth in the face of errors.

The virtuous man (prudent, moderate, strong, just, with science, understanding and wisdom) has everything to gain from life, and, consequently, from work. The company will be happy with him.

And, of course, in cooperative work because man is social by nature, and Saint Thomas is the model of cooperation. In the face of modern subjectivism (beginning with Descartes, Hume, Kant) which wants to make a clean sweep of tradition and to start again with itself, Saint Thomas sits himself in the very wide circle of this orchestra of authors that search for the truth, believers or not; he talks and discusses with them, accepts and refutes. Cooperation and interdisciplinarity should govern the University of the 21st century.
