

The Influence of Nominalism on the Development of the Modern Worldview

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Abstract

Two forceful concepts were instrumental in the formation of the modern world. The first was the worldly emphasis of nominalism which replaced the ancient idealism of the Greek philosophers, and the second was the rise of inductive reasoning as the pathway to knowledge rather than the older emphasis on deduction. Nominalism, the focus on the actual objects in the world, gave birth to the radical empiricism that dominates our culture, while the emphasis on inductive reasoning as the pathway to truth led us to the scientific method and the scientific revolution that is central to our worldview. Nominalism and the inductive approach also led to the emphasis on reasoning from immediate experience and a de-emphasis on reasoning from principle, this led to both naturalism and relativistic pluralism (postmodernism). In this paper we will give a short summary of the debates surrounding nominalism and realism, along with a record of the shift from deduction to induction in the pursuit of truth, and look at some of the ways the resulting consensus influenced our world today. In particular we will examine the role these forces played in the development of modern and postmodern philosophy and theology.

Key words: nominalism, idealism, reasoning, immediate experience, naturalism, relativism, pluralism, postmodern theology

Introduction

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Nominalism, the focus on the actual objects in the world, gave birth to the radical empiricism that dominates our culture, while the emphasis on inductive reasoning as the pathway to truth led us to the scientific method and the scientific revolution that is central to our worldview. Nominalism and the inductive approach also led to the emphasis on reasoning from immediate experience and a de-emphasis on reasoning from principle, this led to both naturalism and relativistic pluralism (postmodernism).

In this paper we will give a short summary of the debates surrounding nominalism and realism, along with a record of the shift from deduction to induction in the pursuit of truth, and look at some of the ways the resulting consensus influenced our world today. In particular we will examine the role these forces played in the development of modern and postmodern philosophy and theology.

Idealism

The early church was heavily influenced by the idealism of Plato and a belief in the real existence of the Universals.¹ It seemed clear to the church fathers that Plato's emphasis on an unseen reality which existed as the pattern and principle upon which the physical realm depended was exactly what the Bible taught. After all, the earthly tabernacle was merely a pattern of the heavenly Tabernacle (Hebrews 8:1-5). They, like most ancient peoples, saw a set of moral principles reflected in human behavior; whether they named it *logos* or *ma'at*, they were adherents of natural law. Nature obviously has its ways of rewarding good behavior and punishing the bad, as the book of Proverbs tells it, "So are the ways of everyone who gains by violence; It takes away the life of its possessors" (Proverbs 1:19). The clearly evident laws of nature were simply a reflection of the grand principles upon which the world depended. The

¹ Roger E. Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1999), 56. The Universals are mind-independent entities that form the qualities and identities of the particular objects that exist. A Universal would be the redness of an apple or of appleness itself. These realities extend even to non-material entities such as goodness. Plato's view of the Universals was that the quality (red, apple, good) actually exists outside time and space and is manifested in each of the individual expressions of the quality in the world.

church fathers agreed with Plato that the earthly was merely an imperfect reflection of a perfect heavenly reality. For most, if not all, of the fathers this seemed self-evident.

Influence of Culture and Emphasis on Faith and Reason

Every generation is deeply influenced by its culture, and the Christians of the first centuries of the church participated in these prevailing beliefs of the dominant Greco-Roman culture. For example, in the process of developing the early creeds of the church, the debate often hinged on the need to maintain many of the attributes of God as defined by Plato (and Philo), such as immutability and impassibility.²

In this period of the development of the teachings and doctrines of the church, one sees both the emphasis on faith and on reason in the debates over the Godhead and the nature of Christ. It is the argument over whether faith or reason is the means of access to truth that will lead eventually to the modern world, but at the beginning, there was no contradiction between them. The debaters used scripture and logic to make their case, and often the struggle was to reconcile a specific doctrine with scripture and the accepted understanding of the nature of God.

Faith over Reason

As the relationship between faith and reason will be the central question behind the shift from “ancient” to “modern” thought, we must ask where people stood before this debate was joined. The war between realism and nominalism had not yet begun. Most reasoned from faith, but underlying much of that reasoning were platonic assumptions. No doubt, there were times when reason got out of hand as men tried to provide completely rational explanations for the great mysteries of the Godhead and the incarnation of Christ. Each generation has its Arius or Averroes.³ Yet underlying these great debates over doctrine was an understanding of the

² Ibid, 57. Olson writes of the Greek understanding of God: “God is simple substance, completely free of body, parts or passions, immutable (changeless) and eternal (timeless). He (or It) is everything that finite creation is not—the epitome of metaphysical and moral perfection untouched by finitude, limitation, dependency, emotion, passion, change, or decay.”

³ Will Durant, *The Story of Civilization, Vol. 4, The Age of Faith*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1950), 954. Arius, of course, attempted to provide a rational explanation for the nature

superiority of faith to reason that went back at least to Jerome and the Vulgate.⁴ Augustine spoke of the precedent of faith over reason, but Anselm will be the chief proponent of faith seeking understanding.⁵ Yet in giving faith preference over reason, no one of these important figures of church history was promoting an irrational faith. The irony is that it will be nominalism, and its early attempt to protect faith from the attacks of reason that will put faith into the realm of the irrational.

The Change in the Tide of Illiteracy

With the fall of the Roman Empire, Europe entered the dark ages. During this difficult period of time the majority of people, including the clergy were illiterate, and only the monasteries kept the light of books and learning alive. The tide of illiteracy began to turn when Charlemagne, the first Holy Roman Emperor, who was himself illiterate, commissioned the first cathedral schools for the training of the clergy. This renewal of learning would eventually lead to the development of the great universities of Europe and the dawn of the Scholastic Movement. Scholasticism will be part of the great re-awakening of Western culture that we call the Renaissance, for it will revive learning and open the door to the re-birth of art, music, architecture, and literature.

Anselm and Abelard – Beginning of Scholasticism

of Christ. Since an actual incarnation of the eternal God into a real, flesh and blood human being, was beyond human comprehension and thus illogical, Arius attempted a more “reasonable” explanation; Christ must be a creature like the rest of us. Averroes was the man who re-introduced Aristotle and his rationalism to the West, he was a skeptic before such a thing was fashionable, and opened the door to the reductionism and naturalism that dominates our present culture.

⁴ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine* (Vol. 3): *The Growth of Medieval Theology (600-1300)*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), 258. Pelikan will point out that the translation of Isaiah 7:9 in the Vulgate and taken from the Septuagint, “Unless you believe, you will not understand,” led almost directly to this saying of Augustine.

⁵ *Ibid*, 259.

At the beginning of scholasticism stand two great thinkers whose writings will foreshadow the great debate between faith and reason; Anselm and Abelard. Anselm is famous for the ontological argument for the existence of God and for the development of the satisfaction theory of the atonement.⁶ Anselm believed the existence of God was conceptually self-evident, and this formed the foundation of his philosophical proof. God is “that than which nothing greater can be conceived.” However, since we can conceive of all kinds of things that don’t actually exist, like unicorns and imaginary islands in imaginary seas, this argument only works if we adjust it to say that the complexity of the universe demands the necessary existence of God. We need God to explain the world, and thus, He stands in complete transcendence over any and every other thing. The universe, as we know it, cannot be explained without a God who is transcendent and thus greater than anything else that we can conceive. It is unlikely that Anselm saw the argument in these terms, for him, the ontological argument was faith seeking understanding.

Abelard, on the other hand, was taught by a teacher who publicly questioned the Platonic universals. He considered the so-called “universals” to be mere titles or names of qualities or objects. The Latin for name is *nomina*, and thus we see the birth of nominalism.⁷ Taken to its extreme, this view implies that there are no universals, only particulars, and nominalism describes a world without God. While Abelard was influenced by Roscelin, he never fully embraced his nominalism. He rather moved in the direction of asking faith to submit to reason. In other words, he sought to put reason ahead of faith in the epistemological hierarchy, and thus, to see reason as the pathway to truth. His book *Sic et Non* asked questions even of scripture and the church fathers, but its goal was to encourage the pursuit of truth by the vehicle of questioning. He is, therefore, siding with reason in the conflict with faith, and giving reason first place in the pursuit of truth. With Abelard we see the beginning of the inductive method and as we might say, “Welcome to the modern world.”

⁶ Roger E. Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1999), 316.

⁷ Will Durant, *The Story of Civilization, vol. 4, The Age of Faith*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1950), 932. In writing of Jean Roscelin Durant tells us, “We are told that he considered universals or general ideas to be mere words (*voces*), mere wind words (*flatus vocis*); individual objects and persons exist, all else is names (*nomina*).”

Limitations of Reason

But there is a real danger in this approach. Our capacity to reason is limited, we don't know everything that it is possible to know, and further we have demonstrated the ability to abuse the power of reason by using reason to defend propaganda and lies. While we are able to reason, we are also able to rationalize, so reason can't always be trusted. Immanuel Kant will raise a further question, we cannot rely on reason to answer the greatest questions we face as human beings; we simply do not have access to the knowledge required and therefore, reason is inadequate for this momentous task. So the power of reason fails on two levels, it is incapable of ultimate knowledge and it is susceptible to deception. This also foreshadows the dilemma we face today, and this limited view of reason invites us to say, "Welcome to the postmodern world."

The Transition from Deductive to Inductive Reasoning

Greek thought, because of its focus on the universals, emphasized deductive reasoning as the path to truth. One of the assumptions that guided Platonic thought was the belief that there was a real connection between the realm of the ideal and the human mind. The carefully trained mind, using the rules of logical deduction, was the necessary tool for acquiring knowledge and understanding. This is the reason that "science" among the ancient Greeks was non-empirical. This is also part of why it appealed to the Church; revealed truth must be approached deductively as we search God's revelation for the specific truth that applies to our situation. In the deductive approach, we are looking for the right answer. This is the essence of the cry for faith seeking understanding.

In contrast to deduction, Abelard's approach of raising questions is the beginning of the use of inductive reasoning in the search for truth. It will eventually produce the experimental method and modern science, which advances by asking the right questions and using the discovered answers to advance the body of knowledge. Thus in inductive reasoning, we begin with the right questions in the process of discovering truth. In the heat of the epistemological debate, nominalism, which emphasized this real time, empirical process of discovery, was called

the *via moderna*, and as history will show, this emphasis on inductive reasoning arising from the empirical study of objects in nature will become the truly modern approach to truth.

Re-Discovery of The Major Works of Aristotle

In addition, the re-discovery of the major works of Aristotle during the Crusades will be a watershed in the debate over faith and reason. It will give rise to the Freethinkers, a group of skeptics that will be born from the philosophical and theological uncertainty generated by the writings of Aristotle. His writings, which include an eternally existing universe, will unleash a torrent of unbelief in questioning the basic teachings of Christianity, as men compared Aristotle's explanations for the world with the teachings of the church.⁸ But it will also give us the incomparable works of Thomas Aquinas.

Thomas Aquinas

Thomas was educated in a time and place that emphasized the study of Aristotle, and it became his life goal to reconcile the writings of Aristotle with the teachings of Christianity.⁹ Ultimately his project was to reconcile faith and reason which had already begun to drift apart. In this, he recognized the limitations of human reason and believed that, as Durant describes it, "the human intellect can prove God's existence, but can never rise to a knowledge of His attributes."¹⁰ We can use reason to discern that God exists, but reason cannot take us to the place of knowing what this God is like apart from His gracious self-revelation and faith in that revelation.

⁸ Ibid, 955. As Durant points out, the contact with Islam along with the rediscovery of Aristotle created a maelstrom of unbelief in medieval Europe. The various numbers of skeptics that arose in this period were lumped together under the title, "free thinker." Some were deists, most denied the fundamental teachings of Christianity (immortality, heaven & hell, the deity of Christ, etc.), and many were out right atheists.

⁹ Ibid, 962. Aquinas was taught by several men who were enthusiastic translators of Averroes and therefore, proponents of Aristotle. The most famous of these was Albertus Magnus.

¹⁰ Ibid, 964. Durant points out that Aquinas anticipated the Age of Reason and attempted to develop a Christian "philosophy" worthy of the challenge he saw coming from the secular philosophers.

What we can say about Aquinas is that he attempted to use reason in the development of natural theology and thus to use reason to establish the existence of God. In this, he sought to make faith reasonable. What philosophers will argue in the modern age is that human reason has limits, and thus, we can never use unaided human reason to “prove” that God exists in the same way that we might prove a geometric theorem. But we should not see these limitations as an excuse for rejecting or ignoring the important observations that Aquinas (and Aristotle) made concerning the universe in which we live. Aquinas presented five philosophical “proofs” of the existence of God. For several centuries, these arguments were accepted as self-evident. It will come as no surprise, therefore, that one of the tasks of the Enlightenment was to overthrow these arguments. As we will consider later, there were spoken and unspoken reasons for opposition to the arguments put forward by Aquinas.

David Hume and Others

One of the most famous of the Enlightenment philosophers, David Hume, made arguments against both the teleological and cosmological arguments while also arguing against the possibility of miracles. He will have some impact among fellow intellectuals, but for the most part his writings were ignored. William Paley’s famous analogy of the Divine Watchmaker, that appealed to the evidence for design in nature were much more influential than Hume’s skepticism at the time. For over 100 years Paley’s books were the texts of the major British universities. However, two subsequent thinkers will have more influence than Hume and eventually Paley. The first being Immanuel Kant and the second Charles Darwin. By the end of the nineteenth century, Darwin’s evolution will be seen as the answer to Paley and the vindication of Hume¹¹. In the realm of philosophy, what many considered the fatal blow to Aquinas came from the writings of Immanuel Kant. In particular, Kant’s antinomies undermined the five arguments as philosophical “proofs.”¹² In the antinomies, Kant simply demonstrated that

¹¹ Hume argued that eventually everything that in his time required a supernatural explanation, such as the universe itself, will be found to have a purely natural explanation. His argument fell on deaf ears until Darwin came along one hundred years later to provide a natural explanation for the origin and development of the biological world.

¹² In his *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas presented these five arguments: 1) the argument from motion, God is the “Unmoved Mover” 2) the argument from causation, God is the “Uncaused

we do not have access to the kind of knowledge required to prove the existence of God.¹³ In the world of philosophy after the Enlightenment, the five arguments of Aquinas were considered anachronistic because of the influence of Hume and Kant. But is this the case? Have the five arguments been proven wrong? Actually, they have not. They still stand as clearly logical and plausible explanations for how the universe came into existence and exists in the form in which we know it today.

The five arguments of Aquinas may not be absolute proofs of God's existence, but neither have they been refuted, nor could they be, because of the Kantian limits on human knowledge. They stand as reasonable explanations that support belief in a Creator that is both logical and credible. In Aquinas we see an important attempt to unite philosophy and theology, and Thomism still stands today as a viable philosophical position.

The Rise of Nominalism

Not everyone in his day agreed that faith and reason could be reconciled. Many felt that God was beyond reason and must only be apprehended by faith. Duns Scotus, for example, wrote "We cannot know God, but we can love him, and that is better than knowing."¹⁴ For men like Duns Scotus God was beyond human comprehension and so, there were theological grounds for this opposition to the power of human reasoning.

Added to this questioning of the adequacy of reason to describe the eternal God was the rise of the skepticism that accompanied the rediscovery of the writings of Aristotle. We have

Cause," 3) the argument from necessity, God is the "Necessary Being" who must exist for all else to exist, 4) the moral argument, mankind has an innate moral sense because we were created by a moral God, 5) the teleological argument, the universe shows evidence of design and thus the need for an intelligent designer.

¹³ For example, Kant will argue that the universe cannot be eternal (it shows the "marks" of temporality) but it must be eternal (because we are here something must have existed forever). These are the antinomies (contradictions) that result because of the limits on our access to knowledge.

¹⁴ Durant, 981.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 15:3 March 2015

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already mentioned it in describing the Free Thinkers, but across Europe, the recovery of Aristotle's writings unleashed a tidal wave of controversy and skepticism. And since Aristotle was "The Philosopher," he was seen as the epitome of human (secular) reasoning. Therefore, it seemed as if reason was the enemy of theology and was, at best, incapable of formulating theological understanding. Further, if used incorrectly, reason appeared capable of destroying theology. As a result, significant numbers of thinkers began to look for ways to "shield" faith from the ravages of reason. As the attacks upon the Christian faith became even more militant in the Enlightenment, the theologians of that era developed their approach to theology from this same desire to protect faith from the attacks of reason.

William of Ockham's Question

Seemingly in anticipation of the Enlightenment, William of Ockham questioned man's ability to know anything beyond his immediate experience. He recognized the human capacity to use universal terms, but he denied that these terms were related to a transcendent reality. They were simply the "names" that men gave to the classes of individual things.¹⁵ He was an empiricist, believing that men experience objects by "intuitive cognition" rather than through the means of innate ideas.

Stumpf describes Ockham's theology, "He rejected the doctrine of divine ideas for the same reason Scotus had, holding that in God the will has the supremacy. Men are what they are because God chose to make them that way and not because they reflect an eternal pattern that exists in God's mind as an idea."¹⁶ The Universals, therefore, are just the terms men use to describe the classes of individual things, and they have no existence outside of the mind of men.¹⁷ But in saying that man has no capacity for knowledge outside of direct experience, he was tying human reason irrevocably to this world.

¹⁵ Samuel Enoch Stumpf, *Socrates to Sartre: A History of Philosophy*, (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1966), 206.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 207.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 207.

James Swindal writes that Ockham “concluded that we know the existence of God, his attributes, the immortality of the soul, and freedom only by faith. His desire to preserve divine freedom and omnipotence thus led in the direction of a voluntaristic form of fideism.”¹⁸ This radical separation of faith and reason also led to a split between theology and philosophy, and the next generation of philosophers (Hobbes, Spinoza, Rousseau, etc.) will not be theologians. In many ways, they will “anti-theologians,” as they begin to use reason to attack the teachings of the Church.

The Reformation

The Reformation did little or nothing to reduce the conflict between faith and reason. Most of the reformers were Renaissance humanists who were strongly influenced by the nominalism of William of Ockham. Further, their Augustinian theology led them to a profound suspicion of human reason because of the corruption of sin. Calvin believed that men could develop an awareness of God through a reasoned process, but reason could never take us to the heights of faith. Faith, because of the work of the Holy Spirit, enables us to know the things given to us by God in redemption and that this knowledge transcends reason. In real terms, the Reformation did not reject human reason. Like so many of the practical endeavors of life, such as work, money, and family, reason was to be used “to the glory of God.” It is no accident that the first great scientists (Newton, Boyle, Faraday, Pasteur, etc.) were outspoken Christian believers. Kepler, one of the pioneers of the scientific movement declared his work of discovery to be “thinking God’s thoughts after him.”

Protestantism and Its Grandchild, Evangelicalism

Yet within Protestantism and its grandchild, Evangelicalism, there arose and remains to this day, a fear of intellectualism. A case could be made that this anti-intellectual bent is a result of the influence of pietism and revivalism that is still a large part of evangelicalism, but there has always been an element of it in Protestant theology. In many ways, the fear of intellectualism is

¹⁸ James Swindal, “Faith and Reason,” *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*

an expression of the age old debate between faith and reason, and is an attempt to protect faith from the attacks of reason. Intellectualism is a version the sin of pride which leads one further and further away from the simplicity of the gospel. May we say, in all honesty, that there is some truth to that statement.

The Enlightenment

Why does this matter? It is because one of the responses to the Enlightenment by Protestant theologians such as Frederick Schleiermacher was to “shield” the Christian faith from the attacks of science and philosophy by attempting to radically separate Christian experience from historical evidence and reason. The difference between these theologians and the biblically oriented evangelicals who would follow them, is that they embraced the intellectual assumptions of the Enlightenment, and considered themselves true intellectuals. Thus their skeptical approach was considered necessary to maintain intellectual honesty. Immanuel Kant, while not a theologian, believed he was rescuing Christianity from the ravages of the Enlightenment. He wrote in *Critique of Pure Reason*, “I have therefore found it necessary to deny knowledge, in order to make room for faith.”¹⁹

Retaining the Essence of Christianity

One of the great dilemmas for the theologians of the 18th and 19th centuries was to retain what they considered the “essence” of Christianity in the light of the advances in science, historical research, and biblical criticism. This was the dawning of the Age of Reason, which seemed to leave little or no room for faith, and rather than abandon Christianity all together, these conflicted theologians attempted to re-state the faith for use in the modern world.

The first to make this transition was Fredrick Schleiermacher. He attempted to re-define Christianity as an expression of human religious experience. Roger Olson describes it as, “What Schleiermacher accomplished was to separate religion (including Christianity) from the realm of ‘facts’ discoverable by science and philosophy. He rescued religion and Christianity from the

¹⁹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martins, 1929), 29. As we will see as we move forward in this essay, this is, in fact, what he has done. He has confirmed the necessity of faith in the development of convictions.

acids of modernity by reducing them and restricting them to an entirely different realm. Also, rather than objective divine revelation standing at the core or bottom of the theological enterprise, human experience was placed there.”²⁰

While Schleiermacher was very influential, subsequent theologians such as Ritschl, Harnack, and Hermann attempted to make ethics and social welfare the defining essence of the Christian faith. In the end, their view of moral purpose as the crux of Christianity became the prevailing view. Thus theological liberalism (modernism) became synonymous with the promotion of the social gospel.

Scientific Age and Crisis of Faith

The emerging of the scientific age created a crisis of faith within the Christian church. The rise of theological liberalism took place in the seminaries and universities, as scholars in the fields of Bible and theology were confronted with the findings and writings of their peers in the secular fields. There is a factor of intimidation related to scientific and academic research. How can an amateur evaluate and criticize the work of these professional scientists? This intimidation will contribute to the many attempts by these theologians to find non-miraculous, non-supernatural explanations for the many events and characters in Scripture that were clearly presented in the text as being of a miraculous nature.

As Rudolf Bultmann famously said, “It is impossible to use electric light and the wireless [radio] and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries, and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of demons and spirits.”²¹ These liberal theologians were left attempting to salvage a role for religion in the deeply anti-religious environment of academia.

There is a certain irony in Bultmann’s statement, because he was part of a movement (Neo-orthodoxy) that was a serious attempt to restore the primacy of faith over reason in the

²⁰ Roger E. Olson, “What is Theological Liberalism,” Patheos.com, 2011.

²¹ Rudolf Bultmann, *Kerygma and Myth*.

theological debate. It originated in the existentialism of Soren Kierkegaard and promoted the concept of a “leap of faith” in regard to Christian belief. What made this “leap” different from previous understandings of faith was that it was not grounded in history, science, or other forms of objectivity and rationality. Grenz and Olson describe his view, “For Kierkegaard, because of human sinfulness and wholly otherness of God, God’s truth and human thought can never be smoothed out into a rational synthesis. Instead, the paradoxical truths of God’s self-revelation must be embraced by a leap of faith by the finite human mind.”²² It was an expression of the old cliché attributed to Tertullian (but which he didn’t actually say), “I believe it because it is absurd.” This new approach to faith was really fideism, and it was ultimately an act of surrender to the forces of the Enlightenment who were seen to be victorious in the battle between science and religion. It was nothing short of declaring faith to be an entirely irrational act.

Postmodernism

But this yields a further irony, the “forces of the Enlightenment,” which were empiricism and rationalism, had themselves been overthrown by Immanuel Kant and his critique of the power of unaided human reason to provide certain knowledge of ultimate reality. The enlightenment was determined to eliminate all forms of superstition, which, in their minds, included religious faith. In the process, however, they were forced by the limits of human existence to acknowledge the inadequacy of reason to provide answers to any of the ultimate questions. In the end, they were forced to admit that their “facts,” ostensibly obtained by reason, were really just beliefs, and that they were just as much in the dark as everyone else. As we entered the postmodern era, the most influential thinkers were neither men of faith nor of reason grounded in objective truth. For example, Sartre rejected Descartes’ famous rationalistic declaration, “I think therefore I am.”²³ He rejected this view because he saw consciousness (“I think”) as a secondary phenomenon, it is the *experience* of thinking rather than the objective thought. This is, of course, an example of Kant’s famous declaration that we do not know the “noumena” (the thing in itself) of something, but we only know “phenomena” (the experience of

²² Stanley J. Grenz & Roger E. Olson, *20th Century Theology: God & the World in a Transitional Age*, (Downers Grove: IVP, 1992), 67.

²³ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, (Simon and Schuster, 1956), x-xi. In the translator’s introduction, Hazel Barnes quotes from an article Sartre wrote in 1936 in which he takes issue with Descartes and Husserl over a “transcendental ego.”

the thing). Kant brought a fundamental suspicion regarding the capacity of human beings to know objective truth, and Sartre is expressing this same suspicion regarding the fundamental premise of rationalism; human thought's capacity to discover reality.

Deconstructionist War

It is this “suspicion” that lays behind the deconstructionist (Jacques Derrida) war against metaphysics. In Derrida's view, metaphysics is a tool of oppression used to force people into a cultural and moral mold²⁴. Thus he desires a world free from metaphysics (just as he desires a world free from many forms of moral restraint). As Nicholas Wolterstorff describes, “*Resistance and the dream of emancipation*: those are the moves of Derrida, the anti-metaphysician, caught in the web of metaphysics, knowing that he cannot escape but always struggling.”²⁵

But what is metaphysics? Is it not the objective reality of things? Metaphysics is the capacity to define and describe, and thus to be able to communicate with someone else the reality we both perceive. As Wolterstorff tells us, even Derrida can't get around the necessity of metaphysics to the very act of communicating. He recounts an interview with Derrida in which the interviewer asked him repeatedly to “discuss strategies for ‘escaping metaphysics’.” Wolterstorff writes, “Each time Derrida's answer was the same, ‘I do not believe, that someday it will be possible *simply* to escape metaphysics.’”²⁶ We find ourselves coming nearly full circle, as Derrida is confronted with the fact that things are not defined by the label we use to identify them, and that there is an objective nature to the things we encounter in the world.

A Time of Unprecedented Confusion

Nevertheless, in looking at the roles of faith and reason in today's world, we appear to be in a time of unprecedented confusion. Nominalism and empiricism turned the focus on our

²⁴ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text: The Bible, The Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge*, (Zondervan, 1998), 55.

²⁵ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the claim that God speaks*, (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 165.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 162.

immediate surroundings and on first-hand experience while implying suspicion concerning the eternal and the non-empirical. The Enlightenment agenda set out to end the use of faith in the pursuit of truth, but in their emphasis on rationalism, they failed to recognize the serious limits to the use of unaided human reason. The Apostle Paul was absolutely correct when he wrote, “For now we see through a glass darkly” (I Corinthians 13:12). Complete certainty in regard to knowledge is beyond even collective humanity. We believe things as much as we know them, and we all navigate through life on the basis of unexamined assumptions. Are we condemned, therefore, to the postmodern view that there are no ultimate answers (no metanarrative), and therefore no truth to guide our choices? And, because “truth” is merely a cultural construct, are we left with a power of reason that only operates within the confines of one’s culture and one’s personal experience?

Restoring the Role of Faith and Reason

Christians are reminded of Paul’s great declaration about the abuse of grace, “May it never be!” (Romans 6:2) In answering the concerns of postmodern philosophy, we must acknowledge that they have correctly understood that human reason is limited. It is just not as limited as they say it is. To put it simply, just because we can’t know everything does not mean that we can’t know anything. In spite of Kant’s distinction between noumena and phenomena, we are able to act and interact with the people and things in the world that surround us quite successfully. We may not know our world perfectly, but we certainly know it adequately. We rely on our senses and our reason to drive to work safely each day, to complete the relatively complex tasks required of our profession, and to communicate with co-workers, family, and friends. Not to overstate something, but on the level of our daily lives, we operate as objective realists. Whether we are conscious of the fact or not, we conduct our affairs in an objective reality that we perceive accurately and adequately. In doing so, we are clearly using our rational powers. It is part of what we do as human beings.

No Meta-narratives?

The second important contention of postmodern thought is that there are no meta-narratives. In other words, there is no overarching explanation for everything that applies to all

people of all times and places. Yet, in making that claim, these philosophers are attempting to describe the nature of all reality; they are, in essence, creating a metanarrative. And, further, they are incorrect in their original assertion. For there actually is a metanarrative: reality itself. Reality is that which is. It is not a cultural construct, every culture exists within it and must deal with the demands and consequences reality imposes. It exists in its current state, and is fully known to God alone. We, however, are a small part of the great cosmos, and we have access to and are aware of our small part of space and time. We are part of what can be described as “the known world,” in which all the Kantian provisos apply, and yet which does give us real, even if not complete, knowledge of this world in which we live. Further, it presents us with “hints” of what the larger reality that we do not have access to, is like. In many ways, the challenge we all encounter is the task of taking what we have learned about the known world and using this knowledge to decide on our beliefs (and even convictions) concerning the nature of the larger reality. Very few people go through this process intentionally or even consciously, but it describes the essence of how human beings form their basic values and convictions whether they do it individually or corporately.

This is the point where faith enters the equation. Christians recognize that God has shut all men into the necessity of faith. No one knows for certain, all of our knowledge is tentative, and we all draw inferences from the known to the unknown. All men face the great uncertainties of existence, and in the ideal, they are required to use the gift of reason, examining the world they can see, feel, and know (and included in that world is the Bible, the Church, and the active work of the Holy Spirit), to make a decision concerning what they believe about the unseen nature of reality. On the basis of that decision, they structure their lifestyle, values, and the priorities that shape the rest of their lives. All human beings go through this process.

Isaac Asimov

An atheist doesn't *know* that no God exists. He or she believes there is no God, and they base this belief on observations, experiences, and careful reasoning. Isaac Asimov, the well-known writer and popularizer of modern science, described his “conversion” to atheism,

I am an atheist out and out. It took me a long time to say it. I've been an atheist for years and years, but somehow I felt it was intellectually unrespectable to say that one was an atheist, because *it assumed knowledge that one didn't have*. Somehow it was better to say one was a humanist or an agnostic. I finally decided that I'm a creature of emotion as well as reason. Emotionally, I'm an atheist. I don't have the evidence to prove that God exists, but I so strongly suspect that he doesn't that I don't want to waste my time.²⁷

In making this decision, Asimov is taking a step of faith. He is taking what he considers to be the condition of the world in which he lives and using it to come to a settled conviction about the larger reality that is beyond his personal and empirical knowledge.

We all do something similar, it may not be as clearly stated or understood, but we all reason from the known to the unknown, and make a faith decision that has dramatic consequences for the direction and outcome of our lives. Whether secular or religious, we all live by faith in our chosen worldview and lifestyle. In the end, we demonstrate that we rely on reason and faith, and that the two cannot be separated. So, while the philosophers argued for a radical separation of faith and reason, we find that on the practical level, men live by both reason and faith.

Conclusion

The central question of this essay is the influence of nominalism on modern society. As we examined the development of this important idea on Western culture, we have noticed its increasing influence from at least the time of Aquinas. Today, it lies at the root of the empiricism and naturalism that dominates Western secular culture. The separation of church and state in our society is an expression of the secularist demand for the marginalization of religious faith as “anti-science,” and is nothing short of the claim by the forces of “reason” to have vanquished faith and banished it from the field of valid human endeavor. The medieval church fathers, such

²⁷ Isaac Asimov, *Free Inquiry* 2:2 (Spring 1982), 9, Emphasis mine.

as Ockham and Duns Scotus, who first coined the term, nominalism, were attempting to protect faith from the attacks of reason. In the end, they laid the path for its destruction.

But faith cannot be so easily undone. Taken to its extreme, nominalism has produced a profound skepticism regarding the traditional assumptions of human history and culture. If there are no great overarching universals, we are left with only the particulars. Worse, since even our “knowledge” of particulars is suspect, we are left with growing uncertainty. In today’s world this has left everything profoundly undefined. One example may be the replacement of an objective standard of truth by a subjective standard, so that men and women now define themselves by feelings and perceptions. And further, that we in the larger society accept those subjective perceptions as accurate reflections of who they are. In many ways this is an expression of the maxim attributed to Chesterton, “When a man stops believing in God he doesn’t then believe in nothing, he believes in anything.” The present condition of our society demonstrates the validity of this saying.

How can we restore some semblance of epistemological certainty in today’s world? As we have attempted to show in this article, we must again put reason and faith into their rightful places in the pursuit of knowledge. We must acknowledge that reason can only take us so far, and that the last step to span the gap of uncertainty requires faith. This act of faith produces results that are examined by reason and lead to confirmation of the choice we have taken and an even deeper sense of conviction. The faith and reason link is not linear, it is circular. It is a loop of evaluation, commitment, confirmation, and then conviction. Faith and reason are not at war, they are, in fact, necessary elements in the process of knowing. We simply have to learn how to use them correctly.

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