

**PART III**

**SCHOLARSHIP AND EDUCATION**

*How Reason Can Survive the  
Modern University:  
The Moral Foundations  
of Rationality*

Dallas Willard

**W**hen I speak of reason surviving the modern university, I refer to reason as a living, social practice. Reason as a human faculty or as a mental function, and all that essentially pertains to it, is perhaps in no danger. It is we, it is the university and education generally, that are in danger because of the loss of the *practice* of reason.

By “reason” I refer to the capacity to apprehend truth itself, as truth is displayed in any true thought, judgment or statement. That capacity involves, among other things, the capacity to grasp logical relations and thereby appreciate evidence for truth. The primary function of reason is to see truth as a property of judgment or representation and to see the simpler laws of truth that govern truth-values as necessarily distributed over judgments that are logically related to one another by such relations as strict implication and logical contradiction. The ideal of the intellectual, artistic and academic life as the pursuit of truth, or of just being thoroughly logical, is far beyond being in “deep trouble” in the university today, and in many places is approximating the status of a “lost cause.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> I will not try to demonstrate this here, or discuss it at any length. I take it as a given. But those who would like to pursue it can certainly consult Robert Nisbet, *The Degradation of the Academic Dogma* (New York: Basic Books, 1971), for an older work; or, among most recent works, Edward Tingley, “Technicians of Learning,” *First Things* (August/September 2000), pp. 29–35, or the Fall 2000 edition of *The Hedgehog Review: Critical Reflections on Contemporary Culture*, entitled “What’s the University for?”

Of course truth is inseparable from the being (reality, existence) of that which the true judgment is about. So reason is intimately linked to the comprehension of *being*, of *how things are*. It is a capacity for insight into reality or what is. Maritain says in one place, "If I . . . am a Thomist, it is in the last analysis because I have understood that the intellect sees, and that it is cut out to conquer being. In its most perfect function, which is not to manufacture ideas, but to judge, the intellect seizes upon existence exercised by things. And at the same time it forms the first of its concepts—the concept of being, which metaphysics will bring out, in its own light, at the highest degree of abstractive visualization."<sup>2</sup>

Reason is therefore indispensable to knowledge, which, it was thought in other times, the university and the intellectual life was primarily about. No longer. We now have *research* universities, but not *knowledge* universities. Our goal is "information" and its use, or possibly only novelty. What this all means is well laid out in Lyotard's book, *Knowledge: The Postmodern Condition*.<sup>3</sup> As a description of the actual processes of university life in general, and the professionalized life that goes on around and within it, this book is not a totally misguided representation of the facts of academic life and of what is regarded and rewarded as "good work."

The book shows how little is said about truth today in our "research" centers, and perhaps less still about logic as anything other than rules to be built into a computer to manipulate symbols of "information." Sometimes "logic" is now used to characterize actual processes of thought which some individual or group tends to carry out. But logic has no weight beyond actual processes that can be technologically or socially sustained, and it has no tight connection (if any at all) with truth in its correlation with reality.

Reality in academe is the social (including the technological) "flow," and whatever is spoken of as truth or logic must not transcend the flow. Knowledge, accordingly, which cannot completely shake its connections with truth and logic (evidence) in some sense, also now becomes a matter of the "flow." Knowledge becomes what, for the time being, passes for or is accepted as "knowledge." It becomes a kind of practice—perhaps the "best professional practice." It is *belief* in a certain social setting. No wonder we turn from "knowledge" to "research" with a sigh of relief, as from something boring to something adventuresome and exciting. Research still has at

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Maritain, *The Range of Reason* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1953), p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

least a mild connotation of finding out something of reality as it exists independently of our mental and social states.

By contrast, Maritain says: "Nothing is more important than the events which occur within that invisible universe which is the mind of man. And the light of that universe is knowledge. If we are concerned with the future of civilization we must be concerned primarily with a genuine understanding of what knowledge is, its value, its degrees, and how it can foster the inner unity of the human being."<sup>4</sup> Most students and faculty in my acquaintance would draw a complete blank on this statement.

If knowledge is power, as we have by now long been told, and power is what we really want, we will find many ways to power, and will no doubt discover that knowledge and claims to knowledge can actually *hinder* the pursuit of power. I think something like this "discovery" has happened: People generally, the "masses," want many things, along with the status of having a university education. They would like to be "right," of course, and to have social status, along with opportunities in life—especially occupational and social opportunities. The life of reason in any traditional sense is not necessarily required for any of these, and may even be opposed to them. It is, in any case, a life of sustained labor. The academic community finds many ways to make itself useful to its public and exciting to its inhabitants other than pursuing a life of reason and knowledge.

But let us go a little deeper into what reason is. I have already said that it is the capacity to apprehend truth itself and the laws of truth (and falsity), along with the realities corresponding to truth. Truth itself is "correspondence" of thought (proposition, belief, statement) with what the thought (etc.) is about. A proposition is true provided that what it is about is as that proposition holds or indicates it to be. The many so-called theories of "truth" that have arisen in the last century and a half are not theories of *truth* at all, but are efforts to change the subject, driven by failures of representationalist accounts of mind and language.<sup>5</sup> Their aim, nonetheless, surely is to represent truth as it is, not to present theories that are "true" of truth in the non-correspondence senses of "true" they themselves spell out. Reason is our ability to bring that peculiar structure of truth with which a child is familiar before consciousness, and, in simpler cases at least, to gain insight into or understanding of it and of the necessary relations between propositions and their truth values.

We take the simplest of illustrations of these relations. With very little

<sup>4</sup> Maritain, *The Range of Reason*, p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> See Frederick F. Schmitt, *Truth: A Primer* (San Francisco: Westview Press, 1995).

reflection on experience and thought one can see that the proposition *Swans are living things* is true, that what a swan is involves or requires any particular swan to exemplify life. (Try giving a dead or plaster "swan" to someone you have promised a swan.) But even if this were not so, it is easily seen that *if* all swans are living things, no thing that lacks life would be a swan (obversion), or that no things lacking life are swans (contraposition). Reason here enables you to know something about everything in the entire universe—something that in this case is fairly uninteresting, to be sure. But the point is the process, and the triviality of the case may help us see the process more clearly.

By contrast, the truth of the proposition that all swans are living things leaves undetermined whether all living things are swans. Conversion "without limitation" is a logically illicit move. This too is an insight of reason. Realization of a *non sequitur* is as much a rational insight as is insight into an implication or contradiction between thoughts or propositions. The grasp of what does *not* logically follow or is irrelevant is often a triumph of reason.

Now I have taken the simplest possible cases to illustrate the use of reason, because I want to make *what reason is* very clear on the basis of thought experiences which everyone can have. (The reader must do the necessary, reflective thinking to achieve the experiences in question.) It is, to repeat, the capacity for insight into truth (or falsity) and truth-value relations between propositions. Similar simple insights of reason underlie basic rules of the logic of propositions (e.g., the distributive laws or De Morgan's laws) and of quantification, as well as systems such as that in Russell and Whitehead's *Principia Mathematica*, with its rules of substitution and detachment. Rational insight into the systems of logical rules allows reason to extend its reach far beyond anything that it can directly grasp in the manner of the simple cases.

(Reason also displays its nature in grasping evidential and conceptual relations other than implication and contradiction, of course; but I shall not undertake to discuss these matters here.)

Now let us try to say something about the reasonable *person* and the life of reason. And here we are, of course, primarily concerned with persons in the context of academic or scholarly life, as lived on our university campuses and carried on in our professional associations. Who is the reasonable person? What is a life of reason? We can, I think, say a few things that are true and important about being a reasonable person, without trying to establish necessary and sufficient conditions of rationality—a difficult if not impossible task.

We can perhaps agree that persons are reasonable in the degree to which they conform their thinking, talk and action to the order of truth and understanding. Reasonable persons will characteristically reason soundly, not

contradict themselves, and be open-minded and inquiring about the issues with which they deal. They will seek to employ the best concepts, classifications and hypotheses, testing them by interrelating them and by reference to their experience and the experiences of others. They will be open to criticism, and even seek it, knowing how hard it is to secure truth on most subjects. People are unreasonable to the degree in which they are not reasonable. No one will turn out to be perfectly reasonable or unreasonable.

The main point in all of this, to my mind, is simply that the reasonable person—the one who acts in accordance with reason in life as well as in their academic or other profession—is the one who governs his or her beliefs and assertions by insight into truth and logical relations. In particular, they are *not* mastered by how they *want* things to be, by the beliefs they happen to have, or by styles or currents of thought and action around them. If they advance claims as true or justified they do so on the basis of such insight, and are very careful to be sure that that basis is *really there*. The difficulty of securing such a basis will make any reasonable person quite humble in their claims and willing (indeed, happy, even solicitous) to be corrected when they are mistaken. Thus the reasonable person is not close-minded or dogmatic, or insistent on having their own way, but just the opposite. And that attitude is, indeed, based upon insight into the truth about the nature of scholarly or intellectual work itself. Positively, of course, the reasonable person will be devoted to *method* for determining truth and the soundness of reasoning, and will carefully observe such methods. They will be conscious and explicit about moving beyond such methods if that is, for some reason, unavoidable in their practice and statements. Life sometimes pushes us beyond where evidence reaches.

The unreasonable person, by contrast, will pursue the “right” conclusion at the expense of rational method and will aim at the achievement of certain pre-preferred effects and outcomes as their primary goal rather than at adherence to rational method. They will judge method as good or bad in terms of the conclusions reached rather than judge the conclusion as good if it emerges from rational method or sound reasoning. They will freely judge and assert without logical discipline.

It is at the point, I think, that we can see and state what has happened in the university setting in recent decades. Generally speaking, rational method, understood in traditional terms where the weight is relentlessly placed on truth and logical relations, either leads to conclusions which are thought, on other grounds, to be “unacceptable,” or at least it cannot be found to support the conclusions which *are* acceptable or desired. Now this is not a particularly new phenomenon, but in the distant past it more commonly led to the

evasion or distortion of truth and logic rather than their repudiation or attempted replacement with “methods” or “logics” that yielded more gratifying results. Indeed, truth and logic has throughout history often been *forced* to support positions that could not, in truth, be rationally supported. Temptation to intellectual irresponsibility is strong. Truth is often bitter, and the path down which “standard” logic would lead us may doom us or our dearest commitments.

That brings me to my next point, which is perhaps the main point of what I have to say here. The life of reason is not, generally speaking, *self-sustaining*. The values inherent in it are not by themselves enough to secure its institution and perpetuation. This brings out the pointlessness of teaching logic as part of a liberal education without illuminating and emphasizing our *duty* to be logical. Only a strong *moral* commitment to being a reasonable person can effectively produce routine conformity, or will to conform, to truth and logic in action and assertion. We see such commitment in outstanding examples such as Socrates, Jesus and Spinoza, and certainly Maritain.

We all have tendencies to want certain things to be true or things to turn out in a certain way. Or sometimes, perhaps, we are just in a hurry to some end. Moreover, our feelings and imagination, as well as our will, have the power and often the habit of obscuring truth and sound reasoning from our intellect. Perhaps our intellect itself is impaired by our overall mental and moral condition or our social setting. To be a reasonable person, to live the life of reason, is therefore not an easy, much less an automatic, thing, but a strenuous life, an uphill battle, involving constant watchfulness, effective precautions, and many failures and humiliations. Unless there is more in us than the mere appreciation of truth and logic, we will not be able routinely to conform our thought and action to them—especially in the social setting. (Consider only the frequency of explicit lying. It is one form of disregard of the truth and its laws.)

Being reasonable, or living the life of reason, as here explained must be incorporated into our moral identity, must be a part of what we understand as being a good person, if it is to have power to direct our lives and govern our thinking and speaking. Only so can reason survive in the modern university—or anywhere else. Willful disregard of truth and the laws of truth must also be recognized as expressions of a morally evil will and person, if they are to be routinely excluded from life. Moral evil is hardly ever discussed in academic ethics today, and the same is true of being a good person. Using one’s professional vocation as an avenue of moral realization, of becoming and being a good person is even less discussed. But the scientist or journalist who falsifies data to achieve their various ends betrays the goodness of heart



which, I am sure, everyone in their sober and thoughtful moments recognizes as the essence of moral goodness. And such betrayal is hardly less evident in the teacher or scholar—or parent or pastor—who is careless or intentionally negligent of truth and sound reasoning and method, in order to secure ends or outcomes that they cherish for other reasons than their intellectual integrity.

The morally good person, let us say, is a person who is intent upon advancing the various goods of human life with which they are effectively in contact, in a manner that respects their relative degrees of importance and the extent to which the actions of the person in question can actually promote the existence and maintenance of those goods.

The person who is morally bad or evil is one who is intent upon the destruction (or non-maintenance) of the various goods of human life with which they are effectively in contact, or who is indifferent to the existence and maintenance of those goods. Truth and solid reasoning are among the important human goods.

Here, I submit, is the fundamental distinction within moral phenomena: the one which is of primary human interest, and from which all the others, moving toward the periphery of the moral life and ethical theory, can be clarified. We can call it, simply, “good will.” For example: the moral value (positive and negative) of acts; the nature of moral obligation and responsibility; virtues and vices; the nature and limitations of rights, punishment, rewards, justice and related issues; the morality of laws and institutions; and what is to be made of moral progress and moral education, and so on. A coherent theory of all these matters can, I suggest, be developed only if we start from the distinction between the good and the bad will or person—which, we have already admitted, very few philosophers are currently prepared to discuss.

But I don’t want to get side-tracked here. We can allow some latitude on exactly how the basic moral distinctions are to be understood, as long as we don’t try to derive moral principles from some version of *formal* rationality alone. An Aristotle, a St. Thomas and a Kant—perhaps even hedonistic utilitarianism of the John Stuart Mill or Sidgwick varieties—could all say what I am saying here, that being reasonable is an essential element in moral excellence, and that one who does not incorporate being reasonable, and living a life of reason, into their moral identity will not be able to sustain routine reasonableness in their practice. We have a moral duty to be as intelligent as possible, and that incorporates adherence to truth and sound reasoning.

In order for reason as a practice, or reasonableness, to survive as a governing principle in life and profession, a certain awe and reverence for truth and logical relations is required, one that goes beyond whatever utilitarian value they may have—which itself is very great—and accepts their unconditional



claim as human goods on our judgment and our behavior. And that awe and reverence will inevitably be associated with a strong sense of moral shame for the individual or group that does not comply with that unconditional claim. This shame will accompany the realization that I have not been the person I ought to have been because, in my non-compliance, I have not honored truth and reasoning according to strict logic, and have not acted to the benefit of those effected by my judgment or action—regardless of whether or not I am found out. Of others, such as those scientists who falsify data or journalists who make up juicy news, we will regard their behavior as morally shameful, as diminishing them from what they ought to be. We will say, “How could they do that?”—even though we very well know how they could. Commitment to truth and reason is not a governing force in their life, not a point of their moral identity, no matter how they may “spin” it. And that is why we appropriately think they are not good persons—even though in our current moral confusion we may think it morally wrong of us to think any person not good.

Strangely, perhaps, one of the strongest threats to being reasonable today is the desire to be or to appear to be scientific. Certainly if “scientific” were understood in a more classical sense, it would come down to precisely the same thing as being reasonable. Brentano had this sense in mind when he in the mid-nineteenth century urged that philosophy become scientific.<sup>6</sup> But “scientific” has increasingly been understood to mean conformity with the findings and assumptions of existing sciences, or, really, of existing scientists. And the will to come out scientific in this sense, or to appear so, is a primary obstacle to the life of reason in our time—and especially on the campus. Other obstacles fall in social, political and religious areas. I think of the attempt to relativize conceptualization, logic and evidence to race and gender. But I won’t try to go into that here.

But now we confront a startling possibility. Perhaps the weakening of the life of reason which, if I and others are right, we are now experiencing in the midst of the academic world is the result of the disappearance of any accepted body of moral knowledge from our intellectual as well as our general culture. Is there a credible and widespread understanding today of who is a good (or evil) person, especially in the university context? If there is, I cannot identify it. In fact, as already noted, we don’t even allow ourselves to talk about such things. How, then, could the life of reason as described be fostered

<sup>6</sup> For elaboration of this point see my “Who Needs Brentano,” in *The Brentano Puzzle*, ed. Roberto Poli (Brookfield, Massachusetts: Ashgate Publishers, 1998).

## HOW REASON CAN SURVIVE THE MODERN UNIVERSITY 189

and sustained within a moral identity if there is no recognizable body of moral knowledge within which moral identity can be cognitively identified as an objective reality in human life? Rationality today cannot find a moral foundation.

Non-cognitivism in ethical theory has triumphed in the twentieth century. In its original form, simple emotivism, it has long been rejected. But the conclusion which that original form established in academic and cultural consciousness still holds the field, and all the book-length blustering about justice and virtue theory has not budged it an inch. But then there *cannot* be an acknowledged body of moral knowledge, because the very possibility of such knowledge is ruled out. And so no moral support for the practice of rationality in life and profession can come from moral knowledge. Its support, such as it may be, must come from itself or from various utilitarian considerations or from feeling favoring it.

Now for my part I believe there is moral knowledge accessible to any thoughtful person, even though there is now no generally *acknowledged* body of moral knowledge, especially on campus. This accessible moral knowledge is rooted in our non-empirical awareness of the will and its properties—we have no better term for this than the unfortunate word “intuition”—in self-knowledge and abstraction directed upon the properties of intention, will and character. Like logical knowledge itself, basic moral knowledge does not in its beginnings depend upon reasoning, though, along with logic, basic moral knowledge lays the foundation for a body of moral knowledge derived largely through reasoning. The most elemental moral knowledge is quite direct. It is strongly presented, for example, by what Lévinas has to say about the face of the other and its immediate claim on me,<sup>7</sup> as well as what Maritain says about connatural knowledge of the virtues.<sup>8</sup> So while I am sure that moral knowledge has disappeared from *view* in our culture in general, I do not say it does not exist. It is just not available as a basis for a social enterprise such as education or the direction of the intellectual or professional life.

Well, what if anything might be done? A few comments:

If rationality and the life of reason is sustainable only as a part of what it means to be a morally good person, and if, as I believe, being a morally good person is sustainable in a social setting only within a framework of accessible moral knowledge that can serve as a guide to life and a background for holding people responsible, then one concerned about a rational life must seek to

<sup>7</sup> Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity* (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 1969), especially pp. 77–81 and 187–204.

<sup>8</sup> Maritain, *The Range of Reason*, p. 23.

make accessible to the public an appropriate body of moral knowledge. Can that be done, and, in particular, can it be done in our current social context or anything close to it?

This is a very difficult question to answer, because it is, at bottom, a question of social causation: a notoriously difficult type of question. But perhaps such transformations have been accomplished from time to time in the human past, at least to some significant degree. I have already mentioned Socrates. He and those who gathered around him and came afterward do seem to me to have put in place a powerful version of moral excellence that included devotion to truth and right reasoning sufficient to sustain the life of reason as an ideal and a practice in the lives of many who learned of it. Perhaps I am too hopeful about that period, and certainly it had its problems and failures, but reading the history of many public figures in the centuries during and after Socrates is impressive, as are the writings and influence of people such as Epictetus or Seneca.

More impressive still, in terms of effect, is the view and experience of the moral life and devotion to truth in the Christian tradition, which gave rise to the universities in the Western world, and sustained them up until the end of the nineteenth century or so. One might think of trying to renew that tradition, and not pass it off as irreparably undermined by its critics and opponents. After all, it is not an exaggeration to point out that no alternative to the Christian tradition has yet been discovered as a satisfactory basis for life.

I am haunted periodically by the words with which Alasdair MacIntyre closed *After Virtue* years ago—still, to me, the most profound words in the book. He says, you may recall, that the barbarians are already within the gates—one wonders who they might be—and that we are not now waiting for Godot, but for another and no doubt very different, St. Benedict.<sup>9</sup>

I'm sure I have never fully understood what MacIntyre had in mind with this statement, but I believe he intends to say that community must come, somehow, *before* virtue, and subsequently provide the support for rationality and the life of reason, among other things. But the community itself, so far as Benedict was concerned, certainly had to be a product of the transcendent reality of Jesus and the Kingdom of God, including the Church. I really doubt that this is what MacIntyre had in mind, at least at the time he wrote those words, but it may now be time to ask if there is really any serious alternative to it.

The details are far from clear to me, but I think something like the development of a community of moral understanding in the Christian tradition

<sup>9</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd edition (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press), p. 263.

## HOW REASON CAN SURVIVE THE MODERN UNIVERSITY 191

must be the answer to our current situation. This seems to me the only thing capable of redeeming reason, of providing the moral substance and understanding that can make the life of reason possible. Though I do not share MacIntyre's philosophy of mind and logic, and believe that the understanding and practical appropriation of moral insight is much freer of specific communities than he supposes (There is a human nature, in my view, and it is fairly obvious.), I am sure that the restoration of moral knowledge to our academic culture will require a certain community of professionals, academics and intellectuals devoted to that cause over a lengthy period of time.

Perhaps the Maritain Association could serve as the center for such an effort. It does not seem to me that success in this enterprise would necessarily be a miracle or an expression of special graces, but it would require the lives of many excellent thinkers in concert over a long period of time. It would require much institutional support from a wide variety of sources as well as powerful intellectual leadership. Success would not be guaranteed, but it surely could be achieved, and perhaps grace and miracle would assist in appropriate ways. Surely no one has greater responsibility to attempt the restoration of moral knowledge to academic culture, or better prospects of achieving it, than the people who identify themselves with Jesus Christ and the intellectual and academic tradition deriving from him. Perhaps it is time to say that, if reason is to be salvaged, the academic life must be seen as a spiritual calling, and the moral character that can routinely support the life of reason with integrity must be a life in the spirit of Christ.

It is fair to say that Maritain represented in his work and life such a posture toward moral wisdom and the life of reason. The last words in the article on him in Edward's *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* read as follows:

Maritain is admired even by those who may be of very different philosophical convictions. He is admired not only for his life-long zeal for truth and impassioned commitment to freedom, but also for his exceptional qualities as a person—his humility, his charity, his fraternal attitude toward all that is. Increasingly he is being recognized as one of the great *spirituals* of his time.<sup>10</sup>

As arrogant as it will seem to many in the academic culture of today, can we aim at anything less than what we saw in Maritain himself, if we are to be responsible human beings concerned with the redemption of reason today?

<sup>10</sup> Paul Edwards, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 5 (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co. & The Free Press, 1967), p. 164.