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BA (Hons) Philosophy
and the Catholic
Tradition:
Introduction to
Philosophy.

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(2750 words)

“In order to live the Gospel and share it with others we don’t need philosophy.” Evaluate this statement in the light of what is said in the Introduction and Chapters 1 to 3 of Fides et Ratio.

Introduction:

In this essay I shall evaluate the viewpoint stated above by reflecting on the following themes which emerge from John Paul II’s encyclical, namely:

1. Philosophy and Culture
2. Everyone Is A Philosopher
3. The Capacity For Wonder
4. The Dignity of Human Relationships
5. Philosophy Serves Faith
6. Philosophy’s Limitations
7. Seeking and Finding Truth

Let us reflect on how he presents philosophy to us in the first three chapters.

Philosophy and Culture

From the introduction to *Fides et Ratio*, we can see that philosophy plays a large role in forming human culture. A faith does not exist within a vacuum, but within the culture of the day. The Gospel is expressed in the humanity of our lives in language and symbolism, the environment that everyone relates through.

When our philosophy is genuinely focused, it can positively influence the medium in which we live the Gospel ourselves and through which we communicate it to others. The Gospel, often appearing counter-cultural, is in the world, though not of it.

According to John Paul II, the early books of the Bible clearly show God's people making sense of their history by analysing the realities of their experiences and gaining faith through them: "...faith and reason cannot be separated without diminishing the capacity of men and women to know themselves, the world and God in an appropriate way".¹

Over the fullness of time we can track the journey that rational man has made and use this knowledge to inspire us to continue and finally complete the redemptive mission entrusted to the Church by Christ.

So philosophy is needed for an awareness of who we are as a people of culture and of benefit when "inculturating" the Gospel message to others.

Everyone Is a Philosopher

Philosophy, the pursuit of truth without relying on faith, presents itself in every culture. All people share in philosophy, but not everyone has a faith.

The story of philosophy illustrates the value of dialogue across many cultures and eras. The omnipresent search for meaning is a desire to realise the authentic nature of the person and a refusal of mankind to drift into a numb faceless crowd.

The Church knows we all face the certainty of our own life and death and are filled with a desire to understand our destiny.² From a faith perspective, *ratio* is a method of awakening to one's own vocation to be truly human and fully relate to one's maker. Therefore, philosophy is not an exclusive academic preserve of the learned, but practised by everyone whether they know it or not.

¹ JOHN PAUL II, *Fides et Ratio* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1998) para. 16

² JOHN PAUL II, *Fides et Ratio*, para. 26

The Capacity for Wonder

One of the unique traits of human life is our capacity for wonder – we are fascinated by the world and ourselves. As stated by Aristotle, “philosophy begins in wonder”.³ John Paul II believes the primacy of this philosophical enquiry is most important⁴ – pursuing our curiosity makes us authentic beings who do not shy away from the wonderful gift of life. We hope to improve the way we live life through reflection, a vital tool for discerning if we are truly living the Gospel and sharing its message. It follows that philosophy is a good thing in acting as an outlet for our sense of wonder and can actually direct us beyond its initial focus.

This sense of wonder is not limited to philosophy, it shares common ground with our experience of God in our worship. The reader may consider the Psalmist finding traces of God in His creation (Psalms 8, 19) or their own moments of inspiration thanks to the beauty of the earth or complexity of mankind. Even if we only use sensible data, we can still find intimacy with our invisible God. The Second Vatican Council’s Constitution *Dei Verbum* had the intention of “understanding faith” and “reflecting on Revelation”⁵ – this contemplation is really a beholding and enjoyment of God’s presence in his wisdom and truth and so examination is an integral part of our faith. Enquiry and wonder belong equally to both faith and reason. If they share such common ground, surely they must be compatible partners.

The Dignity of Human Relationships

Philosophers such as Augustine (354-430 AD) and Boethius (482-525 AD) have highlighted the importance of the human being as a **person**. St Thomas Aquinas also underlines the dignity of the human being in his Commentary on The Sentences and later again throughout the *Summa Theologia*, as a **rational being** in relationship with others. Since people have an intrinsic worth, this has an important

³ ARISTOTLE, *Metaphysics* 982 b12

⁴ JOHN PAUL II, *Fides et Ratio*, para. 4

⁵ JOHN PAUL II, *Fides et Ratio*, para. 8

impact on our duty to care for others, especially in moral and ultimate matters. This personalism suggests that sharing the Gospel with others is as crucial as living it yourself.

In *Fides et Ratio*, we have a keen emphasis on the value of the human person as a being in relationship with others. This communion is at the core of the Church's faith (Mt. 18:20, Ecc. 4:9-12, Acts 1:13-15). Even our powers of reason depend heavily on other people: our wisdom is influenced by our relationships with those around us: "Human beings are not made to live alone...the *one who seeks truth* is also the one who *lives by belief*."⁶

Here, the message is that faith and reason are so closely related that we cannot effectively have one without the other. Our imperfect knowledge, taken on trust, is slowly perfected through time and experience. We develop the capacity to commit oneself to others in a faithful self-giving way.⁷ It is fitting then that God's people have often seen wisdom personified through the ages and today the Church proclaims the Truth as a person, Jesus Christ. We now have a clearer picture of what has been achieved by the redemption of mankind – it has been restored to its true dignity and the value of truth itself has been reinstated. Since the truth has been revealed as a person, it deserves not just an awareness of it but a relationship with it: a full entrusting of oneself to the person of truth. This type of relationship is uniquely human and highlights the dignity of Christ's human nature and ours.

When we consider the etymology of the word philosophy, the *love of wisdom* is very evident in books like Proverbs, Job etc. In the New Testament, the wisdom that man sought is completely revealed in Jesus, who presents Himself to be loved. We discover that wisdom, the Word, loves us in return and also entrusts Himself to us.

We are made in the image of God, who himself holds love, truth and wisdom in high esteem. He is a seeker too in His relationship with us, searching after us in Eden and sending His son (John 3:16-17). We imitate that nature in our human searching and exploring, being unique among all creation in having our own reasoning. Like God, we possess both intellect and will. To limit any of our spiritual parts (such as reasoning) is to belittle who we are made to be and the Creator who made us, reducing the fullness of our relationship with Him. A faith that frowns upon reason is therefore a poorer relative of the one that is fully rational and holistic.

⁶ JOHN PAUL II, *Fides et Ratio* para. 31

⁷ JOHN PAUL II, *Fides et Ratio* para. 33

Grace builds on nature and our human nature is the soil in which the seed of grace is planted – we most closely imitate Christ when we express both our earthly character and our God-given heavenly nature as children of God. The Church professes that this personal dignity is a vital concept for people to appreciate so that they may be truly alive to their own worth and that of others: “Awake O man and recognise the dignity of your nature. Remember that you were created in the image of God.”⁸

The various forms of existentialism also trace the presence of truth in the minutiae of daily human life, encouraging us to embrace it. This is mirrored by the way God shows us His great truth via the incarnation (the truth with a recognisable human face) and in the everyday parables that the Word-made-Flesh told himself.

Philosophy Serves Faith

The lessons learned from philosophy have often proven useful in further understanding our faith.

The first principles contemplated by philosophy provide a useful common ground for all people to share – the postulates of international legal systems being an example (heavily influenced by Thomist moral ethics).⁹ What begins as moral ethics soon blossoms into “life in the Spirit” (Rom. 8:5-11).

This truth that reason can discover is not contradictory to the truth revealed by faith alone – as they are both true they complement and support each other. In other words, our rational truth can inform and rationalise our faith, both for personal edification (living the Gospel) and evangelisation (sharing it with others). As Thomas Aquinas examined the philosophical virtues, he found that they ran parallel to the gifts of the Holy Spirit and in fact, were perfected by them: “*gratia non tollit, sed perficit naturam*”.¹⁰ Here, philosophy begins to offer virtue but soon finds itself out of its depth until revealed truth takes the reasoned truth to a level higher than purely human nature. As grace builds on nature, faith builds on

⁸ LEO, Sermon XXVII on The Feast of The Nativity VII, part VI

⁹ JOHN PAUL II, *Fides et Ratio* para. 3

¹⁰ AQUINAS, Thomas. *II Sent.* D.9 q.1a. 8 arg. 3

reason. Reason is the servant to faith; a servant is important to the master's success, yet without a master it is aimless.¹¹

The power of reason can be effectively used to challenge erroneous articles of faith which are irrational. It can also be used to reinforce articles of faith which some believers may find difficult to accept, but are incredibly logical when examined. This suspicion of the truth is referred to by John Paul II himself¹² and can be relieved with the prudent use of philosophy. A key aspect of sharing our faith is the confidence we have in the absolute truth and man's capacity to recognise and grasp it. In unsure times, people desperately seek certainty. The church ought to provide the truth it has with this same certainty and our gift of reason can be a powerfully persuasive weapon for some.

We can encourage and build up the faith community by educating them from a human perspective while they are being blessed with faith from a heavenly perspective. Examples already exist in Church history eg: the metaphysical terms of form and matter shedding new light on transubstantiation and the concept of personhood revealing the Trinitarian mystery.

The Church clearly sees philosophy as: "the way to come to know fundamental truths about human life... and **an indispensable help** for a deeper understanding of faith and for communicating the truth of the Gospel to those who do not yet know it".¹³

Therefore philosophy may be a valuable aid for:

- (a) Atheists – in realising more authentic lives and beginning the path to a greater truth,
- (b) Agnostics – for clearly explaining theological principles on a common ground,
- (c) Believers – for rationalising and consolidating a heart-felt faith received as a gracious gift.

This should be qualified with the following caveat: with a misguided philosophy, we can neglect our full human nature if we become too self-centred and make it an idol in God's place.

¹¹ Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith *Dei Filius*, III: DS 3008

¹² JOHN PAUL II, *Fides et Ratio* para. 5

¹³ JOHN PAUL II, *Fides et Ratio* para. 5

Philosophy's Limitations

The human sense that an answer can be arrived at leads us on the first step of a long journey. The answers that reason alone can provide are valuable tools for human life here and now, but not for eternal life. The faith-received answers will be the only ones that remain.¹⁴

Philosophy's failure to arrive at a complete answer points to the need to look beyond ourselves, as Aquinas said, a "preamble to faith".¹⁵ This isn't a failure but a lesson in itself, a conclusion not possible without the benefit of philosophy to begin with. The lack of **the** answer does not mean the lack of **an** answer: the certain unknown is as important as the known. The full truth about man transcends him and requires a lifting up of his gaze, but some philosophical systems are too self-aware and not aware enough of the presence of the other.¹⁶ When our intellect is closed to the transcendent, we cannot embrace the full mystery of human life; we only fleetingly grasp incomplete partial truths.

Faith is the pursuit of God without being limited by imperfect human reason. Reason alone can see part of the whole, whereas faith backed-up by reason sees both reason's part of the whole and the remainder of the whole. Consider the image of a tugboat for philosophy along the faith journey. A heavy cruise ship benefits from the exploring start offered by the tugboat but can't rely on it for a full journey across open seas. However, without the short journey out of the port (the first questions) the long voyage would never begin (reaching revelation in the fullness of time).

Seeking and Finding Truth

The *fides* that the Church professes is Christ Himself. Human questions have their complete answer in God alone. The knowledge that the Church holds is both rational (discerned by people as per the teachings of Christ) and unreasoned (divinely received). The received wisdom perfects the reasoned. The vision of Aquinas at the end of his life caused him to reflect on all he had written as mere straw in

¹⁴ JOHN PAUL II, *Fides et Ratio* paras. 5, 9

¹⁵ ARRINGTON, Robert L (ed.). *The World's Great Philosophers*. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing) 2003 p.2

¹⁶ JOHN PAUL II, *Fides et Ratio* para. 5

comparison to his received wisdom from God.¹⁷ Yet all his reasoned truth was not contradicted by his revelation, simply overwhelmed by it. The received truth would be otherwise unknown were it not for the absolutely free gift of God, being beyond our senses and reasoning powers. *Fides et Ratio*, like the Church and humanity itself, struggles to find the truth while simultaneously revealing it. Jesus, being fully human, shared the same experience of discerning and witnessing together.

Reason did not trigger Revelation, the latter occurred first and began to stir the human mind. Yet pride in our own reason can blind us to the God-given knowledge around us in creation and most strikingly upon the cross. If our pride can overcome the apparent “folly” of the cross then our reason is liberated by faith, redeemed from its own selfish prison.¹⁸ The message of the Passion and Resurrection informs our experience of common inevitable facts of life (suffering, despair, injustice and death). The revelation of Christ crucified and risen is the intersection of faith and reason, where great misunderstanding or great faith can be discovered, according to the disposition of the person who comes there.¹⁹

The universal nature of God’s absolute truth is that it offers the ultimate answer to end all of mankind’s searching. Without this revealed love of God our first questions would have unfulfilled answers, but now they are satisfied in full by a truth we have freely received, rather than reasoned out. Philosophy alone cannot offer this gift.

Conclusion:

In order to live the Gospel and share it with others we do need philosophy. We need a reason that is open to divine wisdom and not confined to human reckoning. Our response is a conscious and willing decision to live for God. We must use our capacity for wonder and desire to find truth as the starting blocks for our marathon of faith.

In being reasonable about our faith, we can be faithful to the God who made us rational beings.

¹⁷ <http://www.philosophyofreligion.info/whos-who/historic-figures/st-thomas-aquinas>

¹⁸ JOHN PAUL II, *Fides et Ratio* para. 22

¹⁹ JOHN PAUL II, *Fides et Ratio* para. 23

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