

Tom Rockmore
Fordham University

Science and Religion : Reason and Faith

The problem of the relation of science and religion is as important as it is complex, so as to make it difficult to approach more than a single aspect of this relation in a short paper. I have chosen here to concentrate on the relation in question in terms of the distinction between reason and faith, surely a significant aspect of the problem, although not necessarily the only one, yet peculiarly important since it is the central distinction in terms of which members of the modern philosophic tradition have tended to understand both the difference between science and religion as well as their own relation to both spheres. The point I wish to make is that viewed from the perspective of the modern philosophic tradition the attempt to make out an absolute distinction between reason and faith has not been successful, and that in consequence the philosophic grasp of its own relation to science requires further thought.

Historical note : The Greek and the Medieval Schools

In order to understand the problem to be dealt with here, some historical comments, albeit of a summary nature, may be helpful. Although the specific problem as such only emerges with the rise of philosophical theology in the Middle Ages, the problem is already present in a less definite form in the Greek tradition during the evolution of both science and philosophy from a religious background. The distinction between reason and faith is not, of course, a crucial one within the Greek tradition. The basic epistemological distinction of Greek philosophy is that between knowledge and opinion, although there is naturally a term for belief in ancient Greek. More precisely, in this part of the tradition a basic distinction is drawn between knowledge in the sense of a direct, intuitive grasp of reality as distinguished from mere opinion. For both Plato and Aristotle, opinion is

a lower form of knowledge if it is knowledge at all. But although the association between knowledge and science is made explicit, opinion is regarded not as characteristic of religion but rather as a defective form of knowledge.

Even if Greek philosophy asserts the identity between philosophy and science, the approach to the relation of science and religion in terms of the distinction between reason and faith does not arise earlier, but is in fact a product of the rise of philosophical theology. Many of the thinkers in this period were, of course, primarily theologians and only secondarily philosophers. But often, indeed frequently, the theological views advanced had important philosophical echoes.

Now a basic thrust throughout this period lies in the concern to argue for a distinct religious province not directly accessible through reason, but only from the perspective of faith. The concern is not, of course, to suggest that reason is unnecessary as such. Nor can it correctly be regarded as a desire to dispense with reason altogether since, obviously, reason is also necessary within the peculiarly theological sphere. Rather it is an attempt to make the difficult point that all reality is not accessible to reason unaided since at least in the theological realm reason must be subordinated to faith.

This argument is made in different ways by numerous writers of this period. A central statement is given by Anselm in the famous *credo ut intelligam* which, far from dismissing reason, requires it to cast its light on matters already believed through faith; but which could only be understood by virtue of already having been accepted. The origin of this doctrine lies, of course, in the Bible (Is. vii, 9, lxx "Unless you believe you shall not understand"; see also Joh. Ev. xi, 9), although Anselm is, to be sure, strongly influenced by Augustine's doctrine of *fides quaerens intellectum*.¹ This doctrine further has the general epistemological significance that beyond the realm of theology, for which faith's relevance is clear, knowledge as such is in some signal sense dependent upon faith as a necessary condition thereof although elsewhere Augustine seems to restrict the role of faith solely to theological matters.

1. *De Trinitate* IX, i, 1, in E. Przywara, ed., *An Augustin Synthesis* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1936), p. 63

A much more elaborate, basically similar, but finally different doctrine is advanced by Thomas Aquinas. Faith is defined by him as a mean between science and opinion, although he is explicit that faith cannot occur with regard to a false opinion. His view resembles Augustine's in the insistence on faith as a condition of knowledge, but surpasses his predecessor's in the relatively clear epistemological assertion of the priority of faith over reason or understanding both within and without the theological realm. Significantly in a reply to an objection concerning the relation of faith to science, in particular the Augustinian claim that faith is strengthened by science, Aquinas emphasizes that although science and understanding provide greater clearness than faith, the certainty which they afford is ultimately guaranteed by that of faith.² In other words, the results of the natural light of reason are lower than and dependent upon God's gift of faith.

If we pause for a moment, we can assess the change in the intellectual archeology wrought by the introduction for theological purposes of the concept of faith primarily in order to protect the claim to a specifically theological domain. The original problem, to wit the defence of the realm of theology as accessible only through faith, and hence not directly open to reason, gave rise to the doctrine that reason, at least in this realm, is dependent on faith. This doctrine culminates in the Thomist view that faith and reason cannot conflict, a doctrine which draws between them a distinction in kind, not of degree. The significance of this further development can be seen with regard to the earlier Greek view, to which it issues a significant epistemological challenge. Faith is, in the first place, no longer to be grasped as a lower form of reason, from which it differs in kind. Secondly, reason, which in the Greek view, was wholly self-demonstrating, for instance in the Platonic claim that reality could be directly intuited after sufficient preparation, loses its independent status and becomes dependent on faith and, ultimately, upon God. The result, from an epistemological perspective, of the theological defence of the peculiar nature of its domain is ultimately to demote reason, which accordingly becomes parasitic upon faith, even as science, the realm of the function of natural reason, is distinct from and lower than theology known through faith.

2. *Summa Theologica*, Q. 4, Art 8, Reply to Obj. 3

The Modern Period and the tilt to Reason

The discussion so far has merely set the stage for consideration of the relation of science and religion, as understood in the modern portion of the philosophical tradition. The transition from the Middle Ages to the so-called modern philosophy is much more complex than is commonly understood. Although there are significant changes, there is also and necessarily a significant degree of continuity. This point has well been made by Gilson and others with respect to Descartes, whose view has often, but misleadingly, been said to usher in the modern philosophical age, through the justified insistence on Jansenist, indeed clearly Augustinian elements in the Cartesian position. In fact, the continuity which underlies change seems to be a necessary, and not a contingent factor in the history of philosophy. For inasmuch as western philosophy is basically Platonic in inspiration, it is difficult and perhaps not possible to cast off the shackles of the Platonic mode of thought and still remain within the philosophical purview. This is, as I take it, a point well illustrated recently by the move of Heidegger's position, in its post-*Kehre* period, away from transcendental thought and not, incidentally, towards poetry.

The inability of philosophy to free itself from its past is nowhere more in evidence than in the modern attention to the relation of religion and science. If, for present purposes, we view the modern period as beginning with Descartes, if not with G.E. Moore (!), thereby ignoring such significant figures as Bayle, we can see that in many ways modern philosophy can be regarded as an endeavour, whose success is highly questionable, to deny the kind of reconceptualization of the relation of science and religion undertaken in the Middle Ages through a defence of reason alone as distinguished from faith. Typical of this whole period, which has not yet been brought to a close, and whose end is indeed, despite recent proclamations of the end of philosophy from highly diverse quarters, not as yet visible on the horizon, is the claim that reason, viewed as distinct from and even opposed to faith, is entirely self-justifying.

From within the philosophical tradition, the concept of science has been understood in this period in two largely divergent ways. There is, to begin with, the view that science is the only legitimate source of knowledge. This view, which draws support from the rise of

modern natural science in the seventeenth century, has many defenders both within the scientific community and surprisingly enough among philosophers, who are not known for their masochistic penchant. Scientists have often, routinely, and uncritically viewed science, as distinguished from philosophy, as possessing a monopoly on reason with respect to knowledge. An attitude of this kind can be represented by Newton's celebrated claim to dispense with hypothesis, an infinitely stronger assertion than the more cautious form in which Galileo, upon whose shoulders Newton presumably stood, and indeed claimed to stand, had couched the new scientific world-view. The problem with this approach, as Husserl has aptly pointed out, is that it is objectivistic, or inherently self-uncritical. Nonetheless, it is widely represented by philosophers as well who in various ways have attempted to deny the philosophical claim to provide knowledge. Examples are the attack on metaphysics in the last two centuries, whether in Comte's *philosophie positive*, on the part of Carnap or Ayer, in Sellars's stress on the scientific view of man, in Nowell-Smith's denial of the intrinsic moral content of ethical discourse, or in Rorty's recent claim that philosophy is merely the educated conversation of mankind.

The doctrine that science is the sole source of knowledge and the unique province of reason involves a denial that religion is either intrinsically rational or possessed of knowledge, whatever the personal belief of those who propose it. But beyond the surprising state of mind which this doctrine reveals, which indeed says much about the philosophical self-image, this view is not, I submit, philosophically very interesting. An analogous kind of scepticism is, to be sure, widely current in the philosophical tradition, as early as the Socratic claim to the effect that he knows only that he knows nothing. But the modern revival of this claim is doubly unsatisfactory. For even if the despair as to whether philosophy can provide knowledge at all can be grasped as a psychological attitude, it can hardly be regarded as a conclusion. Indeed, an argument adequate to support this conclusion has never been presented. Nor is it at all clear on what basis the point could be urged, if philosophy is not an intrinsically rational enterprise, that from the philosophical perspective we know only that the scientist knows. Far more compelling is the other view of science present in the modern portion of the philosophical tradition, to wit, the contention that philosophy is science in virtue of its possession of reason, as distinguished from faith.

This view is so widely present in the modern tradition that there is a veritable overabundance of examples which might be cited. The opposition between reason and faith in virtue of which philosophy is held to be science in a quasi-Platonic sense has been stressed many a time and on many occasions. Clearly Descartes' aim, as stated in the programmatic *Discourse* and as developed in the *Meditations* is to advance a position which, based on an initial indubitable principle, an Archimedean point or *fundamentum inconcursum*, provides for the deduction of a wholly demonstrable science, a science therefore not subject to any form of relativity, including that of forms of belief. In his transcendental analysis, Kant, as is well-known, insisted on the need for the demonstration of the conditions of the possibility of knowledge whatsoever on an *a-priori* plane, although he, as he states (B xxx) limited knowledge (*Wissen*) in order to make room for faith. The latter, it follows from this reasoning, lies in the province of hope, not that of knowledge, which is, by definition in the critical philosophy, limited to that which can be the object of experience. Hegel, to take a third example is perhaps closest to the Thomistic position in that faith is the form of knowledge which does not provide for the possibility of achieving a fully definite perception (*"nicht zu einer bestimmten Vorstellung fortgehen..."* *Enz.*, 573, *Zusatz*). He however insists often and at length that art as a form of representation and religion as a source of intuitive knowledge are merely prior stages to fully philosophical, namely, fully conceptual, knowledge attainable only on the plane of scientific or, what is the same thing philosophic reason (*Vernunft*).

In spite of the genuine diversity of positions in the modern philosophical tradition, it is not difficult to detect a central view of reason. Perhaps the best description is that offered by the poet Heinrich Heine, a student of Hegel and friend of Marx. In a remarkable book, *Religion and Philosophie in Deutschland*, written immediately after Hegel's death, he describes German idealism as the natural consequence of the rationalist emphasis on protestantist thought. Even if Heine is here considering German idealism only, his point concerning the stress on reason as opposed to faith as characteristic of modern German thought is descriptive of modern philosophy in general, including Descartes, as already noted, and in a related sense for empiricism as well. Even if Locke insists uncharacteristically on the apodicticity of faith. (*Essay*, BK IV, chapter 18), the thrust of his empiricist view is that all

knowledge must be due ultimately to sensory experience which, accordingly denies the epistemological value of revelation and, as a consequence, the cognitive role of faith. Indeed, precisely this point is stressed by Hume, whose opposition to religion is based on the view that its dependence on faith precludes its appeal to reason.

So far I have suggested that the modern view of philosophy as science and hence as superior to religion, in effect a denial of the religious view of theology as science, rests upon the distinction between reason as fully self-justifying and hence independent of faith on the one hand and faith on the other. I have further suggested that although from the theological perspective faith and reason have often not been viewed as mutually exclusive at all, in philosophy the very enterprise was often and indeed mainly understood as defined by the capacity to make out the distinction between reason and faith by virtue of which philosophy could be said to render legitimate its aspirations to be science and hence surpass religion. It remains now to cast doubt on the success with which philosophical reason has been able to justify this distinction, not through a general examination of the possibility, but rather through an examination of the kinds of strategy which have been advanced in the modern tradition, in order to know solely through reason alone as distinct from the revelation of faith.

The Epistemological Strategies

In order to make this point, I shall examine four of the more prominent epistemological strategies advanced in the modern tradition: those of Descartes and Locke, and of Kant and Hegel. There could be other candidates, but these seem to me to be the main ones. Now knowledge, it is clear, requires at the very least two terms: a subject which knows and an object which is known. Although there may be disagreement about the role of the subject and about the status of the object in respect to it, it does not seem possible to provide an epistemological theory which avoids the subject-object problem. If taken as a complete description, this is of course an oversimplification, since a number of thinkers introduce at least one other term, namely, the idea or impression of sensation, which mediates the relation between subjectivity and objectivity or thought and being. But whether or not the problem of knowledge can be grasped solely in terms of the relation of thought and being or whether additional terms must be brought

in, it is clear that any epistemological view, and in practice the four to be considered here, must rely in a fundamental manner on an interpretation of the relation of subjectivity and objectivity in order to make out the claim of philosophical reason, as distinguished from faith, to self-sufficiency.

Let us begin this rapid survey of the modern endeavour to distinguish reason from faith through a brief glance at the strategy proposed by Descartes. His famous distinction between thought and being, which generated the equally well-known problem of the relation of mind and body, is also responsible for the more general epistemological difficulty as to how to proceed from subjectivity to objectivity. This difficulty must be resolved in order that knowledge may be possible on merely rational grounds. Descartes' argument, however, is vitiated by its inherent circularity, as has often been noted. In this respect, Husserl was doubtless correct to suggest that once one retreats to the *cogito*, there is no possibility of ever returning to the world, so the very attempt is ill-advised. But since Husserl's own analysis is unable to overcome the problem of solipsism which arises if the problem of knowledge is necessarily to be undertaken from the vantage point of the isolated mind, in this crucial respect he does not go beyond Descartes. In a word, the epistemological path which was to proceed from thought to being seems not to have proven fruitful since the adequacy of the former to the latter cannot be demonstrated from the perspective of thought alone.

The empirical reaction to Descartes which originates in Locke can be fairly regarded as an attempt to reverse the strategy he employed, more precisely as an epistemological argument from being to thought. In Locke's view since the mind cannot create *de novo* all ideas are ultimately and necessarily derived from sensory experience. This approach partially resolves the Cartesian problem of the relation of subjectivity and objectivity, since the contents of consciousness adequately provide for the existence of external objectivity, indeed by definition. But the positive argument does not, as Locke admits, go further since within this theory the precise relation of primary and secondary qualities, which must be known in order that these should be knowledge, cannot be demonstrated. In that sense, Hume's later attack on causality in order to undermine the possibility of knowledge of matters of fact from a sceptical point of view merely draws the

conclusion already contained in Locke's analysis of perception. Nor do I believe that this problem has been ameliorated by subsequent sophisticated reconstruction of the empiricist argument, through the introduction of criteriology, the analysis of illusions and delusions, or theories of phenomenalism. Otherwise stated, the strategy which proceeds from objectivity to subjectivity is in principle insufficient, as Hume proved and Locke implied, to provide for knowledge.

The common presupposition, shared by both the Cartesian *a-priori* and the Lockean empiricist *a-posteriori* forms of epistemology is that knowledge or subjectivity must conform to objectivity. This strategy is radically denied in the Kantian view that objectivity must conform to knowledge. This suggestion, which is the conceptual heart of the famous Copernican Revolution, resulted in practice in a highly complex, transcendental analysis of the conditions of the possibility of knowledge whatsoever. Kant's ingenious strategy for making objectivity parasitic on subjectivity is highly controversial. The price he pays for the solution to the problem posed by Descartes, to wit, the condition which must be fulfilled if thought is to know being, is make the subject in some sense constitute its object. It would be out of place to consider in detail here the numerous objections which have been raised against the critical philosophy. We can note that, according to Kant, the so-called Copernican Revolution is not proposed as a description of what in fact occurs; rather, it is a hypothesis whose supposition permits us to advance beyond that point reached in terms of the adoption of a basically different epistemological strategy. Now the condition of the demonstration of the truth of this strategy is an indirect proof to be carried out through the elimination of all other possibilities. Kant, it should be observed, thought that condition could easily be met since, in his view, inspection of the history of philosophy since Descartes was sufficient to reveal the failure of the only other alternative to the critical philosophy. In fact, not only was he unable to demonstrate that there were no other possibilities, but the later course of the tradition has in fact shown, beyond much repetition, other alternatives. It follows that in a strict sense, even if we were to accept the critical philosophy as correct it could at most be said to prove the conditions of the possibility of knowledge, but not its actuality. The critical philosophy cannot therefore be said to solve the problem of the relation of thought and being despite its advance on earlier attempts.

The Hegelian Shift

Hegel moves beyond the critical philosophy in his own much maligned, but also much misunderstood *Identitätsphilosophie*. The basic concept of this view can be summarized as the claim that knowledge requires an identity of subject and object or thought and being as its very condition, but which can be demonstrated only through the inherent circularity of the knowing process. The decision to base the process of knowledge upon a primitive identity had already been anticipated in Schelling and Spinoza, not to mention Aristotle. The novelty in Hegel's position is his reliance, in a brilliant inversion of Fichte's argument against the quasi-rationalist foundationalism prevalent in post-Kantian idealism, on circularity as providing a foundation for theory in a new sense. If we compare this argument with that of Kant, the obvious advantage which accrues to Hegel is that through the appeal to circularity, to wit, the self-developing character of the theory through which it progressively demonstrates its relation to objectivity and its internal coherence, Hegel is able to account for the real, as opposed to the possible relation of subject and object. He thus surpasses his predecessor in terms of a final resolution of the problem posed by the Cartesian distinction between subjectivity and objectivity. On the contrary, in renouncing any concern to provide an external ground for theory, which would, in his terms, be an endeavour at philosophizing prior to entering upon philosophy, Hegel embarks on a form of "pragmatism" which, unable to justify itself *a-priori*, must finally appeal to faith in reason. Thus if he can be said to resolve the Cartesian problem by explaining an ontological relation as the basis of epistemology, it is at the cost of being unable to provide, other than through a quasi-phenomenological account of reason at work, a rigorous justification of its claims to know.

Although all too brief, this rapid review of the four leading alternatives in the modern philosophical tradition is highly instructive as regards the attempt to make out the distinction between reason and faith. I have argued that in the modern tradition, the attempt to defend the concept of reason in independence from that of faith, which is a basic concern in this portion of the history of philosophy, rests on the correct analysis of the relation between subjectivity and objectivity, initially distinguished by Descartes. I have further asserted that in fact we can detect a progression in terms of the development of modern philosophy as regards the treatment of the problem raised by Descartes.

But when we consider the basic strategies employed, all the attempts to analyse the relation of subjectivity and objectivity are substantively flawed, with the possible exception of Hegel's. But even if we accept Hegel's view of the relation of thought and being as correct, and I stress that this has not been shown nor was it my purpose to do so, as a defence of reason his position in fact fails since ultimately the claim that thought knows being cannot be demonstrated but is merely asserted.

At this point, we can draw a series of conclusions, both as regards the defence of the concept of reason central to the modern portion of the philosophical tradition, and also the equally important relation between science and religion dependent upon it. The claim that philosophy is in fact science and hence differs from religion depends on the capacity to defend the distinction between reason and faith. Our analysis has, however, shown that the distinction cannot be made out in any absolute manner. This result can be formulated now in three inter-related propositions, without further development, as follows: (i) the distinction between reason and faith is not an exclusive alternative; (ii) reason is not self-contained; (iii) reason requires faith, to wit, faith in reason.

At this point, two remarks should be made. In the first place, it must be conceded that I have not shown that an absolute defence of reason is not possible whatsoever. At best, I have merely demonstrated that the best attempts in the modern philosophic tradition to perform this task have been unavailing. Secondly, if, as I suspect the attainment of this goal is central to the concern of modern philosophy's endeavour to distinguish itself from the medieval philosophical tradition, the failure to make out this distinction in an absolute sense has the consequence of blurring the difference between these portions of the history of philosophy.

The inability to make out an absolute distinction between reason and faith has important consequences for the grasp of the relation between science and religion. This relation is, of course, highly complex. From the perspective of philosophy, which interests us here, the modern claim of philosophy in fact to be science sought support in the supposition that reason was its sole appanage. This belief, for instance, underlies the Enlightenment desire, from the point of view of reason, to abolish the claims of faith. But if, as seems to be the

case, reason cannot sustain itself in isolation from faith, since it cannot dispense with faith in reason, then it follows that to the extent that science and religion can be identified, respectively, with reason and faith, an absolute distinction between them cannot be drawn. In a word, a further consequence of the inability to make out the distinction between reason and faith is to blur the distinction between science and religion, a distinction constitutive of the self-image of the modern philosophic tradition.