

THE RESTORATION OF THE HANDMAID OF THEOLOGY: THE RECOVERY OF THE *SAPIENTIAL DIMENSION* OF PHILOSOPHY

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In the study of Pope John Paul II's encyclical *Faith and Reason*, the relationship between the different modes of knowledge and the quest for truth are conveyed. By the nature of the disciplines, science (in the modern sense of the term), philosophy and theology seek truth, but philosophy seeks the truth attainable through human reason and theology truth that has been revealed and would otherwise be inaccessible to reason. John Paul II writes that "the relationship between theology and philosophy is best construed as a circle. Theology's source and starting-point must always be the word of God revealed in history, while its final goal will be an understanding of that word which increases with each passing generation. Yet, since God's word is Truth (cf. Jn 17:17), the human search for truth—philosophy, pursued in keeping with its own rules—can only help to understand God's word better...This circular relationship with the word of God leaves philosophy enriched, because reason discovers new and unsuspected horizons."<sup>1</sup>



However, this ideal relationship between theology and philosophy that reached its high point with the Scholastics and in a particular way in St. Thomas, soon after began to crumble and today is ravaged by discord between the two disciplines. One of the factors that has contributed to this rupture between disciplines that all seek truth has been the limitation of modern science on "material description". While sciences are often helpful to deepen one's understanding of an object, "it should not mean the rejection of a typically philosophical and critical thinking which is concerned with the universal."<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, this coincided with a similar shift in philosophy as it moved away from metaphysics and the investigation of the universal and towards a kind of nihilism especially regarding man's capacity to know. John Paul II explains the repercussions of the lack of metaphysical investigation by saying "a philosophy which no longer asks the question of the meaning of life would be in grave danger of reducing reason to merely accessory functions, with no real passion for the search for truth."<sup>3</sup> This reaches to the heart of philosophy itself since the discipline is rooted in the search for truth and if this is lost, the discipline loses its purpose. This perspective makes genuine dialogue between science and religion practically impossible.<sup>4</sup> When man's capacity to know is limited or called into question as has happened in modern philosophy, the first thing that is doubted is his capacity to know universal truths which is the object of metaphysics.

This collapse within the discipline of philosophy itself, away from its nature of seeking truth and going to the limits of human reason, also deepened the rupture with theology. It was this capacity to use reason to reach universal truths that philosophy lent in service to theology -- providing a rational basis for the universal principles conveyed through Revelation. At the same time theology provided stepping stones for philosophy to reach heights that would not have been possible without revelation and at the same time keeping philosophical inquiries directed at the ultimate truth--the destiny and fulfillment of man in God.

After a thorough analysis of the different philosophical positions that have moved away from what he calls philosophy's "*sapiential dimension* as a search for the ultimate and overarching meaning of life,"<sup>5</sup> Pope John Paul II delineates three main tasks that must be undertaken in order to restore philosophy to its essential practice and thus help rebuild the relationship between the disciplines of philosophy and theology. The first task that Bl. John Paul proposes that philosophy undertake is precisely to restore the place of the search "for the ultimate and overarching meaning of life." This is the unifying factor between the discipline of philosophy and theology, and even science. The approaches and objects are different, but all are expressions of the innate human longing to understand the meaning of life -- transcendent truth.

This task presupposes that one can come to know universal truths such as the ultimate meaning of life. This is the second task that falls to philosophy: to restore and "verify the human capacity to *know the truth*, to come to a knowledge which can reach objective truth."<sup>6</sup> Without the capacity of man to know and to attain objective truth, the restoration of the genuine purpose of philosophy would be irrelevant because man would

be incapable of it. This dimension of philosophy would lend theology a great service by showing that man is capable of knowing truth -- rationally "even if [it is] not perfect"<sup>7</sup> and thus show that if man can know absolute truth in general, than certainly he can know them in relation to faith.

Similarly, John Paul II proposes a third task which is to return to a philosophy rooted in good and grounded metaphysics that is able to "transcend empirical data in order to attain something absolute...move from *phenomenon* to *foundation*."<sup>8</sup> Only a philosophy that recognizes that man is capable of this kind of reasoning and then implements this reasoning in solid metaphysics can provide the foundation necessary to help better understand matters of faith, again, even if not perfectly. This is the kind of philosophy that is seen in the Scholastics and in the Church Fathers. A return to a this *sapiential dimension* of philosophy that orients philosophy back to its proper nature and is rooted in a solid metaphysics and epistemology would reforge and bolster the discipline of theology. After all, "The ultimate purpose of personal existence, then, is the theme of philosophy and theology alike. For all their difference of method and content, both disciplines point to that "path of life" (*Ps* 16:11) which, as faith tells us, leads in the end to the full and lasting joy of the contemplation of the Triune God."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Fides et Ratio*, 1998, no. 73

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* no. 69

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* no. 81

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Fr. Brian Mullady, PHL 600 Class Notes, Lesson 13

<sup>5</sup> Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Fides et Ratio*, 1998, no. 81

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* no. 82

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* no. 82

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* no. 83

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* no. 15

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