

***Fides et Ratio*: A ‘Radical’ Vision of Intellectual Inquiry**

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1. Introduction

Commentators on Pope John Paul II’s encyclical *Fides et Ratio*¹ have not failed to notice the incongruity that marks the Holy Father’s defense of the powers of reason against contemporary forms of skepticism. As Nicholas Wolterstorff has put it:

“How surprising and ironic that roughly two centuries after Voltaire and his cohorts mocked the church as the bastion of irrationality, the church, in the person of the pope, should be the one to put in a good word for reason.”²

In fact, given that professional philosophers of nearly all stripes have abandoned the classical search for a comprehensive and systematic wisdom that provides firm answers to the deepest and most pressing human questions, Pope John Paul’s call for us philosophers to recover our ‘sapiential’ vocation is not just ironic but downright mortifying.

Still, the Holy Father’s optimism should not obscure the fact that his defense of reason proceeds on his own terms and from within his own faith-filled perspective, and that it stands in marked contrast to those rationalistic tendencies, characteristic of some recent Catholic reflection on faith and reason, which have helped skew the course of Catholic intellectual life in general and Catholic higher education in particular. My aim in this paper is to argue, first, that the Holy Father propounds a conception of intellectual inquiry that is very different from currently dominant conceptions in the West, and yet, second, that despite its radical and countercultural nature, this conception of intellectual inquiry is philosophically just as plausible as its competitors and, in addition, much more hopeful.

In the first part of the paper I will briefly explicate the Holy Father’s assertion that reason can fully realize its own intrinsic ends only by means of intellectual inquiry conceived of Christocentrically. In doing so, I will highlight the continuity of his view with the portrait of intellectual inquiry and of the philosophical life that Plato paints in the so-called “middle dialogues.” Then in the second part I will contrast the Holy Father’s conception of intellectual inquiry with its most influential modernist and postmodernist competitors. In the end I will urge that, among the currently available alternatives in Western intellectual life, it is the Catholic intellectual tradition, guided by the teaching authority of the Church, which provides the best hope for overcoming the most intransigent intellectual problems that confront technologically advanced contemporary culture, among which are (a) the fragmentation of the intellectual disciplines, with an attendant neglect of the classical aspiration to achieve an integrated

¹I am following the Latin text of the encyclical, and in some cases I have departed from the official English translation, which does not always pay as much attention as one might wish to subtleties.

²*Books & Culture* 5, July/August 1999.

vision of the disciplines themselves and hence of the human person, and (b) a crisis of confidence within the specifically humanistic disciplines that has engendered a general cultural pessimism about the power of human reason to solve “the mystery of personal existence”³—a pessimism that poses a threat especially to the young.⁴

2. A Christocentric Conception of Intellectual Inquiry

It is important to pay close attention to the structure of *Fides et Ratio*. The Introduction, in which the Holy Father identifies the search for wisdom as a universal phenomenon with the implicit search for Jesus Christ as the Way, the Truth, and the Life, is followed immediately by discussions of special divine revelation (Chapter I) and of faith in that revelation as both a source of cognition and an affective prerequisite for the attainment of genuine wisdom (Chapter II).

This structure is significant and perhaps surprising. One might have expected the Holy Father to begin with a discussion of reason and so to proceed “from below,” that is, from that which, on a classical Catholic view, reason can in principle see on its own without revelation and which would render it receptive to the transcendent and the supernatural. To be sure, the Holy Father insists at various junctures that when reason operates correctly and in accord with its very nature, it does indeed find itself open to the transcendent even in the absence of divine revelation.⁵ But the unmistakable intent of Chapters I and II is to underscore the claim that reason can operate with full adequacy only within the framework of an “act of entrusting oneself to God” which “engages the whole person” and in which “the intellect and the will display their spiritual nature.”⁶ This act of faith in God’s gratuitous self-revelation, which the Holy Father characterizes as the highest realization of human freedom, enables the subject’s intellectual perception to attain a depth which would otherwise be lacking and which is necessary for attaining what we might call ‘sapiential certitude’, that is, certitude about the nature of the world and of the human person as expressed in a rigorous and comprehensive manner.⁷

In both its cognitive and its affective dimensions, this is a strikingly bold and radical vision of intellectual inquiry. With regard to the cognitive dimension, the Holy Father is asserting that no matter how impressive particular human claims to knowledge might be, they will collectively fail to constitute genuine wisdom if not informed by faith. For without the light of faith the sum of human knowledge can approach neither the comprehensiveness nor depth of insight required for wisdom:

“Faith sharpens the inner eye, opening the mind to discover in the flux of events the workings of Providence. The words of the Book of Proverbs are very significant in this regard: ‘The human mind plans its course, but the Lord directs its steps’ (16:9). That is, illumined by the light of reason, human beings know how to discover the way, but they can

³*Fides et Ratio* (hereafter *FR*), #12.

⁴See *FR* #6. Here, as in so many other writings and speeches—not to mention actions, such as the convening of World Youth Days—Pope John Paul II appeals to young people to accept the challenge of the Gospel with a seriousness that runs counter to the general practice of their elders, especially in first world countries.

⁵See *FR* ##23, 41, 60, 70, 81, 83 and 84.

⁶*FR* #13.

⁷In *FR* #4 the Holy Father singles out a rigorous mode of thought and systematicity (or completeness) as characteristic of speculative philosophy.

follow it to its end, quickly and unhindered, only if with a rightly tuned spirit they introduce the perspective of faith into their inquiry. Therefore, reason and faith cannot be separated without diminishing the capacity of men and women to understand themselves, the world, and God in a coherent way.”⁸

And he underscores the cognitive necessity of faith in Christ by citing one of his favorite passages from Vatican II’s Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World:

“As the Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* puts it, ‘only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light’. Seen in any other terms, the mystery of personal existence remains an insoluble riddle. Where might the human being seek the answer to dramatic questions such as pain, the suffering of the innocent, and death, if not in the light streaming from the mystery of Christ’s Passion, Death and Resurrection?”⁹

In the Introduction to the encyclical, the Holy Father had explicitly coupled the search for wisdom with the human quest for self-knowledge, in keeping with the ancient dictum, “Know thyself.” Every scientific and humanistic discipline contributes to this quest, since each counts some aspect of the human person among its objects of study. But here we are told that we can understand ourselves fully and solve “the mystery of personal existence” only by the light of “the mystery of the incarnate Word.” Vestiges of this far-reaching sentiment can still be found even nowadays in the mission statements of the largest Catholic universities, if not often in their day-to-day practice.¹⁰ What it implies for philosophy is that the mysteries of the Christian Faith must appear as first principles in any successful attempt to articulate the full truth about God, the world, and ourselves. What’s more, even though these mysteries are not naturally evident to us and cannot be acknowledged as true except by faith, without them we find ourselves in peril not only with respect to our supernatural end but also with respect to widely shared communal ends. For instance, the Holy Father explicitly ties the absence of the cognitive dimension of faith to the “technocratic logic” that dominates formerly Christian cultures in which scientific and technological innovations now take place in what we might aptly call a ‘sapiential vacuum’, with no systematic advertence to the transcendent metaphysical and moral questions that such innovations should occasion, especially in biotechnology.¹¹

In treating the affective dimension of faith, the Holy Father begins by invoking the attitude toward intellectual inquiry expressed in the Wisdom literature of Sacred Scripture:

“The Chosen People understood that, if reason were to be fully true to itself, then it must respect certain basic rules. The first of these is that reason must realize that human knowledge is a journey which allows no rest; the second stems from the awareness that such a path is not for the proud who think that everything is the fruit of personal conquest; a third rule is grounded in the ‘fear of God’ whose transcendent sovereignty and provident love in

⁸FR #16 (my translation).

⁹FR #12.

¹⁰For example, the University of Notre Dame’s mission statement, revised as late as 1995, still contains the following lines: “A Catholic university draws its basic inspiration from Jesus Christ as the source of wisdom and from the conviction that in him all things can be brought to their completion. As a Catholic university, Notre Dame wishes to contribute to this educational mission.”

¹¹FR #15.

the governance of the world reason must recognize.”¹²

Rectitude of affection—characterized here by humility, fear of the Lord, and a sense of urgency about attaining wisdom and truth—is essential for seeing important truths clearly. Moreover, it is evident from the context that the Holy Father means to affirm this not only for moral truths but also for important metaphysical truths—especially those having to do with God and the nature of the human person—which, when held with confidence, establish a framework in which subjects come to see self-transcending life-commitments as plausible paths to human fulfillment. However, it is precisely here that our moral defects tend both to blind us and to render us fearful:

“The natural limitation of reason and inconstancy of heart often obscure and distort a person’s inquiry It is even possible for a person to avoid the truth as soon as he begins to glimpse it, because he is afraid of its demands. Yet even when he flees from it, the truth still has an impact on his existence. For he can never prop up his own life with doubt, uncertainty, or deceit; such an existence would be infested with fear and anxiety. This is why the human being can be defined as *the one who seeks after truth*.”¹³

In making these claims, Pope John Paul is self-consciously appropriating within a Christian setting the ideal set forth in Plato’s *Republic*, where Socrates emphasizes repeatedly that moral uprightness, which makes one fit for self-transcending and self-sacrificing friendship within a just community, is a necessary condition for being devoted to the truth and, in general, for leading the philosophical life. Indeed, other things being equal, moral uprightness is the chief mark that distinguishes the philosopher from the sophist. As the encyclical puts it:

“One should remember, too, that reason needs to be sustained in its inquiry by trusting dialogue and authentic friendship. A climate of suspicion and distrust, which sometimes beset speculative inquiry, is oblivious to the teaching of the ancient philosophers, who held that friendship is one of the most fitting contexts for doing philosophy correctly.”¹⁴

As we will see below, the claim that intellectual inquiry ideally takes place within a community of self-transcending friendship founded upon a robust conception of the common good is foreign in the end to both modernist and postmodernist conceptions of inquiry. But according to the classical conception of intellectual inquiry that John Paul is evoking here, the pursuit of wisdom will prosper only insofar as rigorous intellectual training and practice are embedded within a well-ordered program of moral and spiritual formation consonant with the attainment of complete wisdom. In short, on this view ideal intellectual inquiry presupposes a way of life that depends on and fosters rectitude of affection, where such rectitude is deemed essential for one’s having certitude with respect to a correct set of first principles.

Furthermore, as Socrates insists in the *Republic*, moral uprightness is best inculcated and preserved in intellectual inquirers by a morally upright community. From the Holy Father’s perspective the relevant community is in the first instance the *ecclesia*, the Church herself, and the affective rectitude induced by faith consists essentially in our participation, through charity, in the inner life of the Holy Trinity—a participation that all the faithful, including intellectual inquirers, receive gratuitously through

¹²FR #18.

¹³FR #28 (my translation).

¹⁴FR #33 (my translation).

the merits of Jesus Christ and which reconstitutes on a new plane their friendship with one another. And because of its particular core beliefs, this community is outward-looking and hence naturally enters into conversation with the political, social, and cultural bodies that all human beings, including members of the Church, find themselves a part of. In this sense, intellectual inquiry as Pope John Paul envisions it is always open to the stranger. This explains why it was wholly fitting for the Holy Father to include a brief treatment of the Church's relationship to differing cultures within an encyclical on faith and reason.¹⁵

The communal setting of intellectual inquiry is absolutely crucial to the Holy Father's account. For even though inquiry is seen as perfecting the individual inquirers themselves, its most important function is to serve the broader community that gives rise to and sustains it. Inquirers are obliged to return to the cave from the sunlight—or, as St. Thomas puts it, “just as it is greater to illuminate than merely to shine, so too it is greater to give to others what one has contemplated than merely to contemplate.”¹⁶ So the ideal life of inquiry is essentially social in both its origins and its aims. In particular, as a servant of the broader community, intellectual inquiry is responsible to the first principles on which that community is founded. One of its main functions is to clarify those first principles and to deepen the community's understanding of the warrant for them and of their superiority to possible competitors.¹⁷

Finally, this conception of the nature of intellectual inquiry places no *a priori* restrictions on possible sources of cognition, but ostensibly invites inquirers to draw upon all the cognitive resources available to them—including both faith and reason—in constructing a complete and coherent set of answers to the deepest human questions.¹⁸ In the end, possession of the truth matters more than adherence to any given theory or method of inquiry.

This is the context within which the Holy Father repeatedly acknowledges—and, indeed, insists upon—the autonomy of intellectual inquiry, a notion that can be misunderstood in much the same way that the moral autonomy of the human person can be.¹⁹ I can only skim the surface here, but it is important to articulate at least the most general principles governing the autonomy of inquiry and the authority exercised with respect to inquiry by the community, especially where the relevant community is the Church.

¹⁵See *FR* ##70-72.

¹⁶*Summa Theologiae* 2-2, ques. 188, art. 6.

¹⁷I am underplaying here the self-critical function of inquiry in order to emphasize that even this function is perspectival and not free-floating. Such self-criticism is made from a point of view and must hence take the form of criticizing theories and practices by appeal to prior principles which those theories and practices are seen to violate. To reject the prior principles themselves is in effect to ‘excommunicate’ oneself from the community within which one began inquiry. Even though this might under certain specifiable conditions be a reasonable course of action, it itself involves an implicit appeal to a new set of first principles and hence presupposes the possibility of a community built around the new principles. The idea that inquiry can be entirely ‘free’, i.e., free of any commitment at all to prior principles, is a fiction of the modernist imagination.

¹⁸Where, after all, did Socrates get the belief in personal immortality that he puts to the test in the *Phaedo*? As is clear from the “judgment myths” found in the *Phaedo*, *Republic*, and *Gorgias*, it came at least in its origins from his inherited religion and was perhaps fortified by his deep conviction that the philosophical life, which is a “preparation for death,” is the best life a human being can lead. Moreover, Socrates seems content to treat this belief as innocent until proven guilty. That is, he is anxious to refute the objections of Simmias and Cebes, even though he acknowledges that his own positive arguments for the belief are inconclusive. In this sense, his investigation of the thesis of personal immortality is analogous to the Christian's investigation of the mysteries of the faith.

¹⁹See *FR* ##16, 45, 48, 49, 67, 75, 77, 79, 85, and 106.

Philosophical inquiry developed historically outside of Christian revelation with its own formal and material standards of success. It is this extra-ecclesial situation that the Holy Father calls the first of the three “stances” of philosophy.²⁰ In the *Summa Theologiae* St. Thomas self-consciously adopted Aristotle’s formal conceptions of philosophical methodology and of the goal of philosophical inquiry in fashioning his own systematic presentation of Christian wisdom (“third stance of philosophy”), whereas in the *Summa Contra Gentiles* he engaged well-disposed classical and medieval non-Christian philosophers by trying to show that given just their own material assumptions it is possible to establish a large proper subset of Christian metaphysical and moral doctrines, the so-called ‘preambles of the faith’ (“second stance of philosophy”). Thus, intellectual inquiry as a general phenomenon has a certain independence from Christian faith (though not, on this conception, from affective commitments *in toto*), and reason serves in its own right as a source of cognition. As such, reason plays an important regulative role in the articulation and defense of the mysteries of the faith and in the investigation of those revealed truths it is able to establish even in the absence of revelation. To put it most simply, because of God’s veracity and hatred of falsehood, what is “contrary to reason” cannot be a part of any valid articulation of Christian wisdom.²¹ So intellectual inquiry has formal and material resources distinct from the Christian faith, and this gives it a measure of self-rule.

However, this general understanding of the autonomy of inquiry is fully consonant with the claim that inquiry is responsible to the community that gives rise to it and sustains it, and that the community, in pursuing the common good, legitimately exercises a normative role in inquiry beyond that which is exercised over inquirers by other inquirers. For just as genuine moral autonomy can be corrupted by weakness or wilfulness into a moral blindness that obscures one’s vision of genuine goods, both private and common, so too the autonomy of reason can be corrupted by moral weakness or wilfulness into an intellectual myopia that both blinds one to important truths and skews one’s vision of the common good to which inquiry is meant to contribute. What’s more, there is no reason to think that the exercise of the purely intellectual skills necessary for inquiry renders one immune to this sort of corruption. Indeed, intellectuals have forever accused one another of having fallen into it, and the “technocratic logic” I alluded to earlier is partly a result of the community’s failure—or perhaps inability or even reluctance, in the case of pluralistic liberal democracies—to bring authoritative metaphysical and moral guidance systematically to bear on scientific and technological research. So just as moral autonomy, rightly understood, does not entail the illegitimacy of all claims to moral authority outside of individual subjects or groups of subjects, so too intellectual autonomy, rightly understood, does not entail the illegitimacy of all claims to intellectual authority outside individual inquirers or groups of inquirers.

Needless to say, opponents of John Paul’s account of inquiry will be quick to point out that the specter of possible injustice and oppression looms large here, especially when the community in question is a full-scale state with inescapable coercive power. This is one reason why the model of the Republic strikes many of us moderns as so perilous, despite the safeguards built into the education of the guardians. From a Christian perspective, the primary difficulty with the Republic is that the effects of original sin cannot be wholly rooted out in this life by any environment or process of education. The Church, though, is an institution which (a) has voluntary membership, (b) is not, at least in the contemporary world, closely allied with inescapable coercive political power, and (c) has even loftier moral ideals for individuals than does the Republic. To be sure, these factors have not always in the past guaranteed, and do not now guarantee, that communal leaders will have either good intentions or good judgment in their dealings with inquirers. But they do provide standards of criticism that can legitimately

²⁰See *FR* #75-77.

²¹See St. Thomas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* I, chaps. 7 and 8.

be appealed to by inquirers.

What's more, the exercise of authority over inquiry by the community at large is part and parcel of a social conception of intellectual inquiry that will have been internalized by the inquirers in their education, and so they will be at least antecedently predisposed to see this authority as a helpful guide rather than a threat. This is especially so in the case of the Church. For the conviction, shared by all the faithful, that the Holy Spirit guides the Church in preserving and safeguarding revealed truth puts the teaching authority of the Church in a theoretically stronger position than similar powers exercised by any other political or social community.

As regards the material character of the exercise of this authority, the Holy Father explains in Chapter V of *Fides et Ratio* that interventions on the part of the communal teaching authority of the Church are usually negative, warning against tendencies that might lead inquirers and the faithful at large outside the bounds of orthodoxy. But inquiry is largely underdetermined by orthodoxy and so a large area for freedom of thought and individual discretion is left open. On the other hand, some such interventions are positive, urging, for instance, that certain lines of inquiry which have heretofore been neglected should be investigated. But in such cases the warrant for the intervention must always be some pressing intellectual or pastoral challenge to the common good of the community.²²

I have sketched the general parameters of the Christocentric account of intellectual inquiry which Pope John Paul proposes in *Fides et Ratio* and which he sees as a Christian successor to the classical philosophical traditions. I am under no illusion that this account will seem attractive to large numbers of contemporary intellectuals—just the opposite, and that is why I acknowledged from the start that it is countercultural. But the encyclical in effect lays down a challenge to contemporary philosophers and scientists to formulate a plausible and satisfying alternative. This can be a healthy exercise, given that intellectual inquirers are not often called upon to think very hard or very deeply about the nature of inquiry itself. But it can also be a revealing exercise, since the contemporary alternatives turn out to have deficiencies that even their own advocates should be able to recognize.

3. Competing conceptions of intellectual inquiry

The nature of intellectual inquiry has been a disputed topic ever since Plato painted his portrait of the philosopher and of the philosophical life in dialogues such as the *Gorgias*, the *Phaedo*, the *Phaedrus*, the *Symposium*, the *Apology*, and the *Republic*. (Remember that in Plato's time the natural and human sciences had not yet branched off from philosophy, and so what Plato was in effect proposing was an account of intellectual inquiry in general and of the life of intellectual inquiry.) And, in fact, the modern academy has its own pictures of intellectual inquiry and of the intellectual life—pictures that look very different from Plato's and very different indeed from what the Holy Father has in mind in *Fides et Ratio*. I now turn to them.

There are at least three important competing conceptions to consider: enlightenment or modernist rationalism, especially in its more optimistic versions; pragmatism; and Nietzschean or postmodern anti-rationalism. My treatment of these conceptions in the present paper is broad-stroked and to that extent deficient. Still, it will be sufficient to highlight the deep differences that divide the Holy Father from the vast majority of contemporary intellectuals.

²²A faint—and far more dangerous—analogue of this second role is played in universities nowadays by governmental and corporate subsidies for scientific research.

3.1 *The enlightenment rationalist (or modernist) conception of inquiry*

According to the rationalist account of intellectual inquiry, an ideal inquirer, *qua* inquirer, is an intellectually autonomous individual with no indefeasible intellectual allegiance to any political, cultural, or religious community and hence with no intellectual loyalty to any historical tradition of inquiry. As Kant puts it:

“Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one’s own understanding without the guidance of another. This immaturity is self-incurred if its cause is not lack of understanding, but lack of resolution and courage to use it without the guidance of another. The motto of enlightenment is therefore: *Sapere aude!* Have courage to use your own understanding!”²³

At least in the context of inquiry, affective ties are deemed impediments to seeing the truth clearly and objectively—where truth is conceived of in realist fashion as distinct from consensus, though accessible to all methodologically competent inquirers. On this account, it is precisely because ideal intellectual inquiry proceeds from principles evident to ‘pure’ or ‘cool’ reason alone that it must be free from any explicit or implicit exercise of intellectual authority on the part of non-inquirers.

This aspect of enlightenment rationalism is, to be sure, not entirely ‘modern’. In *De Utilitate Credendi* St. Augustine recounts that he was first attracted to Manicheanism by its disdain for credulity and its promise that no catechumen would have to accept on faith what could not be proved by “pure and simple reason.”²⁴ After his conversion Augustine attributed this attraction to the sin of pride, which had blinded him not only to his own intellectual limitations but also to the fact that an appropriate sort of trust in others is essential to intellectual inquiry. In contrast, on the rationalist view all affective ties, taken indiscriminately, distort judgment and turn it into one or another form of self-deception. Hence, inquirers must habituate themselves to factoring out the affective allegiances they have as ordinary human beings when they assume the role of ‘objective’ inquirers.

The more optimistic modernists believed that all careful reasoners of normal intelligence would find the very same first principles evident, and that they would likewise be able to discern the evident soundness of the arguments leading from those first principles to various important conclusions in metaphysics and moral theory.²⁵ For instance, in the *Discourse on Method* Descartes contends that even though not everyone has the creative talent to forge new intellectual paths, all human beings of normal

²³“What is Enlightenment?” (1784). Kant is an interesting and crucial figure in the story of enlightenment rationalism. On the one hand, his conception of enlightenment stands squarely within the movement initiated by the likes of Descartes and Locke. On the other hand, his Humean-inspired pessimism about the power of speculative or theoretical reason prepares the way for postmodernist conceptions of inquiry.

²⁴*De Utilitate Credendi*, chap. 1, #2: “My purpose is to prove to you, if I can, that it is profane and rash for the Manicheans to inveigh against those who follow the authority of the Catholic Faith before they are able to intuit the Truth which is seen by a pure mind, and who, by having faith, are fortified and prepared for the God who will give them light. For you realize, Honoratus, that the only reason we fell in with such men was their claim that, apart from any intimidating authority, they would by pure and simple reason lead those who heard them to God and set them free from all error. For what else compelled me, for almost nine years, to spurn the religion instilled in me as a boy by my parents and to follow those men and listen to them diligently, except their claim that we had been made fearful by superstition and had been required to have faith before reason, whereas they would urge no one to believe unless the truth had first been discussed and made clear?” (my translation). See also *Confessions* 6, chap. 5.

²⁵Descartes made this claim at least about foundational beliefs in physics and metaphysics, while it was extended to foundational moral beliefs by various modern moral philosophers.

intelligence have enough “good sense” (*le bon sens*) to perceive the evidentness of the first principles, arguments, and conclusions yielded by his new method of ideas—and this, presumably, regardless of their moral and spiritual condition, and regardless of the moral and spiritual condition of the cultures within which they practice intellectual inquiry. On this view all that is needed for genuine philosophical wisdom is intellectual insight and good method on the part of the teacher and good sense on the part of the student. Moral and spiritual education are simply beside the point—no surprise, since they are instilled by just the type of communities whose influence rationalism seeks to banish from intellectual inquiry.

Other thinkers democratize the enlightenment by claiming in effect that in a democratic society each individual should be his or her own philosophical expert. For instance, in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* Locke insists that all normal adults have the ability and the obligation to apply on their own—without guidance from an expert—an epistemic methodology that will ensure that their assent to any proposition is proportioned strictly to the evidentness of that proposition’s claim to truth. And in *On Liberty* Mill brings this enlightenment ideal into the public forum by arguing that the best way for the citizen of a democracy to attain truth on important metaphysical, moral, and political questions is to participate in the on-going free discussion of these questions among intellectually autonomous citizen-philosophers.

Despite their differences, these more optimistic modernists are all agreed that by using the correct methods, reason by itself can and will discover all the truths needed for both individual and communal human flourishing, and that, without reliance on faith of any sort, the general consensus of mankind will—at least over time—converge on just those truths. This was an exceedingly attractive prospect in the early seventeenth century, given the religious and political divisions that were plaguing Europe in the wake of the Reformation, and given the social and cultural accomplishments of the Renaissance. Nor did modernist bravado die easily. Despite the notable lack of consensus—or even progress toward consensus—on important metaphysical and moral issues among seventeenth- and eighteenth-century thinkers, and despite the pessimism about the powers of reason that had been trenchantly expressed by Hume and in a sense codified by Kant, the same modernist optimism is evinced in Mill’s spirited nineteenth-century defense of intellectual autonomy and freedom of inquiry.

Today the optimistic brand of modernist enthusiasm is confined mainly to scientifically-minded intellectuals who have devoted themselves to constructing wholly ‘naturalistic’ (or ‘materialistic’) worldviews. Yet despite the dramatic recent achievements in the natural sciences, there are just too many deep and important questions about the human condition that the natural sciences cannot plausibly answer. They simply leave out too much that is important to us. As a result, materialistic ideologies fail to cohere with the fundamental attitudes and deep-seated first principles of most ordinary human beings. Moreover, when we turn to theoretical work in the human sciences, we notice that—for better or worse—this work by and large seems to presuppose naturalistic first principles and hence cannot serve to discover them in the impartial manner promised by modernism.²⁶ But without rationalist-conceived human science there is no hope of constructing a unified rationalist account of reality, which would, at least in broad outline, integrate the disparate academic disciplines into a synthetic framework. And as the Holy Father insists in *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, such an integration of knowledge is essential to our attaining a complete vision of the human person. To fail in our search for a unified and integrated

²⁶This claim is at the heart of the call for Christian-based social science that one finds in the work of the so-called “Radical Orthodoxy” movement, led by theologians such as John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock.

account of reality is in essence to fail in our search for coherent self-understanding.²⁷

The Holy Father notes with some concern that the recent past has seen the promise of the enlightenment fall on hard times and hard realities. For given the failure of modernists to provide a satisfactory comprehensive account of “how we ought to live,” as Socrates was wont to say, there is a palpable sense in which pessimism and even cynicism with respect to the attainment of wisdom has been their cultural legacy. This will become clear as we turn to the postmodern alternatives.

3.2 *The pragmatist conception of inquiry*

In the eyes of many, then, the so-called ‘enlightenment project’ has failed as a path to sapiential certitude, despite its spectacular scientific and technological achievements. The possible reactions to this perceived failure are many, but two stand out as worthy of special attention because of their prominence in contemporary Western intellectual culture. Each in its own way not only rejects the optimistic version of enlightenment rationalism but goes so far as to stand Socrates on his head.

The first, and more bourgeois, reaction to enlightenment rationalism might aptly be called pragmatism because of its association with John Dewey, though it finds a powerful early modern expression in Hume. According to this view, we should begin by simply admitting that the modernist search for sapiential certitude has been a failure and that such certitude has thereby been shown to be unattainable. As Philo puts it in the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, when we leave the arena of everyday human affairs and attempt to inquire into the deep foundational questions of metaphysics and moral theory, we are like “foreigners in a strange country,”²⁸ since our cognitive faculties, even when used as well as they can be, are not capable of yielding firm answers to these questions. Instead, we end up with competing comprehensive claims to wisdom, none of which has any more rational warrant than any other. Fortunately, even though we lack rational warrant for our sapiential claims, nature has endowed us with instinctive sentiments and beliefs which, if we do not corrupt them by either moral or epistemic fanaticism, are sufficient to guide us through ordinary life and even through scientific research conceived of empirically as a mere extension of ordinary thinking.

In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle had attributed the core of this position to the poet Simonides, who exhorted his readers to concern themselves just with things here below and not with the gods and heavens above. But the urgency with which pragmatism is defended today is a new phenomenon engendered by contemporary political realities.²⁹ The pragmatist emphasizes that the rationalist search for sapiential certitude is not only futile but especially dangerous within the framework of a pluralistic democratic society. The reason is that competing claims to comprehensive wisdom are frequently held with a high degree of what St. Thomas calls “certitude of adherence,” and such firmness of commitment—which is admittedly not proportioned to the evidentness of the claim to truth of the propositions assented to—causes social division and undermines tolerance, the chief civic virtue required by such societies. So our best course is simply to abandon the search for wisdom as a general communal imperative. When it comes to ultimate moral and metaphysical questions, either we should train ourselves not to raise them at all or, if we find this psychologically impossible or otherwise undesirable,

²⁷This is a major theme of Walker Percy’s fiction, which is in many ways a fitting literary complement to *Fides et Ratio*.

²⁸David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Co., 1983), p. 7.

²⁹For an exposition, emendation, and defense of this ‘Rortyan’ position, see Gary Gutting, *Pragmatic Liberalism and the Critique of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

then we should at least refrain from insisting on the universal validity of our own sapiential preferences when we leave the private sphere and participate in public discourse. The role of the philosopher is not to raise these deep strategic questions, but is instead to engage in tactical ‘Socratic irony’, exposing the assumptions, pretenses, and incoherences of the wealthy, the famous, and the powerful.

The first thing to note about pragmatism as just described is that, despite its pretensions to the contrary, it in fact stands under the shadow of enlightenment rationalism. For according to the pragmatist, rationalism is mistaken not in its core conception of ideal intellectual inquiry, but merely in its optimism about the ability of affectless human inquirers to reach sapiential certitude by means of inquiry conceived rationalistically. Far from holding that rightly-placed affective commitment is essential to intellectual inquiry itself, the pragmatists see affective ties as kicking in, so to speak, only after inquiry properly speaking has failed in its task. Only from this perspective does it make sense to assign equal epistemic weight indiscriminately to all affective commitments (or at least to all politically tolerable ones), regardless of the intellectual content associated with those commitments. For instance, from this perspective the early Heidegger’s commitment to the renewal of German culture under National Socialism is—*epistemically* at any rate—on a par with, say, the Holy Father’s own commitment to the renewal of human cultures through what he calls the ‘new evangelization’.

It is worth recalling that when Augustine became disillusioned with the Manichean guarantee of naturally grounded wisdom, his immediate temptation was to cling to his faith in pure reason and despair of ever reaching certitude about the ultimate meaning of human existence.³⁰ That is, he flirted with pragmatism as I have defined it. In the end, however, he altered his conception of inquiry instead, adopting the more classical approach explained above. So in the end the crucial issue for Augustine was not *whether* to make a faith-commitment *qua* inquirer but rather just *which* such commitment to make. And he came to believe that it was his own affective disorders that had tempted him, in effect, to assign equal epistemic weight to all such commitments after his disappointment with Manicheanism.

What drove Augustine beyond pragmatism was, in large measure, dissatisfaction with the thought that he should resign himself to abandoning the quest for wisdom as futile or, alternatively, to romanticizing it as an end in itself. In other words, he exhibited just the sort of moral urgency that the Holy Father sets forth as one of the affective prerequisites for attaining wisdom. In contrast, the pragmatist seems content to recommend the pursuit of a pleasant and comfortable life that avoids suffering as much as possible, and that, within that stricture, makes an effort to render other people’s lives more pleasant, or at least less unpleasant. This was just the sort of life which Augustine had abandoned after reading Cicero’s *Hortensius* and which he had come to see as shallow, self-deceived, and indifferent to the deep human aspiration to commit oneself to noble ideals and deeds. In a passage that may very well have been aimed precisely at pragmatic postmodernism, the Holy Father speaks of nihilism:

“As a result of the crisis of rationalism, what has appeared finally is nihilism. As a philosophy of nothingness, it has a certain attraction for people of our time. Its adherents claim that the search is an end in itself, without any hope or possibility of ever attaining the goal of truth. In the nihilist interpretation, life is no more than an occasion for sensations and experiences in which the ephemeral has pride of place. Nihilism is at the root of the widespread mentality which claims that a definitive commitment should no longer be made, because everything is fleeting and provisional.”³¹

³⁰See especially *Confessions* 5, chap. 14 and 6, chap. 11.

³¹FR #46.

The validity of applying this charge to pragmatism might not at first be obvious, since, after all, the pragmatist holds that people are free to commit themselves passionately and wholeheartedly to any kind of lifestyle they please, as long as they are tolerant of commitments that conflict with their own. But the very foundation of pragmatism implies that it is foolish to cling to any faith commitment with a degree of certitude that is not proportioned to what would be evident to any affectless inquirer, and yet this is precisely the sort of certitude that the virtue of faith confers on the Christian believer. To the pragmatist, then, the absolute certitude with which the Christian faithful adhere to their claim to wisdom can only seem foolish and dangerous. This is, after all, the certitude of the Christian martyrs, and these martyrs are precisely the sort of “fanatics” whose influence in the public sphere pragmatism is anxious to minimize. Anyone who finds these martyrs, along with other saints, admirable will find pragmatism unsatisfactory. In fact, anyone who finds non-self-transcending conceptions of human fulfillment rather unfulfilling will likewise be dissatisfied with pragmatism’s implicit disdain for the noble and heroic. Such people are looking precisely to make the sort of permanent and “definitive” commitments that the pragmatist views as silly and treacherous.

3.3 *The Nietzschean anti-rationalist (or postmodernist) conception of inquiry*

If pragmatism is rather bourgeois, the same cannot be said of the Nietzschean brand of postmodernism. “Supposing truth to be a woman—what?” Thus begins Nietzsche’s *Beyond Good and Evil*, and thus begins as well his relentless critique of the affectless rationalist inquirer. One finds hints of this view in Hume’s darker moments, when his assertion of the ascendancy of non-rational sentiment over reason is particularly strong and his concomitant pessimism about reason is particularly intense.³² But Hume still retains his ingenuous confidence that the most basic sentiments relevant to moral and scientific practice are universal, ineradicable, and predominantly benign, and so he manages—at least most of the time—to maintain his cheerfully ironic pragmatism. Thus it fell to the more serious, cynical, and persistent Nietzsche to launch a devastating critique of modernism and the bourgeois culture fostered by it. From the Holy Father’s perspective, there is much to be learned from this critique,³³ but whereas Nietzsche’s modernist predecessors had overvalued reason and rational discourse, so he himself undervalues them. In the end, it is the rhetoricians, and not the philosophers, who prevail.

As Nietzsche sees it, the classical search for wisdom is a movement of pure will or instinct, with reason serving only to rationalize the first principles that one already accepts or prefers without reason. To be sure, he chides the ‘neutral’ or ‘value-free’ modernist scholar for not being able so much as to appreciate the sentiments that have given rise to philosophy and religion across all human cultures.³⁴ Yet from his perspective all philosophical inquirers, classical as well as modernist, are operating in bad faith, since they refuse to bring to the surface the various ways in which appeals to expert knowledge and to the so-called ‘authority of reason’ have been and continue to be used as instruments of both self-deception and oppression.

Now one might find much truth in this attribution of bad faith even while insisting that intellectual inquirers equipped with affective rectitude have the ability to distinguish legitimate and benign from

³²The character of Philo in Hume’s *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* is especially interesting in this regard, since he alternates—or so it seems to me—between a gleeful superficial disparagement of the search for wisdom (that is, pragmatism) on the one hand and a somber deep despair about the human condition (that is, Nietzscheanism) on the other.

³³See *FR* #91.

³⁴A particularly entertaining example of this occurs at *Beyond Good and Evil* 58, where Nietzsche pokes fun at the condescension of the “German scholar” toward religious people.

illegitimate and oppressive appeals to the authority of reason. (Ironically, given the context, Catholics might understand the interventions of the Church's teaching authority in philosophical matters to be aimed precisely at helping us make this distinction.³⁵) But Nietzsche will hear of no such qualifications. On his view, all appeals to the authority of reason, whatever their provenance, should be viewed with suspicion. And, indeed, it is just such suspicion—in the beginning with respect to those who fall outside of one's own community of victims and in the end with respect to everyone, including one's own past selves—that marks Nietzschean inquiry.

In *Fides et Ratio* the Holy Father asserts that this attitude of universal suspicion—even if not wholly unjustified—leads straight to nihilism.³⁶ This might not at first be obvious, since there are highly-publicized communitarian versions of Nietzschean inquiry that promote a sort of 'secular fideism', complete with (a) 'faith-communities' built upon the members' shared perceptions of being victimized by sinister and powerful outsiders and (b) an account of truth according to which truth as an ideal consists simply in the consensus of those who share the 'faith' of the community. The radical intellectual perspectives generated by such fideism have, after all, produced some very insightful critiques of classical and modernist intellectual inquiry.³⁷

Despite this veneer of communitarianism, however, the Holy Father is right on the mark in his assessment of the nihilistic tendencies of Nietzschean perspectivalism. For the fact remains that Nietzsche's own analysis of bad faith can be turned back upon any such communitarian Nietzscheanism itself, and this 'hermeneutic of suspicion' undermines the very communities that were initially held together by shared perceptions of victimization. It is no accident that the most salient characteristic of Nietzsche's 'free spirit' is that he undergoes continual 'dis-integration' as he uncovers and is disgusted by his own past self-deceptions. In the end the free spirit repudiates all attachments to people as individuals, to communities, to country, to pity, to science and philosophy, to his own virtues, and even to his own detachment.³⁸

Interestingly, the free spirit's detachment is in some ways remarkably akin to the detachment of the Christian saint, whom Nietzsche both despises and grudgingly admires. But the detachment of the Christian saint is for the sake of friendship with God, and all the objects of detachment are in the end recovered to the extent that they can be re-ordered toward that friendship. The free spirit's detachment, in contrast, serves only to exclude him from genuine friendship with others and ultimately leaves him with only his suspicion, including his self-suspicion. No claim to objective or absolute wisdom will long survive inquiry of this sort. In short, given the foundational first principles of Nietzschean inquiry, there is ultimately no perspective—established either by faith or by reason—that can be both intellectually

³⁵See chapters 5 and 6 of *Fides et Ratio*, where the Holy Father defends magisterial interventions and also argues that the Catholic Church, because of the universality of its message, has been more successful than any other historical institution in interweaving the universalist claims of the Gospel with indigenous human cultures. This is not to deny that mistakes have been made along the way, and the present Holy Father has been the first to acknowledge them. But the intent has been to enhance indigenous cultures and bring them to perfection through the Gospel, and not to repress or replace them in the manner of, say, the Roman or British Empires or, more recently, imperialistic free-market consumerism.

³⁶FR #91.

³⁷I have in mind, for example, certain feminist critiques of the history of science. This, by the way, is a game that Catholics and other Christians can play as well, since we are urged to see the world "through the eyes of faith." However, given that a fundamental stance of seeing oneself as a victim carries with it grave spiritual risks, it is probably better for Christians to employ this device very sparingly.

³⁸*Beyond Good and Evil*, 31 and 41.

normative and a source of permanent friendship and harmony binding together the community of inquirers. So, once again, those looking to make permanent self-sacrificing and self-transcendent commitments will find Nietzschean inquiry less than satisfactory.

But whatever form postmodern nihilism might take, whether the passionate and suspicious nihilism of Nietzscheanism or the cheerfully ironic nihilism of pragmatism, it seems both to arise from and be sustained by an underlying despair about the human condition:

“The currents of thought which claim to be postmodern merit appropriate attention. According to some of them, the time of certainties is irrevocably past, and the human being must now learn to live in a horizon of total absence of meaning, where everything is provisional and ephemeral. In their destructive critique of every certitude, several authors have failed to make crucial distinctions and have called into question the certitudes of faith. This nihilism has been justified in a sense by the terrible experience of evil which has marked our age. Such a dramatic experience has ensured the collapse of rationalist optimism, which viewed history as the triumphant progress of reason, the source of all happiness and freedom; and now, at the end of this century, one of our greatest threats is the temptation to despair.”³⁹

It is undeniable that since the “collapse of rationalist optimism,” philosophers have tended to be more guarded in their aspirations and less hopeful in their expectations, especially when compared to their predecessors in the great classical philosophical traditions. As Chesterton remarks, “[Modern philosophy’s] despair is this, that it does not really believe that there is any meaning in the universe.”⁴⁰ Still, even the classical pagan philosophers were in their own turn much less hopeful than the Holy Father is. Recall that Socrates’ own conception of the best the philosopher could hope for even in the next life was the sort of perpetual philosophical conversation that Dante situated in the first circle of hell—a far cry from the intimate union with the Persons of the Triune God that the Holy Father takes to be possible for us, at least in its beginnings, even in this life.

4. Conclusion

Pope John Paul II proposes a conception of intellectual inquiry which is radical by contemporary Western standards and yet which has preserved the classical quest for a unified rational self-understanding and an answer to the “mystery of personal existence.” In this paper I have tried to suggest in inchoative fashion the main lines of argument by which this conception of inquiry might reasonably be defended as superior to its main competitors. What remains is to develop these arguments with greater rigor and specificity.

³⁹FR #91.

⁴⁰G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press (1908, 1995), p. 164.