

Redemption of Reason

Talking Points for Two Lectures

By: Dallas Willard

Lecture One: Is There a Problem about the Human Use of Reason Today?
If so, how did it come about? How do things stand in Academe?

What is reason? It is the human capacity to discover necessary connections by thinking, not necessarily excluding the use of information or knowledge from the other two human sources of truth: perception and authority. “Thinking” has many different forms and styles, but it is, in general, a matter of bringing things before the mind and attentively dwelling upon them and their properties and relations.

The human problem is to secure knowledge to serve as a basis for action: knowledge of what to aim at (the good) and of how to achieve the aim (means to ends). The general public assumes that this is what our schools are about and why they are worth maintaining.

The use of reason, as described, was discovered in the ancient world, chiefly among the Greeks (See Bruno Snell, *The Discovery of the Mind*), and has, from time to time, resulted in increased knowledge and access to reality to the great benefit of humankind.

“Reason” has been a traditional name for this human capacity to discover by thinking, but that word has, for various reasons or causes, largely disappeared from our vocabulary today. Confidence in reason would be odd today. “Truth” and “knowledge” have gone with it. One does not simply appeal to reason, truth or knowledge today. The function of reason, however, cannot be omitted. It has gone underground and re-emerged under the name of “research.” Research, and not ‘reason’, is what is honored today, and what people are honored for and guide themselves by. One does, constantly, hear appeals to *research*.

A major issue, then, facing the individual in the academic world of today is: What truths and standards can guide my research (and, of course, my teaching) toward the good implicit in the drive toward truth and knowledge, or is the only applicable standard of the quality of my research or reasoning simply the professional status which I manage to negotiate in my professional context? Is my social and professional environment the ultimate horizon for the guidance, sustenance and evaluation of my work and my life as a scholar/scientist/thinker?

At present, and for most people in Academe, especially younger people, I think the answer to this last question is “Yes.” Fitting in with—successfully moving within—the thought currents swirling around them in their professional associations, and respecting a rag-tag collection of moral ideals that are vaguely if powerfully “with it,” is about all that can guide them toward “good work,” or at least toward being “successful.” Those around them reward them for that. What is good “research,” or work that will be rewarded today, is work that fits into the social/professional context of the individual worker. (Here Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, can be taken as a reliable, if somewhat

exaggerated, account of “good work.”) This, to me, gives a clear picture of what reason must be redeemed from today.

If one says “No” to that last question (“Is my social and professional environment the ultimate horizon for my work and life?”), then one has to state what could serve as alternative points of reference in determining what is good intellectual work and what is not. For most of our history the points of reference were clear, no matter how badly they were served on occasion. These were: (1) Faithfulness (accuracy, truth) to the subject matter concerned (reality), and (2) Service to what was good—moral good and other goods. These were thought to provide a standard against which the use or abuse of reason/research could be judged and, even, corrected.

So, **on the traditional view**, one might be in good social standing and do bad work intellectually, or in bad social standing and do good work intellectually. And even now this will seem to most people to be, somehow, the right way to think about things. The possibility that reason or research could be “lost” and in need of redemption is a real one, and there must be standards against which the use of reason can be judged.

But how are standards of truth, reality and goodness to be discerned and applied? How can we accept reality and morality as standards by which reason/research are to be guided and judged if they are not themselves certified as truth and goodness by reason and research? And reason must be defined independently of reality and morality if it is to be what says what they are. There must be a knowledge of reality and goodness independent of reasoning and research if there is to be a standard by which reason and its results can be judged. The temptation to retreat to negotiated professional standing as the only standard of good intellectual work seems irresistible. But then reason cannot be redeemed from its slavery to social forces. It’s institutional setting cannot protect it, but only becomes a part of the problem: *Hitler’s Professors*, Social pressure in the Sixties, Political Correctness concerning what questions can be asked, the exclusion of God from all fields of inquiry, including religion.

Biblical revelation, authority, perception and common sense have all made claims to provide a standard against which the processes and claims of reason could be judged. But the “theories” of reason have in many ways managed to undercut those claims. This is especially true with regard to morality.

With “research” progressively defined in terms of the natural sciences and strictly humanistic inquiry, any cognitive basis for morality is lost, and moral knowledge disappears from the intellectual scene. (Julie Reuben’s *The Making of the Modern University*). Thus, Stanley Fish (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 16, 2003) advises higher education to “Aim Low,” and not attempt to develop moral character in its students. This is pretty obvious, in view of the presumed fact that there is now no knowledge of morality upon which efforts at character development could be based.

Now, as the Reuben book makes clear, it was, historically, the removal of religion from the cognitive arena that eventually led to the removal of morality from pedagogy in the

American Universities. The other university “faculties” disowned responsibility for moral pedagogy and training. Now this is not an observation about “the nature of things”—not a statement to the effect that there is no morality without religion, for example. It is simply a statement of how things developed in “the making of the modern university.” That university is now the cultural authority on everything, through its “research.” The practice of morality in the universities was tied to religious belief and practice. No other foundation for morality was established when religion was removed from the area of knowledge. (See Reuben’s fascinating account of how this transpired.)

One field of knowledge after another took itself to be self-contained, and, in particular, to require no reference to God for the understanding of its subject matter. This had been developing for a long time, with the rise of “modern” science. (See James Orr, *The Problem of the Old Testament*, pp. 12ff: Only “natural” causes to be admitted into research in “Higher Criticism.” But of course that was progressively extended to everything.)

So religious belief is defined out of relevance to academic fields, and “knowledge” and “research” defined accordingly. (Noah Porter/William Graham Sumner case.)

This “irrelevance” is now internalized into Christians who receive their intellectual-professional formation in Ph. D. granting institutions where such irrelevance is so far assumed that it would not even be discussed. Thus, what is actually taught as truth, and what is brought into course content, in “Christian” institutions and by Christians in whatever institution, differs very little from that anywhere.

Consequently, “Integration of Faith and Intellect” does not, usually, extend to **the course content and research** in Christian schools, any more than in Secular institutions. No one is seriously inquiring into the relationship between Chemistry and the resurrection of the dead or the contents of the “Apostle’s Creed,” or between Law or Business Administration and the clearly cognitive contents of the *New Testament*. Little more is intended by “integration,” as commonly understood, than being a good Christian person on the job.

So we can, I think, describe *the situation in Academe* as follows:

Reason can be supported in its devotion to truth and goodness only in a moral life that is fortified by a morality based on knowledge and reality. It is not a self-sustaining power.

A morality based on knowledge and reality is not now available, only one based on feeling and social pressure (“political correctness” etc.) Reason itself has not been able to provide an objective and life-guiding morality.

Reason/research falls prey to drives for social dominance, political motivations, individual advancement and “intellectual respectability”. Is this the case today?

Dare we say that the Intellectual system today is not rational? Dare we not?

What are the resources of the Christian (or any) religion for dealing with the plight of reason in its bondage to social forces that surround it? **For opening up the institutional settings of reason/research to genuinely free inquiry into all the questions left unanswered by the type of research now acceptable?** Can it free itself from its institutional and social bondages? The question of the redemption of reason turns out to be inseparable from the question of the redemption of religion itself. We shall have a go at some of these questions in the next talk.

Lecture Two: The Way Back: Thinking about a Possible Christian Response to the Plight of Reason today.

When I speak of “Christian” or “Christian tradition or knowledge” in what follows, I shall be referring to what C. S. Lewis calls “Mere Christianity,” the core beliefs of the main tradition of the Christian people throughout the ages. It is sufficient just to think of the cognitive content of the “Apostles’ Creed.” Failure to distinguish this central core from the many historical and accidental accretions to that tradition led the Christian institutions (Churches, but also their colleges) of the late 1800’s and early 1900’s to irrational defenses of doctrines and practices that could not be rationally defended, leading to identification of religion with irrationality and to the deadly and false opposition of “faith” to reason. Religion became synonymous in many minds with blind dogmatism and blind adherence to authorities. “Faith,” it is jokingly said, “is what you believe even though you know it ain’t so.” Thus, you will hear people say today that you can’t be a scientist and believe in God. When you supply the historical background, you see why they might say that, though it remains a thoroughly ignorant statement.

Now, one standing outside the peculiar history referred to sees things very differently. Thus Charles Malik: “If the university today dominates the world, if Jesus Christ is who the church and the Bible proclaim him to be, and if we happen to believe that what the church and the Bible claim about Jesus Christ is the truth, then how can we fail, not only to raise the question of what Jesus Christ thinks of the university, but to face the equally urgent demand: What can be done?” (*A Christian Critique of the University*, p. 21)

I want us now to put ourselves as best we can in Malik’s position, outside the box and posture of current American religion and intellectual prejudices, and think that, as followers of Jesus Christ, we have something vital to say and to be in the University setting with reference to intellect. Try to imagine, for a moment, that all we say about Jesus is true and that we know it. Think the thought that he brings ultimate knowledge of truth and goodness, and that we see the University as a human system struggling to provide the knowledge necessary to life having set aside what he brought and brings. If we were to do that, what are some of the things we might do as honest and open researchers into the subject matters of our fields and across disciplinary lines?

One of the things we must do is develop our own understanding of what truth is and how it relates to life. Truth itself—what truth is—is a simple thing, which small children easily understand. A statement or belief is true if what it is about is as that statement or belief says it is. “Snow is white” is true if and only if snow is white. And so on. Truth is completely unyielding to opinion or desire. “True for me” never makes any belief true. It’s just another way of saying you believe something, or say something. But then of course many beliefs are false. Again, “absolute” truth is not a kind of truth, but a way of talking about how someone believes or holds to something. All truth is absolute in the sense that it does not depend upon anyone’s acceptance. Truth is not a social construction, though views often are: false views as well as true ones. You are not a dogmatist or a Nazi if you understand truth in this way. The recovery of truth in this clear and traditional sense is indispensable for the redemption of reason. Only so can one

find a point of reference outside the “social ferment,” as Horkheimer describes “Critical Theory,” to serve as a guiding star for thought in its appointed function, which is, precisely, discovery of truth. The curious feature of so much “research” is that it goes hand in hand with the assumption that there is no truth to discover. What, then? Foucault rightly says, in that case, that “force” rules the intellect. No redemption possible.

Of course the particular truths which Jesus Christ brings into the world then have, at last, a field of play in open and fair competition with alternative claims to truth. But we must distinguish truth itself from truths of whatever kind, which, unlike truth itself, often are very complicated and recondite.

Having done this we clarify in our minds and for others what knowledge is. I suggest: We know any given thing if we are able to represent it as it is on an appropriate basis of thought and experience—not to exclude authority. Authority is indispensable, and it is good so long as it is utterly open and fearless in the face of any question, fair or unfair. All that religion requires of philosophy, L. T. Hobhouse once said, is “a fair field and no quarter given.” Yes, especially for follows of Christ.

Knowledge, of course, requires truth. You cannot know what is not true. And you cannot know that for which you have no “basis.” You should also note that to know, you do not have to know that you know. (An old Sophistry.) The description of knowledge stated above is one that fits the cases we commonly distinguish in ordinary life, between those who do know something and those who don’t. What counts as an “appropriate basis” will vary from subject matter to subject matter, and there is no general formula for such a basis. Experienced people in any field have a good sense of when such a basis is there and when it is not. Of course we need to know and use general logic in our inquiries of all sorts, but that gives us, in some cases, only a necessary condition, never a sufficient condition of “appropriate basis.”

You will notice that truth and knowledge and logic as here described do not automatically rule any areas of thought or practice out of the domain of knowledge. That contrasts with the many understandings of knowledge in the Western tradition that do automatically rule some areas out. Whether there is knowledge in a given area or case is a matter of the details. One of the good things Postmodernism (to speak loosely) does is to reject the idea that there is **just one** “story” about knowledge, and, in particular, to reject the hegemony of natural science—mainly, Physics—over the whole domain of knowledge and reality. Every field has its standards derived from experience of its subject matter.

The greatest mistake among Christian thinkers and institutions over recent centuries was to **allow the secular mind** to define what counts as knowledge. Think of how this went from, say, Descartes, through Empiricism, up to Positivism and Scientism. That is what opened the way to the required assumption of atheism—practically at least, God making no difference—in all areas of knowledge and practice. The opposite of that assumption is not theism, but openness to facts and inquiry without adherence to some narrow and prejudiced understanding of what counts as knowledge.

Having secured the stand of the Christian intellectual in this understanding of truth, knowledge and reality—and of course one must work through the foundations of this understanding—one can now go on to consider the central truth-claims of Mere

Christianity. One can explore the implications of those central claims, about God, the universe, and human life, for particular fields of intellectual work.

It may be of use here to think of three respects in which one could evaluate adequacy of treatment or of course content in a given field of research. Is the treatment, the understanding, adequate to:

The judgments of fellow professionals?

The human needs for understanding and practice?

The subject matter itself?

You can see, I think, that these are rather different standards. And whether the traditional “body of Christian knowledge”—concerning practice as well as theory—is relevant to adequacy of treatment in a given field will depend on which of these serve as the standard of adequacy.

A good way to proceed might be to scrutinize the unanswered questions in the given field—your field, of course. Through force of habit, these might not be obvious. We may then need to go back to what is “obvious” in our field. “Genius,” it has been said, “is the ability to scrutinize the obvious.” Doing this may yield results that will make you look like a genius. Indeed, it is a good rule in intellectual work to mistrust the obvious. What would happen if one did such scrutinization on the hypothetical assumption that the central claims of Mere Christianity are true? Would anything appear intellectually interesting about, for example, why the physical universe has the laws it does, why mathematics works, the possible forms of energy, the function of the art object in aesthetic creation and appreciation? Or why the life of Napoleon, or Teresa of Calcutta, turned out as it did? What language is? The nature of the human being? Spiritual reality in the human? The mind and the brain? And so on.

Let us say without qualification: If research in our fields is adequate in every respect without “integration,” without any reference to the central truths of Mere Christianity, that’s fine. So be it. If there is a God, he is in charge of that too. But one shouldn’t assume that such adequacy is present without careful examination. In some cases, we might find mere consistency between the research results in the field and Mere Christianity. Perhaps in other cases there might be stronger or weaker evidence for its central truths, or from those truths to the given field. For example, the truth of the existence of an all-powerful, benevolent creator God. It has been said that except upon the assumption of such a being, science as we know it would have never arisen. If so, that is intriguing to say the least. But we need to recognize that false assumptions can be useful, and to dig deeply to see if there is more to the cause and effect than just a fortunate assumption of what is false. These are just some suggestions as to what might be done. You would know better than I in the areas where you specialize. But the general point is that the current assumption that no field of knowledge or practice requires reference to God and his kingdom and his redemptive presence in history needs to be challenged and made to support itself on the highest intellectual plane. What might be established in one field could be influential on other fields. Sometimes a current controversy may be broadly illuminating. The current discussion of evolution and intelligent design as factually carried out on the campuses and in the culture is a painful illustration of how irrational presumably rational people can be, and has much to teach us about the current state of the intellect.

Now, once again: The last thing we are talking about is taking a dogmatic stand about anything. We are talking about engaging our work and our fields with openness, humility,

dogged intelligence, the highest quality of scholarship, love for those we work with, and confidence that God is with us. But we are not to thoughtlessly accept the secular definitions of our work.

Also, we are not talking about something that identifies itself as “Christian” research. We are talking about good research done outside of the blinders of dogmatic secularism.

This, I believe, gives some practicable idea of how reason can be redeemed from its dogmatic, secular captivity as seen in current University and intellectual environments.

Beyond all this, but not in separation from it, we must show by our character and practice the reality of life in the kingdom of God with a living Christ. The intellectual vacuum in the moral life of our culture is appalling. It is not for us just to talk about it, though we should, but we must live out the “truth and reality” we talk about, make present the non-secular presence which Mere Christianity advocates. We cannot do this just by maintaining purity of doctrine and being nice. What we say we believe must be the things we actually believe, the things we act upon. To believe something is to be set to act as if it were true. One main reason why we must be intellectually serious is because the views and theories of secularism deeply impact what we actually do believe, and not just what we profess to believe. Much of the weakness of Christian practice comes from the thought that what we say is true about God and the universe is not knowledge, and that the other side represents “real knowledge.” Integration of faith and learning is whole life. And the kind of intellectual/practical schizophrenia we see so much of today is not sustainable in a healthy existence. The redemption of reason, the restoration of it as traditionally recognized in our better human moments, is vital to human beings, Christian or not.

Now deeper critical issues concerning the failure of self-understanding of reason or “research” in its modern modes is something that I cannot pursue here. This failure deeply effects the Universities and our general culture. But I would just say that it is a hugely important matter for humanity, and that it is widely recognized as such by leading philosophers. I refer you only to Edmund Husserl’s works and especially his *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*. A much simpler treatment is to be found in H. W. B. Joseph’s *Some Problems of Ethics*, especially Chapter I. You can find further discussions of this matter on the “Philosophical” side of my web-page: www.dwillard.org.