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Justin Cerniello

Human Reason Allows Faith

The question of are faith and reason compatible has been argued over extensively. Those who claim that the two are not compatible are often hung up on the things that we cannot understand, causing them to think faith is irrational. They say that faith and reason can never be used together because one will always push away the other. In this paper, by analyzing Augustine's *Confessions*, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Contra Gentiles* I will show that the exact opposite is actually the case. All three of these authors exemplify how it is nearly impossible to fully turn towards God without using reason in collaboration with faith. They also provide a simple and logical reason for why we cannot understand everything; they show that humans are not divine, so humans can't fully understand divine concepts. Augustine, Dante, and Aquinas demonstrate how reason is essential in finding and turning to God, therefore they all represent the third claim of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition which states that faith and reason are compatible.

In Augustine's *Confessions* one can see what happens when one doesn't use their reason in combination with their faith, and what happens when they do. Like so many people today Augustine, before his conversion, was turned away from faith by things he could not understand. He was so distracted by them that he didn't apply his reason and faith together to the scriptures he was reading, he just wrote them off as irrational and untrue. This is seen when Augustine says

“I had been rash and impious in that I had spoken in condemnation of things which I should have learned more truly of by inquiry. . . Thus I was ignorant how this image of Yours could be; but I should have knocked at the door and proposed the question how it was to be believed, and not jeeringly opposed it as if it were believed in this or that particular way”(Book 6:5). If Augustine never used his reason and faith with each other, he would have never realized this and gone on the rest of his life opposing the bible. It is only when he uses them together that he is able to turn to God. It let him see that since we are not divine human reason can only take us so far, but it is still essential in growing and maintaining one’s faith as more concepts we can’t understand arise. Augustine makes this clear when he says “This, since men had not the strength to discover the truth by pure reason and therefore we needed the authority of the Holy Writ. . . . I saw that many passages in these books, which had at one time struck me as absurdities, must be referred to the profundity of mystery. . . . It was at once a book that all could read and read easily, and yet preserved the majesty of its mystery in the deepest part of its meaning: for it offers itself to all in the plainest words and the simplest expressions, yet demands the closest attention of the most serious minds”(Book 6:8). Augustine is a perfect example of how one needs to use both reason and faith in order to turn to God.

Saint Thomas Aquinas has been one of, if not the most influential person in showing that faith and reason are compatible. In the *Summa Contra Gentiles* this was his main goal. Aquinas demonstrates how we are to make sense of divine concepts and how we need reason to find and turn to God in the first place. He starts by logically showing why we, as humans, cannot fully comprehend everything about God. His explanation is extremely powerful in showing that just because our reason does not allow us to know everything, it doesn’t mean that faith and reason

are not compatible. He first acknowledges that there is a “twofold mode of truth” regarding God. This twofold mode is that “Some truths about God exceed all the ability of the human reason. Such is the truth that God is triune. But there are some truths which the natural reason also is able to reach. Such are that God exists, that He is one, and the like”(Chapter 3:2). He goes on to explain why exactly these truths surpass human reason. The core of his clarification is that all human knowledge is derived from tangible things that we can observe and, on Earth at least, God is not something that we can explicitly observe. Aquinas says “the principle of all knowledge that the reason perceives about some thing is the understanding of the very substance of that being. . . . Hence, if the human intellect comprehends the substance of some thing, for example, that of a stone or of a triangle, no intelligible characteristic belonging to that thing surpasses the grasp of the human reason”(Chapter 3:3). This does not happen when it comes to God though because “the intellect depends on the sense for the origin of knowledge; and so those things that do not fall under the senses cannot be grasped by the human intellect except in so far as the knowledge of them is gathered from sensible things”(Chapter 3:3). And thus human can reason only take us so far before it is simply impossible to conceptualize anything more; he says “beginning with sensible things, our intellect is led to the point of knowing about God that He exists. . . . There are, consequently, some intelligible truths about God that are open to the human reason; but there are others that absolutely surpass its power”(Chapter 3:3). Later in the book Aquinas illustrates why we have the ability to reason. In doing so he does not just show that faith and reason are compatible, he makes it clear that without reason we would never be able to find God in the first place. He says “That is why it was necessary for the human mind to be called to something higher than the human reason here and now can reach, so that it would thus learn to

desire something and with zeal tend towards something that surpasses the whole state of the present life”(Chapter 5:2). We need it to see that there is something beyond our Earthly desires and that in comparison, these desires are meaningless; “Following this same direction, the philosophers themselves, in order that they might lead men from the pleasure of sensible things to virtue, were concerned to show that there were in existence other goods of a higher nature than these things of sense, and that those who gave themselves to the active or contemplative virtues would find much sweeter enjoyment in the taste of these higher goods”(Chapter 5:2). Aquinas ultimately shows that faith depends on one’s ability to reason.

Dante’s *Divine Comedy* reiterates the idea that reason is needed in order to turn towards God. He also realizes that human reason only gives one the ability to know so much. Dante tells the story of him trying to turn away from sin and back to God. To do this he must first travel through Hell and up through Purgatory, then he will be able to find God. His journey to triumph over sin and temptation is guided by Virgil, who represents human reason. Dante is in “a dark wood” when he realized that he had been living the wrong life. When he tries to escape the darkness of the woods he “faced a spotted Leopard, all tremor and flow and gaudy pelt. And it would not pass, but stood so blocking my every turn that time and again I was on the verge of turning back into the wood. . . . I shook with dread at sight of a great Lion that broke upon me raging with hunger, its enormous head held high as if to strike a mortal terror into the very air. And down his track, a She - Wolf drove upon me, a starved horror ravening and wasted beyond all belief”(Canto I:33-49). These beasts that present themselves when Dante tries to turn back towards God represent the temptation and sins that people struggle to escape. One can see that Dante represents the third claim of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition as he is only able to get

passed these beasts once Virgil shows up. This is seen when he says “And as I fell to my soul’s ruin, a presence gathered before me on the discolored air, the figure of one who seemed hoarse from long silence. . . . are you then that Virgil and that fountain of purest speech?. . . . And he replied, that mad beast that fleers before you there, suffers no man pass. . . . Therefore, for your own good, I think it well you follow me and I will be your guide and lead you forth through an eternal place”(Canto I:61-108). Dante shows that human reason is the key factor in escaping sin, resisting temptation, and thus turning to God.

Augustine, Aquinas, and Dante all see the importance of using faith and reason in conjunction with each other. Through their writing it becomes evident that human reason is what allows one’s faith to grow. They show that it lets us initially find God, resist temptation, and keeps us from getting deterred by questions we simply don’t have the ability to know. All three of these authors represent the claim that faith and reason are compatible.