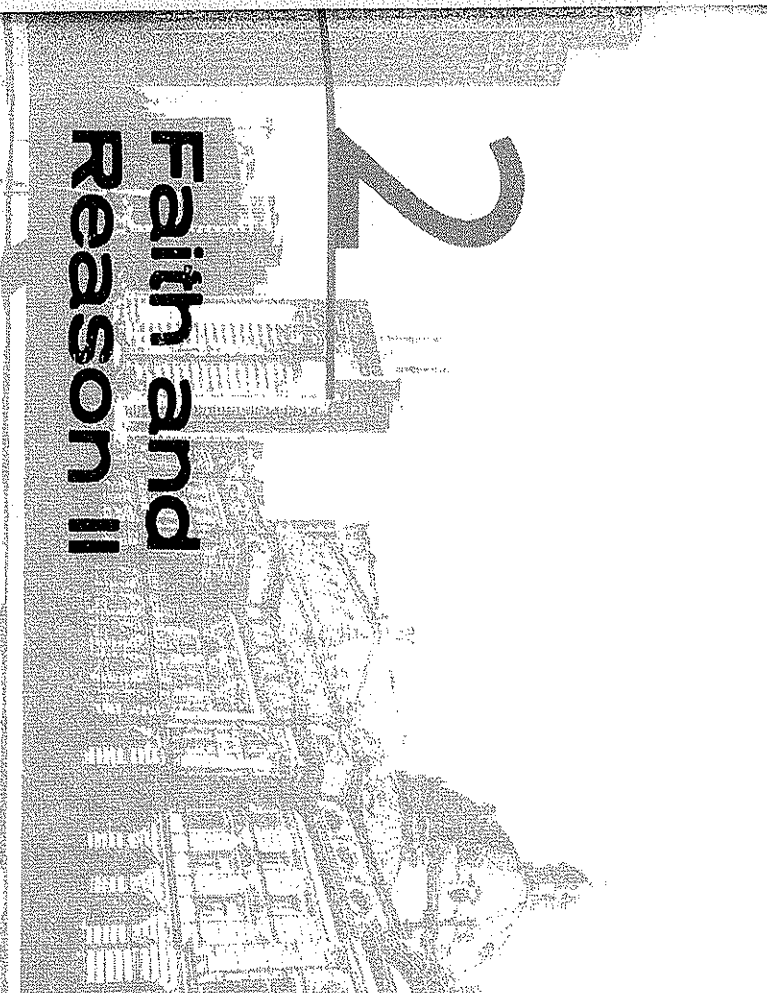


Endnotes

1. For the sake of simplicity, we will use the broad term *religions* to refer both to people who follow an organized religion and to those who simply consider themselves to be "spiritual."
2. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1923).
3. C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1978), 17.
4. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt, Brace 1959).
5. See Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), 14–35.
6. Eliade *Sacred and Profane*, 20–22.
7. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (London: HarperCollins, 2001; orig. pub. 1952), 1–32.
8. Karl Marx, "Introduction" to *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, trans. A. John and J. O'Malley, Cambridge University Press, 1977; orig. pub. 1844).
9. See, for example, Freud's book, *The Future of an Illusion* (New York: Norton, 1989; orig. pub. 1927).
10. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 136–37.
11. Two classics in the field illustrate this procedure: William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Great Books in Philosophy; Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2002; orig. pub. 1902), analyzes various religious experiences from a psychological point of view without raising the question of their objective reality; G. Van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, trans. J. E. Turner (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986; orig. pub. 1933), uses a "phenomenological" approach—a method that attempts to give an exact description of the data without imposing value judgments on it.
12. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Continuum, 1994).
13. The Christian theological tradition is founded upon Jewish conceptions of God and God's relationship with humans. But as it developed, the Christian theological tradition quickly took on a distinctive shape (e.g., in conceiving of God as a Trinity) and this fact justifies reference to the "Christian theological tradition" throughout the book.



Faith and Reason II

What Is Reason? What Is Faith? 21

The relationship between faith and reason is the theme of our entire book; this chapter has the specific task of further defining the terms. Though it may seem at first glance that the meanings of *reason* and *faith* are obvious, we'll find that this is not at all the case.

In the first chapter (sec. 1.11), we saw how influential a tradition is in framing how people look at reality—what basic questions they ask and what assumptions they make about the world. In this chapter we will see that our very understanding of the terms *reason* and *faith* is profoundly influenced by particular traditions. We will compare two broad types of tradition as we consider the meanings of *reason* and *faith*: (1) traditions that are open to the transcendent, and (2) traditions that are closed to it. I shall try to show how traditions that are closed to the transcendent produce a narrow view of both reason and faith that accurately distorts the meanings of both. A fuller, more accurate

understanding of these concepts can only be regained by viewing the world from traditions open to the transcendent.

As we proceed in our discussion, we will at times use the word *worldview*, meaning the basic way one looks at the world. Thus we might say that some people have an optimistic worldview, others a pessimistic or cynical one.

We can also see how closely worldview and tradition are related. The tradition in which one is raised profoundly influences one's worldview, and so we can speak of a Christian or a Buddhist worldview (worldviews open to the transcendent), but we can also speak of a rationalist or determinist worldview (worldviews closed to the transcendent).

Traditions Closed to the Transcendent: Rationalism, Materialism, and Determinism

2.2

The following description of traditions closed to the transcendent are necessarily simplistic. Intellectual traditions are complex, and so the labels that I will be using—*rationalism*, *materialism*, and *determinism*—are too broad to describe actual historical movements of thought. Few individual thinkers, for example, are purely rationalistic, materialistic, or deterministic. Nevertheless, the terms do accurately describe a general and highly influential trend in modern thinking, and we need to be aware of how this general trend has powerfully influenced common modern understandings of both reason and faith.

Rationalism

2.2.1

The French philosopher René Descartes (1596–1650) is usually considered a primary catalyst in the development of the rationalist tradition. Dissatisfied with the conflicting philosophical opinions of his time, Descartes worked to establish true knowledge on a solid basis. His first step was a negative one: to “reject as absolutely false everything in which I could imagine the least doubt, in order to see whether, after this process, something in my beliefs remained that was entirely indubitable” [incapable of being doubted].¹ Descartes’s method is sometimes called “methodological doubt”—the process of sweeping

away all uncertain ideas, so that only solid knowledge remains. After doubting everything, including the trustworthiness of his own sense observations, Descartes found he was sure of only one thing: that he doubted! But if he could raise these doubts, he himself must exist as the conscious subject raising these doubts. This train of thought led to Descartes’s famous conclusion: “I think, therefore I am.”²

Since the truths of mathematics are the most obvious and sure truths (everyone agrees that $2 + 2 = 4$), Descartes chose mathematical knowledge as his model for all knowing: “In seeking the correct path to truth we should be concerned with nothing about which we cannot have a certainty equal to that of the demonstration of arithmetic and geometry.”³ This paradigm is also evident in the title of a work by Descartes’s contemporary, the Dutch Jewish philosopher Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677), *Ethics: Demonstrated in Geometric Order*.

True knowledge must be based on objects of which we can have certainty, rationalists argue. Following in the tradition of Descartes, rationalists thus tend to define “true knowledge” as scientific knowledge of the physical world, because this knowledge is based on the mathematically exact laws of physics and chemistry. Any other knowledge that does not measure up to this standard cannot be called true knowledge, only opinion. The rationalist thus dismisses any possibility of true transcendent religious knowledge—since true knowledge can only be grounded in observable, demonstrable facts. A variation of rationalism is what we might call *scientism*—the belief that the only sure knowledge is knowledge based on strict scientific evidence.

Descartes’s thought was a precursor to the highly influential intellectual movement known as the **Enlightenment**. Partly in reaction to the bloody religious conflicts of the Thirty Years’ War (1618–1648), Enlightenment rationalists such as David Hume (1711–1776) attacked belief in the supernatural as irrational, and thinkers such as Voltaire (1694–1778) criticized religious belief as blind obedience to church authority. Rationalists in the Enlightenment tradition thus associate the term *reason* with strictly logical, empirical, mathematically based thinking, and *faith* with a blind adherence to traditional doctrine.

Materialism and Determinism

2.2.2

The materialist worldview is one logical extension of the rationalist worldview. If one believes that the material, physical world is the only basis of true knowledge, then it is just one short step further to the

conclusion that the material world is the only true reality. Variations of the materialist worldview occur in many fields of study. In psychology, a strict behaviorist rejects concepts such as *mind* and *thought* as ultimately meaningless and focuses strictly on the facts of observable behaviors that can be understood as responses to external stimuli. Karl Marx claimed that his economic philosophy was based on "scientific materialism"—a view of the world that rejects such vague notions as *spirit* and *soul* in favor of observable, physical realities that provide us with the real explanation of human behavior.

In neuroscience, research into genetics and brain function is increasingly revealing the physical foundations for mental processes in the brain and in our genetic makeup. For example, we can identify which parts of the brain control certain functions, and which specific genes are associated with specific character traits. For the materialist, the logical conclusion is that there is no difference between mind and thoughts and their physical foundation. Thoughts are simply electronic signals sent by the brain along the human nervous system. For Sir John Maddox, former editor of the premier scientific journal *Nature*, an explanation of what we mean by *mind* "must ultimately be an explanation in terms of the way neurons function."⁴

Similarly, emotions can be broken down to their "true" material basis: they are simply the result of certain chemical reactions that take place in the stomach or other bodily organs.

Francis Crick, one of the discoverers of DNA, nicely sums up the materialist conclusion. "You, your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behavior of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules."⁵

The strict materialist view is closely allied to a determinist view. If the material world is all that exists, then it is obvious that everything that happens in the universe is a result of the strict laws of cause and effect that govern the physical world. If this is true, human free will must be an illusion. Again Crick illustrates this way of thinking: "What you're aware of is a decision, but you're not aware of what makes you do the decision. It seems free to you, but it's the result of things you are not aware of."⁶ Our choices are determined by our genetic makeup and the influence of our environment, according to the determinist. If one takes away genetics and environmental stimuli, there is no "mind" or "will" left over to make a choice.

Implications of Worldviews Closed to Transcendence

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Ethical relativism is one natural consequence of the rationalist, materialist, and determinist views. For the rationalist, ethical standards of "right" and "wrong" can have no certain objective value, since they are not based on certain physical knowledge. They must simply be matters of opinion. At most, "right" might be defined in a pragmatic way as that which leads to material comfort for the most people. For the strict materialist and determinist, of course, ethical "right" and "wrong" can have no meaning, since actions are not chosen, but determined by forces beyond human control.

A further implication of these modern trends of thought is that humans must make their own meaning, since no meaning is "given." Joseph Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI) sees this implication working itself out in modern biotechnology (genetic manipulation, in vitro fertilization, cloning), since there is no "given order in nature" (that is, given by a transcendent reality), humans are free to manipulate nature in any way that is technologically possible.⁷

We noted earlier that although few people are pure rationalists, materialists, or determinists, the influence

of these philosophies is everywhere apparent. Consider these examples of common statements, followed by the rationalist or determinist logic behind each.

- "It is inevitable that teenagers will be sexually active because of their 'aging hormones.'" *Translator:* Hormones determine the behavior of the teen.
 - "I'm not a morning person." *Translation:* Certain genetic factors determine whether or not people function well in the morning.
 - "It's all about the money." *Translation:* In business transactions, people may speak of ethical qualities such as honesty and integrity, but their real motivation will always be economic gain and material comfort.
 - "I think abortion is wrong, but I can't judge anyone who thinks it is right." *Translator:* Transcendent or objective ethical standards do not exist; standards of right and wrong are matters of opinion.
- While few people would see themselves as strict materialists or determinists, many think and act in ways that presume materialistic and deterministic principles, whether they recognize them as such or not. ●

Rationalist and Materialist Critiques of Faith

2.4

Let us now consider how traditions closed to the transcendent think about religious faith. Following is a general summary of some of the more common views.

The concept of a transcendent God who created the universe is meaningless. All things in the universe can be explained by material causes, so there is no need for God.⁸ Religious knowledge is not true knowledge, since it is not based on observable, restable evidence. Thus "invisible" realities such as spirits, the soul, heaven, and hell can only be accepted by a blind faith that is the opposite of reason. British biologist Richard Dawkins speaks of the "overweening confidence with which the religious assert minute details for which they neither have, nor could have, evidence."⁹

There can be no ultimate meaning to the universe. Ultimate reality is matter, and matter can have no higher purpose or goals.

Religious thinking is based on a prescientific view of reality. Religion arose as a way of explaining natural phenomena. For example, with no scientific understanding of electrical charges, the ancients imagined that lightning was caused by Zeus hurling thunderbolts across the sky. As science advances, the need for "religious" explanations will shrink and eventually vanish.

Faith is an irrational way of thinking that can only be imposed on people by authoritarian churches. Again Dawkins illustrates this view, "Faith is an evil precisely because it requires no justification and brooks no argument."¹⁰

Faith and science are opposites. Scientific knowledge can only advance when it is free of religious restriction. A classic case was when the Roman Catholic Church forced Galileo to deny his scientific conclusion that the earth revolved around the sun, because this contradicted the literal meaning of some biblical passages. A contemporary example is when a strictly literal reading of Genesis causes people to reject the scientific theory of evolution.¹¹

To sum up: in the traditions closed to the transcendent, faith and reason have specific meanings. *Reason* is defined as logical thinking based on sure, physical, and scientifically provable evidence. *Faith* is defined, at best, as unprovable opinions about highly speculative subjects. At worst, especially as it is embodied in organized religion, faith

is narrow-minded, judgmental, resistant to scientific truth, and insists on blind obedience to its authority.

Critiques of Rationalism, Materialism, and Determinism

2.5

Yet the above definitions can themselves be critiqued as excessively narrow, distorting, and in the end, irrational. Regarding such narrow definitions of reason, the Jewish theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, "Extreme rationalism may be defined as the failure of reason to understand itself."¹² In the following sections, we will explore a broader understanding of reason.

Critique of Rationalism

2.5.1

The rationalist view that reason operates with strict logic on scientifically observable facts actually accounts for only a small percentage of human knowledge. Humans, in fact, gain knowledge in a variety of ways. We have already considered the point (sec. 1.11) that humans acquire aesthetic, historical, or philosophical knowledge in ways that cannot be based on strictly scientific methods, and yet such knowledge is accepted as reliable truth. Let us consider some other points.

Knowledge through Authority

2.5.1.1

The vast majority of anyone's knowledge is based not on personal, scientific observation, but rather on accepting the authority of someone else. C. S. Lewis writes, "Do not be scared by the word *authority*. Believing things on authority only means believing them because you have been told them by someone you think trustworthy. Ninety-nine percent of the things you believe are believed on authority. I believe there is such a place as New York. I have not seen it myself. I could not prove by abstract reasoning that there must be such a place. I believe it because reliable people have told me so. The ordinary man believes in the Solar System, atoms, evolution, and the circulation of the blood on authority—because the scientists say so. Every historical statement in the world is believed on authority. No one of us has seen the Norman Conquest or the defeat of the Armada. None of us could prove them by pure logic as you prove a thing in mathematics. We believe

them simply because people who did see them have left writings that tell us about them: in fact, on authority."¹³

G. K. Chesterton, in typically humorous fashion, begins his autobiography by contrasting knowledge gained through authority with the rationalist's paradigm: "Bowing down in blind credulity, as is my custom, before mere authority and the tradition of the elders, superstitiously swallowing a story I could not rest at the time by experiment or private judgment, I am firmly of the opinion that I was born on the 29th of May, 1874, on Campden Hill, Kensington."¹⁴

Knowledge through Tradition

251.2

In his reflections on human understanding, Hans-Georg Gadamer shows how much of human understanding is based not on one's own understanding, but on taking one's place in a certain tradition of understanding, whether artistic, philosophical, or theological (see sec. 1.11). The rationalist ideal is that of a completely independent thinker who has shed the chains of past authority and who dares to think for himself. While such a model is noble in many aspects, it hardly corresponds with reality. Every thinker has been profoundly shaped by tradition: he can no more leave tradition behind than he can jump out of his own skin.

The French philosopher Paul Ricoeur makes the same point in his analysis of language. Consider a philosopher who wishes to understand the human condition of guilt, suffering, and sin. The very fact that the philosopher thinks in a certain language (let us say, in English) already has shaped profoundly his understanding. The meaning of these English words cannot be separated from the influence of a centuries-old religious tradition that stretches back to the practices of ancient Greeks and Hebrews. Of course the philosopher is able to think critically about the meaning of these words, or to compare them with similar concepts in non-Christian traditions, but he can only begin to do so from within the horizon of a tradition shaped by a particular language.¹⁵

Knowledge Based On Probability

251.3

In everyday life our reasoning is constantly based on probabilities, not strict logical necessity. I make preparations to teach my class tomorrow based on the probability that I will have class, but I have no sure knowledge of that, since it is logically possible that the college may burn down in the night, or that all the students

will be sick. I lend a close friend some money based on the probability that he will pay it back: he has always been trustworthy in the past, but it is logically possible that in this particular case he will be untrustworthy.

Any important life decision is based not on strict logic but on probabilities. Given what she knows about her interests, abilities, and talents, and after weighing practical considerations such as job opportunities, Jill believes that nursing would be a good career for her. But this is not logically certain. Given what he knows about Martha's good character, their common interests, and their five years of dating, Jeff feels certain that his marriage to Martha will be a happy one. But he has no logical guarantee.

The English theologian John Henry Newman shows that even when we do not have strict logical proof we can still be certain of our knowledge in various fields, based on an accumulation of sufficient probabilities.¹⁶ Thus an Englishman, though he cannot personally prove it, is certain that Great Britain is an island based on a convergence of probabilities: he was taught this at school; Britain appears as an island on maps; he has never heard anyone deny the assertion.

Newman applies his insight to faith: the truth of Christianity also can never be based on strict logic—an argument for the truth of Christianity would necessarily take the form of an argument from a convergence of probabilities.¹⁷

Personal Reasoning

251.4

We often make decisions and judgments based on what Newman calls the *illative sense*.¹⁸ The illative sense is a type of reasoning, Newman insists, but it is not a strictly logical one. It is often based on personal, implicit knowledge. Thus a farmer may be able to make highly accurate predictions about the weather based on his long years of observations, but he might not be able to articulate his reasons logically.

A cook, based on experience, may have a highly developed sense of just what seasonings to put in a soup and in what amounts, but would have difficulty in writing out an exact recipe.¹⁹

Many of our judgments cannot be based on precise rules: the judge instructs the jury that they should only deliver a guilty verdict if they find the defendant guilty "beyond a reasonable doubt"—but the judge cannot provide them with precise rules for determining what a "reasonable doubt" is. Yet a decision must be made, and is.²⁰

Knowledge, Experience, and Emotions

2515

Newman makes a distinction between what he calls "real assents" and "notional assents." In a notional assent, my mind accepts an abstract idea as true. But a real assent involves more: I accept something as true not merely abstractly and intellectually, but with my emotions, my imagination, my whole being.

Thus, for example, Roger might give a notional assent to the principle that one should wear a seat belt when driving; his mind accepts the abstract idea that wearing a seat belt makes one safer. It happens, however, that Roger is involved in a serious accident; the police officer tells him afterward that wearing his seat belt saved his life. Now Roger can give a real assent to the principle. When he agrees that people should wear seat belts, he thinks not of an abstract idea, but of his own personal experience—the slamming on the brakes, the shattering glass, the sudden jolt, and the immense relief of simply being alive and well after the accident.²¹ With his experience, Roger now *knows* this principle in a much deeper, more experiential way.

Determinism, Materialism, and Reason

252

We considered in chapter 1 (sec. 1.4) the point that strict skepticism is self-contradictory since the person asserting that there is no truth in fact assumes that his own assertion is true. Strictly materialist and determinist points of view run into similar logical difficulties.

For example, how can the thought, "My thought is simply a firing of neurons, nothing more," itself be a firing of neurons? Logically, the person thinking this thought is (so to speak) standing apart from his neurons and thinking about them.

Similarly, a strict determinist cannot rationally say, "My every thought is determined by an outside force." If this is true, how would the person ever have become aware that his thought was determined? The fact that humans are self-aware shows that humans have the freedom to stand apart from themselves and consider the causes that influence, but do not fully determine their beliefs and behaviors.

Strict determinism destroys any possibility of true knowledge. C. S. Lewis quotes a Professor Haldane's critique:

If my mental processes are determined wholly by the motion of atoms in my brain, I have no reason to believe that my beliefs are true . . . and hence I have no reason for supposing my brain to be composed of atoms.²²

The materialist thus has difficulty in explaining self-awareness or self-consciousness. Admittedly, consciousness has a material basis in the physical functioning of the brain, but it cannot reasonably be reduced to this physical phenomenon and nothing more.

The newly developing science of neuroplasticity also challenges materialist thinking. Conventional neurology had assumed that adult brains in particular are "hardwired, fixed in form and function."²³ But recent research and practice is showing that carefully planned mental exercises can in fact change the structure of the brain in significant ways. This research has caught the attention of religious leaders such as the Dalai Lama, who finds in it confirmation of his belief that not only does the brain affect the mind, but "how people think really can change their brains."²⁴

Stephen Barr has shown that the materialist belief that all reality is simply physical reality is itself an article of faith that cannot be proven. How does the materialist know that no reality exists beyond material reality? He simply makes the assumption and then uses the assumption to try to explain any evidence against it.²⁵

The Madness of Rationalism and Materialism and the Sanity of Faith 253

G. K. Chesterton shows that the commonly accepted idea that the religious worldview is irrational and the rationalist worldview is reasonable has it exactly backwards. In fact, argues Chesterton, a rationalistic view of reality is more closely related to insanity than to healthy reason.

Chesterton uses the example of a paranoid man who is convinced that everyone is secretly plotting to kill him. It is impossible, using strict logic

alone, to convince the man that he is wrong. If we point out that other people deny that they want to kill him, he answers that of course they deny it, because they are trying to conceal their plot. His version of reality explains the facts.

The real problem with his paranoid view of reality is not that it is irrational, but that it is too narrow rational — it

continued

continued

takes a single idea and uses it in a strictly logical way to explain all events. The only way to restore the paranoid man—and indeed the strict rationalist and materialist—to sanity is to help him to see how cramped and narrow his worldview is.

Chesteron contrasts narrow rationalism with the imagination of the poet who knows that life is complex and full of mystery. The poet allows his mind to move beyond the visible facts and imagine a much larger reality. He is open to the transcendent. The rationalist, on the other hand, is convinced that every event must have a strictly logical explanation, and the materialist restricts his reality to what he can see and touch.

The poet only desires exaltation and expansion, a world to stretch

himself in. The poet only asks to get his head into the heavens. It is the logician who seeks to get the heavens into his head. And it is his head that splits.²⁶

The determinist logically convinces himself that he has no free will, but the ordinary, less intellectually sophisticated person very sensibly takes it for granted that free will is real.

The determinist makes the theory of causation quite clear, and then finds he cannot say "if you please" to the housemaid. The Christian permits free will to remain a sacred mystery; but because of this his relations with the housemaid become of a sparkling and crystal cleanness.²⁷ ●

Reason and Faith in the Christian Worldview

2.6

Rationalism and materialism understand faith as, at best, a harmless opinion about matters that are not real. At its worst, religious faith is actively evil: it is intolerant of other beliefs, obstructs rational and scientific thinking, and demands slavish and blind obedience. Dawkins writes, "More generally (and this applies to Christianity no less than to Islam), what is really pernicious is the practice of teaching children that faith itself is a virtue. Faith is an evil precisely because it requires no justification and brooks no argument."²⁸

How differently do faith and reason look when considered from a Christian worldview?

Reason Ultimately Based On Faith

2.6.1

Chesteron comments, "It is idle to talk always about the alternative of reason and faith. Reason is itself a matter of faith. It is an act of faith to assert that our thoughts have any relation to reality at all."²⁹ If complete skeptics are consistent, they must doubt even their own ability to reason: if there is no such thing as truth, how could their own skeptical reason make a true statement? But once we seriously question our ability to reason, then reasoning has come to an end. Chesteron labeled this trend toward complete skepticism in some strands of modern thought as the "suicide of thought."³⁰

When scientists or investigators of any kind begin to research a question, they can only proceed on two articles of faith: (1) that their own reasoning ability is trustworthy and can achieve actual true results, and (2) that the world is governed by rational laws that will allow them to discover true and reliable information. Neither of these two statements could be logically proven: they are the presumptions of faith upon which all reason relies. These two assumptions can only be based on a radical and strictly unprovable confidence in the rationality of the universe.

Faith in the Rational Structure of the Universe

2.6.2

The Christian worldview does offer a rationale for its faith in human reason and in the rationality of the world. Both beliefs are grounded in the belief that God—understood as the ultimate source of all rationality and order—created both humans and the universe.

A classic expression of the belief in the rational order of creation is found at the beginning of the Gospel of John, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came to be through him" (John 1:1–3). With this introduction, the Gospel writer echoes the first words of Genesis, "In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen 1:1). With his reference to the "Word," John alludes to a theological tradition that described God creating the universe through God's own rational power.

The Greek for *word* (*logos*) was familiar in pre-Christian Greek philosophy. It referred not only to verbal or written communication, but more generally to rational order. The Stoic philosophers, for example, referred to the rational order present throughout the universe as the *logos*. Pre-Christian Jewish thought applied this concept to God's creation. The Book of Proverbs, for example, describes Wisdom as God's "first-born" who was with God when he established the heavens and fixed the foundations of the earth (Prov 8:22–31). The first-century Jewish philosopher Philo shows some striking parallels with the Gospel of John in his understanding of the *logos*. For Philo, the *logos* is the divine means by which God brought order and law into the universe, giving form and rationality to the original formlessness.

The universe is understandable because God created it through his *reason*. The rational order of nature—apparent when an object falls to the ground, when a seed grows into a plant, when spring follows winter, when the planets orbit the Sun in regular patterns—all of these orderly laws are the result of God's *logos* throughout the universe. God's order is seen not only in the physical realm but in what we call the ethical realm as well—in the laws of human nature. Just as nature has its laws, so too does human nature: if humans do not lie, steal, or commit adultery they will prosper; if they break these laws, disorder and chaos result.

The human mind can recognize and understand this order because it participates in the same divine *logos*. God created humans in his own image (Gen 1:26–27): one essential aspect of this image is the human mind's ability to participate in God's *logos*.

Faith's Openness to Wonder

2.5.3

For the materialist and determinist, the universe is a closed system, bound by inflexible and necessary natural laws. There can be no "meaning" outside of the necessary working out of these laws. The human being, for example, is simply a chance product of the laws of evolution guided by natural selection.

The beginning point of faith, in contrast, is fundamentally different. The person of faith recognizes the same material reality and the same laws of nature that the materialist observes. But the person of faith allows some fundamental questions that the materialist simply glosses over. Granted that laws of nature do exist, the person of faith wonders, "Why do they exist at all? Could they have been different?"

Chesterton describes the view of a person of faith: "He is pleased that snow is white on the strictly reasonable ground that it might have been black. Every color has in it a bold quality as of choice; the red of garden roses is not only decisive but dramatic, like suddenly split blood."³¹ Persons of faith allow themselves the simple wonder of a child as they look above and ask, "Why is the sky blue?"

The faith perspective also asks the most fundamental question, "Why does anything exist at all?" Persons of faith do not simply take it for granted that the universe exists (as materialists do): they know that it is possible for it not to be at all.

Faith in the Goodness of Existence

2.5.4

Closely connected to the sense of wonder is a sense of gratitude. Persons of faith have a lively sense that their own existence, along with the existence of the entire universe, is a *gift*. It is not something that we humans have created for ourselves, and so is not something that we should take for granted. It is something that might not have been.

Again Chesterton captures this sense:

The rest of all happiness is gratitude; and I felt grateful, though I hardly knew to whom. Children are grateful when Santa Claus puts in their stockings gifts of toys or sweets. Could I not be grateful to Santa Claus when he put in my stockings the gift of two miraculous legs? We thank people for birthday presents of cigars and slippers. Can I thank no one for the birthday present of birth?³²

The person of faith considers life and all existence a good gift. It is the faith of a child who has a natural instinct for the joy and goodness of life. In asking, "Why is the sky blue?" the child is not motivated simply by an intellectual curiosity. The child is delighted that the sky is blue, sure that it is a very good thing that the sky happens to be that color. The child's question is simply an attempt to understand better the basic, miraculous fact that the sky is blue. Chesterton sums up his own basic childhood convictions in this way, "The world was a shock, but it was not merely shocking: existence was a surprise, but it was a pleasant surprise."³³

Hamler reflects, "To be or not to be, that is the question." The basic orientation of the person of faith is to respond: To exist is good. Life is a wonderful gift that was given to me in a way beyond my understanding—I can only accept it with gratitude. This basic

orientation can be upheld even when life is difficult, and even when doubts arise.

Once again, this confidence in the goodness of creation has a solid grounding in Christian faith: the belief that God, the ultimate source of goodness, created the universe. In the creation story in Genesis 1, the phrase, "God saw how good it was" is repeated throughout the account, culminating with, "God looked at everything he had made, and he found it very good" (Gen 1:31).

Faith In an Orderly Universe

2.6.5

Sociologist Peter Berger finds a basic faith in the orderliness of the universe in all religious societies. Throughout most of history, people have believed that the "created order of society, in one way or another, corresponds to an underlying order of the universe, a divine order that supports and justifies all human attempts at ordering."³⁴ Rituals marking sacred space and time (see sec. 1.3 above) are one way in which this belief in the correspondence of the natural and supernatural order is manifested.

Berger also illustrates this belief with an example from everyday life. A child awakens from a nightmare, alone, threatened by nameless terrors, and cries for his mother. The mother comes, comforts him, perhaps turns on a light, and assures him, "Everything is OK."

It is precisely the statement, "Everything is OK," that interests Berger. For it truly is a universal claim: an assurance to the child that there is fundamental goodness and order to the world that we can trust, in spite of temporary dangers or disruptions. Berger points out that the mother's assumption is a natural one, but that the assumption cannot be based merely on an empirical observation of the world as it is. After all, objective observation shows us that life is full of uncertainty, unfairness, suffering, and eventually death. The confident assertion that "everything is OK" can only be based on a faith in a transcendent reality that gives order and meaning to the world; the world seen in itself (characterized by uncertainty and death) would give us no ground for this confidence.³⁵

Faith Begins with God's Grace

2.6.6

Let us now consider a more technical definition of faith from a well-known representative of the Catholic tradition, the medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274). "Now the act of believing is an

act of the intellect assenting to the divine truth at the command of the will moved by the grace of God" (ST 2–2.2.9).³⁶ We'll consider each part of Aquinas's definition in turn.

Aquinas argues that faith, the act of belief, begins when the human will is "moved by the grace of God." The essential meaning of *grace* can be summed up by considering the idea of life as a gift, as we have suggested. Grace is a free gift given by God; by definition, one cannot earn this gift. God's primary, fundamental gift is simply the gift of existence.

Aquinas's definition describes God's grace as moving the human will; in other words, God's grace is operating in some sense within the human person. Aquinas speaks of an "inward instinct of the Divine invitation" (ST 2–2.2.9 ad. 3). Further, an act of faith is "related both to the object of the will, i.e., the good and the end, and to the object of the intellect, i.e., to the true" (2–2.4.1). Both the will and the intellect have a natural aptitude to be perfected (2–2.4.2).

We can connect Aquinas's teaching with our discussion in chapter 1 about how the human being is naturally oriented toward the transcendent. We have within us a natural orientation toward the truth, the good, and a transcendent meaning; in other words, we have a natural orientation toward God.

Karl Rahner understands this transcendent horizon as God's offer of grace to every human being; he calls this offer the "supernatural existential." In the very structure of the human person, in our built-in desire for truth, for goodness, and for meaning, God offers each person the opportunity to transcend his or her limitations. Each person is given the opportunity to respond to this offer from God and in faith open the self to the transcendent.³⁷ At the same time, each person is given the opportunity to reject this offer of grace and remain closed to the transcendent.

Human Cooperation with God's Grace

2.6.7

At the time of the Reformation in the sixteenth century, a great debate took place between the Reformers and the Catholic Church precisely on the issue of how truly free a person is to cooperate with God's offer of grace (see sec. 7.17.2). In recent dialogue, however, Catholic and Lutheran theologians have found basic common ground in their mutual belief that the initial offer of grace can only come from God, although they continue to differ in their description of how humans respond to that offer. (see sec. 7.17.4).

The Catholic imagination sees the classic example of this cooperation with God's grace in Mary's acceptance of God's will for her life. When the angel Gabriel told Mary that she would have a child, Mary was confused; she didn't understand how this would be possible. In the end, however, she agreed to cooperate with God's mysterious plan for her, proclaiming, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38).

In the materialist/determinist view of the world, as Razinger notes, the question of the meaning of life is answered either by denying that life has any ultimate meaning or by insisting that humans create their own meaning by their actions. In contrast, the worldview of faith, following Mary's example, is open to accepting the meaning already present in the world.³⁸

Faith as Conversion

The word *conversion* is derived from the Latin *convertere*: "to turn around." In the Christian view, the fundamental "turnaround" is when a person turns from a worldview closed to the transcendent to one open to the transcendent. To believe, writes Razinger,

means that man does not regard seeing, hearing and touching as the totality of what concerns him, that he does not view the area of his world as marked off by what he can see and touch but seeks a second mode of access to reality, a mode he calls in fact belief, and in such a way that he finds in it the decisive enlargement of his whole view of the world.

Yet because the human is still naturally oriented toward the physical world, the world of the senses, this conversion will be a lifelong process.³⁹

But far from being an irrational turn from the world of the senses to a worldview of blind faith, the Catholic and catholic understanding of conversion includes a rational dimension. Jesuit theologian Bernard Lonergan speaks of three kinds of conversion: moral, religious, and intellectual. The movement toward intellectual conversion might well begin precisely with the kind of critique of the limitations of the rationalist, materialist, and determinist worldviews that we have been considering.⁴⁰ Such a critique would be the necessary prerequisite to accepting a viewpoint open to the transcendent.

In his *Confessions*, Augustine describes how his own intellectual conversion helped to prepare him for his later religious conversion

to the Christian faith. As a follower of the materialist-oriented Manichean religion, Augustine relates that he had been unable to conceive of nonphysical existence; it was only when he began to read Platonist philosophy that he was "prompted to look for truth as something incorporeal" (*Confessions* 7.20).⁴¹ C. S. Lewis, too, describes his intellectual conversion from an atheistic materialist view to an idealist philosophy as an important step in his eventual conversion to Christianity.⁴²

Faith as Conversion of the Whole Person

Aquinas's teaching that the will commands the intellect to assent to the divine truth is one way of expressing the truth that faith is a response of the whole person, not merely their reason. "After all," writes Newman, "man is *not* a reasoning animal; he is a seeing, feeling, contemplating, acting animal. . . . Life is for action. If we insist on proofs for everything, we shall never come to action: to act you must assume, and that assumption is faith."⁴³ A person makes decisions based on his or her fundamental worldview, and this worldview is not chosen by strict reason alone.

Just as the decision to convert to Christianity is never based purely on reason, a movement away from Christian faith rarely involves merely an intellectual decision. Lewis writes that a Christian will experience times when he will find it difficult to hold to the strict ethical teachings of Christianity: he will feel pressure to conform to non-Christian standards, or he will be tempted to tell a lie to get out of trouble, or he will have an opportunity to make some money in a way that is slightly unethical. At these times, his emotions and feelings, not his intellect, will try to persuade him that Christianity—with its strict ethical standards—is untrue.

Or again, there will be times when attending church or praying will be difficult or bothersome, and the person may begin to drift away from faith.

To hold faith in these situations, according to Lewis, a person must "train the habit of Faith." This might involve a deliberate, daily effort to recall the basic articles of faith through attending services, saying prayers, or reading religious books.⁴⁴ A person would have to discipline his emotions and even his imagination in order to hold solidly the Christian worldview.

In the Catholic view, too, faith cannot be defined as a onetime decision in which a person chooses to believe in God or to "accept

Christ” as one’s personal Savior. Rather, faith is an ongoing process requiring systematic discipline: Aquinas calls it a “habit of the mind” (ST 2–2.4.1). Faith (along with hope and love) is considered one of the “theological virtues”; as a virtue, it is defined as “an habitual and firm disposition to do the good” (CCC no. 1803).⁴⁵

Faith and Objective Statements of Faith 2610

Let us return to Aquinas’s definition of faith as the assent of one’s intellect to the divine truth. We must now ask, “How does a person know this divine truth?” In another passage of the *Summa*, Aquinas clarifies: “The formal object of faith is the First Truth as manifested in Holy Writ and the teaching of the Church, which proceeds from the First Truth” (ST 2–2.5.3).

The primary object of faith, in other words, is God himself, considered as the source of all truth. The person trusts God, and because God is trustworthy, he can believe in what God communicates.

For Aquinas, God communicates the specific content of faith through Scripture (“Holy Writ”) and Church teachings. These teachings are expressed as articles of faith (for example: “God is a Trinity”; or “the Second Person of the Trinity became human”); these articles in turn are expressed through the **creeds** of the Church (ST 2–2.1.6–10).

In the modern world, the idea that faith can be summed up in specific articles of belief is often challenged. Many argue that religion should be a matter of the heart, and that when theologians draw up precise definitions in creeds, they make religion too abstract and intellectual, and thus kill the true religious spirit.

In the Catholic view, however, the precise definitions of the articles of faith in no way contradict true religious devotion. Newman, for example, recognized the difference between accepting the theological proposition that God exists (by a notional assent) and worshipping God with a loving devotion (a real assent). But the theological propositions are necessary, because one cannot love what one doesn’t know. Theological propositions are as necessary for the religious mind as language is for everyday communication.⁴⁶

Lewis makes a similar point in his response to an air force officer who rejected theological ideas as “petty and pedantic and unreal” in comparison to his real experience of the tremendous mystery of God when he was out flying alone in the desert at night. Lewis agreed that such an experience was more real than a theological statement, just as the Atlantic is more real than a map of the Atlantic.⁴⁷

But the map analogy supplied Lewis with a further point: theology in fact functions as a good map. First, maps, like theological statements, are based not on the experience of a single person, but on the combined experience of many thousands of people. Second, just as when one wishes to leave the beach and travel on the ocean, a map is necessary, so too if one wishes to make any progress in growing closer to God, then one cannot rely on personal feeling alone; one needs a more objective guide. The officer’s experience of God in the desert may have been very real, but

It leads nowhere. There is nothing to do about it. In fact, that is just why a vague religion—all about feeling God in nature, and so on—is so attractive. It is all thrills and no work: like watching the waves from the beach. But you will not get to Newfoundland by studying the Atlantic that way, and you will not get eternal life by simply feeling the presence of God in flowers and music.⁴⁸

Lewis’s last point is that theology is practical. In today’s world, Lewis writes (and his point is even more true in our current Internet-centered culture), people have access to literally thousands of different—and often contradictory—theological ideas. Even if people do not make a disciplined study of theology, they will inevitably have some basic theological ideas. Without a disciplined theological study, however, the ideas are virtually certain to be muddled and confused.⁴⁹

Returning to Aquinas’ definition, is clear, too, that belief in the articles of faith is based not only on a trust in God as “first truth” but also on a fundamental trust in the authority of Scripture and of Church teachings as accurate reflections of God’s communication. This should come as no surprise, however—we have seen that religious thinking is impossible unless it is done within a specific religious tradition (sec. 1.11), thus presuming a fundamental trust in the reliability of that tradition (sec. 2.5.1.2)

The Vatican II document *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* (*Dei Verbum*) emphasizes this aspect of faith as an obedient acceptance of God’s revelation:

“The obedience of faith” (Rom 16:26; cf. Rom 1:5; 2 Cor 10:5–6) must be given to God as he reveals himself. By faith man freely commits his entire self to God, making “the full submission of his intellect and will to God who reveals” and willingly assenting to the Revelation given by him. (DV no. 5, citing Vatican I’s *Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith*, ch. 3)

Theological statements of faith found in the creeds (such as "I believe in one God") or in the Bible (such as "Christ died for our sins") form the more objective aspect of Christian faith. They are necessary expressions of faith that all believers can use as a reference point to clarify the beliefs that they share. They sum up the centuries-old religious experience and insights of the Christian tradition. They are a fixed guideline so that believers do not stray off into their own subjective ideas and opinions.

Catholic Faith: Between Fideism and Rationalism

27

In responding to rationalism, the Catholic tradition emphasizes the compatibility of faith and reason. Not all Christian traditions have taken this approach, however. Some traditions subscribe to what we will broadly term *fideism*; that is, they tend to separate sharply the realm of faith from the realm of reason. In a fideistic belief, critical reason has its rightful place in the scientific or other practical realms, but not in the realm of religion, since religion is simply a matter of feeling and personal faith.⁵⁰ Ironically, even though fideistic persons are typically very pious and devout, they share with rationalists the same definition of faith (that it is simply a matter of personal feeling). Dawkins cites a contemporary example of fideism in the American geologist Kurt Wise, director of the Center for Origins Research at Bryan College, Dayton, Tennessee. Dawkins quotes Wise,

As I shared with my professors years ago when I was in college, if all the evidence in the universe turns against creationism, I would be the first to admit it, but I would still be a creationist because that is what the Word of God seems to indicate. Here I must stand.⁵¹

The Catholic Church, however, has insisted that fideism is an error. Obedient faith in God can never contradict natural human reason, since God himself created our human reason. In the words of the Vatican I Council (1870):

Though faith is above reason, there can never be any real discrepancy between faith and reason. Since the same God who reveals mysteries and infuses faith has bestowed the light of reason on the human mind, God cannot deny himself, nor can truth ever contradict truth.⁵²

The Catholic tradition teaches, for example, that the existence of God can be known with certainty without faith and without divine revelation by "the natural light of human reason" (see sec. 3.3.1).

Faith and reason are contradictory, or at least exclude one another, if the terms are defined within the rationalist tradition. But viewed from the Catholic tradition, they in fact work in harmony.

Scriptural View of Faith

28

Our focus in this chapter has been on the relationship between faith and reason, and so our discussion of faith has tended to be theoretical. In the world of Scripture, however, the concept of faith has a more personal meaning, essentially signifying a person's trust in God.

In the Old Testament, the concept of faith is primarily summed up in the Hebrew root word *aman*. The word has a variety of meanings: firmness, stability, belief, and truth.⁵³ The word is used to describe Abraham's relationship with God: "Abram put his faith in the Lord, who credited it to him as an act of righteousness" (Gen 15:6). The relationship is one of trust: in this context, it refers to Abraham's trust in the Lord's promise that he would make his descendants as numerous as the stars.

In this Hebrew Old Testament scriptural view, God is worthy of this trust because of God's own trustworthy, faithful nature, expressed by the same Hebrew root word: "The Lord's love for us is strong; the Lord is faithful forever" (Ps 117:2); "For your love towers to the heavens; your faithfulness, to the skies" (Ps 57:11).

Another passage brings out the relationship between the two aspects of the Hebrew concept, "Unless your faith is firm you shall not be firm" (Isa 7:9). We see here the connection between trust or faith in God and the idea of a person being firmly established, confident, and secure in his own life.

The same concept, expressed with the same root word, occurs in the scriptural image of God creating the universe through his Wisdom: "Then was I beside him as his craftsman" (*amom*; Prov 8:30). If the universal craftsman of the universe, Wisdom, is firm and sure in her work, then humans are justified in their confidence that the universe also makes sense and can be trusted (see sect. 2.6.2).

In his discussion of Isaiah 7:9, Joseph Ratzinger connects this Hebrew concept with the fundamental principle of a worldview based on faith: that humans cannot make their own meaning, but rather

must be open to the meaning that comes from a transcendent source (see sec. 2.6.7). He shows further how the basic meanings of *animus* (firmness and trust) extend naturally into the concept of *understanding*: we trust what we can understand. Understanding gives us a “place to stand,” a firm worldview that helps us to make sense of our existence.⁵⁴ So, far from being irrational, faith “is a movement toward the *logos*, the *ratio*, toward meaning and so toward the truth itself, for in the final analysis the ground on which man takes his stand cannot possibly be anything else but the truth revealing itself.”⁵⁵

Finally, there is Christian faith in Jesus Christ, the key to the Christian understanding of the meaning of life and of the universe. We shall touch on some aspects of this faith in chapter 10.

Questions about the Text

1. How would you define *rationalism*, *materialism*, and *determinism* as intellectual movements?
2. Why does a materialist or determinist reject the reality of free will?
3. How do the rationalist and determinist worldviews define *faith* and *reason*?
4. In what ways do people commonly accept information on authority without strict proof?
5. What are some examples of Newman’s “illative sense”?
6. Why is a strictly determinist view self-contradictory?
7. In what way is reason itself ultimately based on a kind of faith in rationality?
8. Does it make sense to define faith as trust in the fundamental order, meaning, and goodness of the universe?
9. What are the different elements in Aquinas’s definition of faith?
10. In what ways does a conversion to Christian faith involve an intellectual conversion?
11. What is meant by the objective aspect of faith, and why does the Christian tradition consider this aspect necessary?
12. What is meant by a fideistic approach to faith? How do rationalism and fideism share a common definition of faith?
13. How would you summarize the basic biblical attitude toward faith?

Discussion Questions

1. Can you think of some examples of the influence of rationalism, determinism, or materialism in your life experience?
2. To what extent do you think your own actions are determined by forces outside of yourself?
3. In your field of study, how much information do you accept on authority, without proving it for yourself?
4. How much of your own decision-making process is based on strict logic?
5. Do you have faith in the essential goodness and meaning of the universe?
6. Do religious people whom you know tend to be fideistic, or are they open to rational discussions of faith?

Endnotes

1. René Descartes, *A Discourse on the Method of Correctly Conducting One’s Reason*, trans. I. Moadan, Oxford World’s Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 28.
2. *Ibid.*
3. René Descartes, *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, in René Descartes, *Philosophical Essays: Discourse on Method, Meditations, Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, trans. L. J. Lafleur (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1964), 152.
4. John Maddox, *What Remains to be Discovered: Mapping the Secrets of the Universe, the Origins of Life, and the Future of the Human Race* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999), 281.
5. Francis Crick, *The Astonishing Hypothesis: The Scientific Search for the Soul* (New York: Scribner, 1994), 3.
6. Private conversation noted in John Horgan, *The Undiscovered Mind: How the Human Brain Defies Replication, Medication, and Explanation* (New York: Free Press, 1999), 247.
7. Joseph Razinger, *Introduction to Christianity* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000; orig. pub. 1968), 66.
8. When Napoleon asked the Enlightenment mathematician Pierre-Simon Laplace why he did not mention God in his five-volume study of heavenly bodies, Laplace famously replied, “I have no need of that hypothesis.”
9. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 34.
10. *Ibid.*, 308.
11. *Ibid.*, 282–86.
12. Quoted in Rodney Stark, *For the Glory of God: How Monotheism Led to Reformations, Science, Witch-hunts, and the End of Slavery* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 201.
13. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (London: HarperCollins, 2001; orig. pub. 1952), 62.
14. G. K. Chesterton, *The Autobiography of G. K. Chesterton* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1936), 1.
15. Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil, Religious Perspectives 17* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 350.