

On Reason, Truth and Ecological Conversion

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Abstract: *The awareness to the ecological concerns of the present calls for a rational understanding of the fact that human development should always be founded on our responsibility to be stewards of this earth. To put this into perspective, this article discusses the role of reason in the quest for truth which highlights the prominence of metaphysics over the limitations of empirical science. The article argues that the rationality of reason in its quest for truth leads to ecological conversion that makes the rational human being truly a steward of his or her environment.*

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The history of different peoples shows that we, as humans in general, have always strove to be better by alleviating the very conditions we are in. This is possible because of our ability to comprehend and apprehend our situational environment, putting ourselves in the forefront of being in charge in the changes that happen in our lives. The ability to understand and process for the better our lives are things that are unique from all other creatures thus, making us special among all others. Rationality, as it is our primary characteristic, separates us from the plurality of creatures and enables us to transcend our world to become the sole power to effect deliberate transformations of our own being from primitive to modern. In effect, this also allowed different human societies to create their own *ethos* manifested in the different kinds of norms as well as cultures and traditions that distinguish them from each other. These are not technically results of deliberate acts of people in the society to be different from others but are formed in time as results of the subjective interactions that happen between people. Thus, similarities in norms, culture, and tradition among different societies can be dependent on proximity that suggests greater possibilities of interaction and communicative action. Such circumstances show the intentional function of reason to manifest itself in practical life.

Reason is expressed through language which is the medium of communication. This is primary to human nature and is something that defines the humanity of man. Human interaction cannot be possible without it and therefore it becomes a description that befits being human. It is reason that determines rationality and the reasonableness of this rationality. Derived from these understandings, we can pursue the thought that reason cannot just be understood according to its functional relevance to man but way beyond towards its transcendent goal of finding the truth which is at the pinnacle of its every objective. At best, this is basically achieved in the event of discourse where best ideas and practices are realized, studied and understood through the interplay of different views that would result to a collective knowledge of what is true and what is real. Hans George Gadamer in his book *Truth and Method* elaborated more on this which he basically termed as the “fusion of horizons” and that the capacity to come together in dialogue is what Jurgen Habermas has extensively discussed in his “theory of communicative action”.

It is therefore to be assumed that as human beings, we know what is best for us because we have the capability to project our future and have a glimpse of what it will be in the

context of our understanding of truth. In which case, we become critical to everything that threatens a rational future bearing the fact that this future should be a result of our very own rationality. Unfortunately, such kind of assumption finds a stumbling block at the rate we humans develop and utilize earth’s resources in the name of human development. People of different culture and tradition seem to be very shortsighted in trying to achieve development and in effect, fail to see the long term consequences of this shortsightedness to nature. Human rationality is compromised and is being conditioned not by the idea of truth but by the standards of pragmatic and utilitarian mode of existence. The consequences of which is primarily seen in the continuous degradation of the natural environment. Pope Francis, citing Pope Paul VI in his encyclical *Laudato Si*, perfectly articulates this fact when he writes, “Due to an ill-considered exploitation of nature, humanity runs the risk of destroying it and becoming in turn a victim of this degradation”.¹ The question is why do people still continue destroying nature despite the knowledge that in return it will haunt them? Such a thing is incomprehensible if one considers himself as rational. The glaring truth according to the pope is that “the deterioration of nature is closely connected to the culture which shapes human coexistence”.² So what is this culture and what’s wrong with it?

The prominence of science in the present times created a culture of consumerism that is evident in the human tendency to utilize everything there is in nature to satisfy human demands. “A consumerist vision of human beings”, Pope Francis writes, “encouraged by the mechanisms of today’s globalized economy, has a levelling effect on cultures, diminishing the immense variety which is the heritage of all humanity”³, thereby rendering materialism to be the common denominator for all.

“In the current 21st century, science has progressed at such a rapid pace that it is now akin to an uncontrollable chain reaction. However, as the saying goes, *every rose has its thorns*, few adversities of the scientific revolution have brought about some major

¹ Pope Francis. 2015. *Laudato Si’: On Care for Our Common Home* [Encyclical], 4.

² *Ibid.*, 6.

³ Pope Francis, 108.

changes on the entire planet, regarding living, as well as non-living aspects.”⁴

Primary to the changes are the environmental issues the earth is facing. This is basically emphasized in *Laudato Si* and one of the primary reasons for this is “the notion that there are no indisputable truths to guide our lives, and hence human freedom is limitless”⁵. That we can always do anything because we can, is a deathblow to the moral realm of human existence. In effect, this is the cause and reason for the devastation that the natural environment is experiencing. Due to the focus on things scientific, people have forgotten about ultimate questions that should guide human actions towards the good. Science is assumed to have all the answers for everything thus, the idea of some metaphysical endeavors are treated as a thing of the past. What is the meaning of life? What is the truth? What is good and what is bad in view of an understanding of an ultimate truth? These questions are appeals to metaphysics which had been sidelined by the scientific revolution. But are these questions really still relevant to the question of environmental destruction at present? This can be given more consideration through the understanding of why there is the reluctance to metaphysical questions and to metaphysics in general.

The Prominence of Metaphysics

Metaphysics as a discipline has been through criticisms that downplay it as a bygone philosophical endeavor; treating it as a matter of the past and has no remarkable relevance to the present philosophical emphases. This is seen for instance in the claims of the philosophical movement known as logical positivism that originated in the Vienna Circle of the 1920s. In the paper of Herb Gruning, *God and the New Metaphysics*, it is stated that logical positivism;

“...held to the epistemological doctrine that statements which could not be verified by empirical means, that is through scientific observation, could be safely relegated to the category of, at best, the emotion, or, at worst, the meaningless. The epistemological method of empiricism then became extrapolated to the metaphysics of materialism, which implies that there is nothing beyond physics.”⁶

Rudolf Carnap, a major figure of the Vienna circle and a prominent logical positivist proves the statements by Gruning to be true in his book, *Philosophy and Logical Syntax*. In the book, Carnap makes it explicit that for a statement to be meaningful, it must fulfill his criteria of verifiability. He and all other logical positivist held that any statement which do not fall within the criteria is meaningless. This is their platform of identifying that the various words and concepts used in metaphysics like God, Omniscient, Infinite, truth, etc. are meaningless or are

pseudo-statements because they cannot be verified thus rendering metaphysics a discipline that defaults its relevance. “*Since metaphysics does not want to assert analytic propositions, nor to fall within the domain of empirical science*”, Carnap writes, “*it is compelled to employ words for which not criteria of application are specified and which are therefore devoid of sense, or else to combine meaningful words in such a way that neither statement is produced. In either case pseudo-statements are the inevitable product*”⁷

Such claim intended to overshadow the fact that metaphysics with all the understandings about it plays a very critical role in the understanding of everything including those that are the concerns of scientific investigation. Lonergan has this to say in his lecture on ‘*Insight*’;

“We began these lectures with science as pursuit of an ideal, where the ideal shifts in virtue of the pursuit – first, from knowledge through causes to analysis and synthesis; then to law and system; and then to states and probabilities. So we suggested self-appropriation as a means of going to the root of the ideal and its developments. Our hope was to find a fixed structure in virtue of which we could orientate ourselves.

Now if science moves from pursuing a knowledge of things by ultimate causes, first to analysis and synthesis, and from analysis and synthesis to law and system, and from law and system to states and probabilities, then one may ask, ‘What is philosophy? Is philosophy any of these? Or is it some new form of knowledge?’⁸

Lonergan basically captures the dilemma that the philosophical tradition is facing at present. The prioritization of science as the standard norm in the pursuit of knowledge and consequently be the basis of our understanding of the truth as what logical positivism had started will really leave a mark in how we understand and situate the relevance of metaphysics in these trying times.

Nevertheless, the damage was done and metaphysics has been viewed with suspicion ever since. This is the legacy that we have inherited from logical positivism and it is also the climate in which Pope John Paul II, in his encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, wishes to rekindle the prominence of metaphysics that basically underscores the understanding of being that is fundamentally founded on the capacity of reason to know the truth. Reason plays a very important role in the development of humanity and it is through which that we are capable of transcending our situations way beyond observable realities. This is why we can ask about what is true and what is reality as well as the meaning of our very existence because reason by its nature seeks to understand questions that it is capable of raising. However, the trend of

⁴ Science Struck, “Negative Impacts of Science”.

<https://sciencestruck.com/negative-impacts-of-science> (accessed December 18, 2018.)

⁵ Pope Francis, 7.

⁶ Gruning, Herb. 2001. “God and the New Metaphysics.” *Journal of Religion & Psychological Research* 24 (2): 64.

⁷ Carnap, Rudolf. 1935. *Philosophy and Logical Syntax*. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co. Ltd. 65.

⁸ Lonergan, Bernard. *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan: Understanding and Being*. The Robert Mollot Collection.

present ways of thinking seem to have forgotten this fact, instead, invested more of its effort to things that are much more related to scientific standards. This is why the pope in writing his encyclical states that the search for ultimate truth seems often to be neglected. “*Modern philosophy*”, he writes,

“clearly has the great merit of focusing attention upon man. From this starting point, human reason with its many questions has developed further its yearning to know more and to know it ever more deeply. Complex systems of thought have thus been built, yielding results in the different fields of knowledge and fostering the development of culture and history. Yet, the positive results achieved must not obscure the fact that reason, in its one-sided concern to investigate human subjectivity, seems to have forgotten that men and women are always called to direct their steps towards a truth which transcends them.”⁹

The issue of truth is an indispensable aspect of philosophy. No matter how thinkers will mask it with the prominence of science, reason in its very nature find its way to raise questions that can be beyond the grasp of empirical verification. As such, considering terms that are beyond empirical verification as meaningless is silly if not a deliberate denial of the things that they imply in practical life.

What is surely amazing is the fact that when the different schools of thought as well as science fail to meet the expectations that are accorded to them, what lies in front of them always is the door of metaphysics. It is by far the most viable option when all these schools of thought are at the edge of their limits. This is because, “(metaphysics) encompasses everything that exist, as well as the nature of existence itself.”¹⁰ Its claim that reality is absolute and it has specific nature independent of our thoughts or feelings are some examples of what it offers to reason for further speculations. The metaphysical study of being is one that can’t be left unsaid as it really is one of the basic things that metaphysics is up to clarify. Indeed, metaphysics could have been sidelined but surely enough, its prominence calls for its resurgence in mainstream thinking.

Understanding the Truth

The idea of truth most probably is one of the foundations of our whole approach to life. We seek out the truth in our encounters with others and with the world. As human beings, Pope John Paul II would say that we are defined as “the one who seeks the truth”.¹¹ Throughout our life, we try and focus on real problems, real issues, real events, and not

to get caught up in delusions and illusions. So what is truth then? Is it something comprehensible?

Truth seem to be a very complex reality but thanks to the capacity of our reason for we can have access to its understanding. Truth can simply be understood “in metaphysics and the philosophy of language as the property of sentences, assertions, beliefs, thoughts, or propositions that are said, in ordinary discourse, to agree with the facts or to state what is the case.”¹² It is “most often used to mean being in accord with fact or reality. It is also sometimes defined in modern contexts as an idea of authenticity.”¹³ In practical life, truth basically determines how we look at reality and how we find meaning in our experiences. However, lurking behind the simple idea of truth is a deep philosophic and metaphysical assumption that it is the goal of all rational activities and thus, the basis of the enduring search for what is real and meaningful. Truth always transcends and it can’t be limited by the facts of observation and in effect becomes a primary object of metaphysical thinking.

In Gary M. Jaron’s paper “*What is true, and What is Real, Providing the Non-Aristotelian Tools to Orient You*”¹⁴ the understanding of truth can be much more elaborated in the postulation that it is the basis in testing the validity of a statement. For instance, something is “true” if the thing under examination is a non-verbal thing and/or event that is perceptible, measurable, quantifiable, verifiable, and is repeatable. This is the realm of the hard sciences such as physics, chemistry, geology, biology, and so on. On the other hand, Jaron states that;

“we can say that a statement is true if it can be demonstrated that the person who is making the claim is reporting his/her beliefs and experiences honestly and not under the influence of some mind altering or sensory altering substances at the time of the experience. Now if the statement has all the characteristics mentioned, but lack only the characteristic of repeatability, then it is more likely to be in the realm of the soft sciences such as history, psychology, sociology, etc.”¹⁵

The issue therefore of truth is something that lingers in a horizon of disciplines that are not simply determined by empirical data but also by rational coherence. As such, the appeal to metaphysics is plausible.

Furthermore, let us consider a piece of a thousand peso bill. What could be our bases of determining it as real and true? Practically, we can examine its physical attributes and the substances that it is made of to be certain. All these aspects can be shown to be true about it leading us to ask whether

⁹Catholic Church, and John Paul. 1998. Faith and reason: encyclical letter Fides et ratio of the Supreme Pontiff John Paul II on the relationship between faith and reason. Sherbrooke [Québec]: Médiaspaul, 4-5.

¹⁰http://www.importanceofphilosophy.com/Metaphysics_Main.htm (retrieved December 1, 2018)

¹¹Catholic Church and John Paul, 25.

¹²<https://www.britannica.com/topic/truth-philosophy-and-logic> (retrieved December 2, 2018)

¹³<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Truth> (retrieved December 2, 2018)

¹⁴Jaron, Gary M. 2012. “What Is True, and What Is Real, Providing the Non-Aristotelian Tools to Orient You.” *ETC: A Review of General Semantics* 69 (2): 197–203.

¹⁵Ibid.

these are all there is about the object. It brings us to speculate whether the only important thing we can say and describe about an object is its material components or there's something more. But isn't it that when we have a monetary bill in our hand, the emphasis of our concern is not its physical attributes but its monetary value? The monetary value is basically independent from the physical attributes of the money. As Jaron states, "the term monetary value, ... represents so-called 'things' which don't exist except in symbolic form."¹⁶ Which means that the value is an abstract concept found in our mind and no matter how abstract it is, we generally identify it as true and that it is in the monetary value that the essence and relevance of the money can be derived. In fact, it is the monetary value of the money that holds more meaning to us. The truth of which is far more relevant than the physical aspects because it is the monetary value that determines the essence or the 'moneyness' of the money.

Our analogy on the value of money reflects how the question of truth permeates within the walls of empirical science forcing the issue of what lies beyond the observable. The issue of truth is a metaphysical concern that transcends the everyday life and surely also transcends that which we know of the world. Pope John Paul II beautifully elaborates this in relation to belief when he states that;

"Nonetheless, there are in the life of a human being many more truths which are simply believed than truths which are acquired by way of personal verification. Who, for instance, could assess critically the countless scientific findings upon which modern life is based? Who could personally examine the flow of information which comes day after day from all parts of the world and which is generally accepted as true? Who in the end could forge anew the paths of experience and thought which have yielded the treasures of human wisdom and religion?"¹⁷

This is for the pope to emphasize that the one who seeks the truth is also the one who lives by belief. That the truth is not grounded on things but beyond things, thus, it bears in it the independence to be the object of everything that we aspire for. As such, our understanding of value which goes beyond the empirical aspect of money can be connected to our capacity to believe in the reality of abstract ideas in our minds. The idea that a thousand peso bill will buy us a handful of goods is a belief and a confidence we have of the truth of its value and we can't be wrong.

The Challenge of Laudato Si

"Laudatosi, mi' Signore" – "Praise be to you, my Lord". In the words of this beautiful canticle, Saint Francis of Assisi reminds us that our common home is like a sister with whom we share our life and a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us. "Praise be to you, my Lord, through our Sister, Mother Earth, who

sustains and governs us, and who produces various fruit with coloured flowers and herbs".¹⁸

This opening paragraph of the encyclical captures the very fact of our existence. We are thrown in to this world without choosing it and in it we experience our very own existence. Humanity in general is humanity on earth and our existence as humans depends on what the earth has to offer. Is it for us to dominate the earth then? Science and technology would tell us that human development must be based on the mastery of earth's resources, exploiting it for the development of human societies. Man is here to dominate the earth and the basis of truth are the developments that man can possibly achieve. But what are the consequences of this? Isn't it that, as what Pope Francis had widely elaborated in his encyclical, the developments are taking their toll on the environment? The destruction of the natural environment is the destruction of our Sister, our Mother earth who sustains and governs us.

Science for its part is doing its best to find solutions to the stark consequences of its own making. Some people and organizations as well as governments are already trying to come up with programs and measures to mitigate the fast deterioration of our natural environment but the amount of destruction that is done everyday to it far exceeds the efforts for its rehabilitation. With this, we can outrightly see the gradual demise of the natural environment. One thing more, the effort by science to address the problem is just only geared towards the eradication of the symptoms and not the causes. Thus, a continuous dependence on the capacity of sciences to arrive at solutions becomes a trap that catapults us to a world of uncertainties. This brings us back to metaphysics.

The metaphysical quest to the understanding of truth would lead to the realization that the world is never enough to give answers to all the questions that we raise. The limits of empirical verification is a door for the abstract realm of metaphysics. As such, the truth is way beyond empirical reality and the search for it would, in special way, include the realms of ethical considerations. The truth is deemed to be good for it determines the rationality of reason. Determining what is good from what is bad is in general a metaphysical concern. In fact if we try to extend it into the ideas of Martin Heidegger, the pursuit for goodness is a pursuit for authenticity. This should lead us to realize that Pope Francis' goal of letting us realize our responsibility to earth as not a matter of dominion but a matter of stewardship holds water for his proposed ecological conversion. Such a conversion will see humanity do a paradigm shift towards what's more essential, the truth. This ecological conversion is grounded on the fact that we as humans accept that there is something more than scientific advancements. With this, we can be motivated not to rely solely on science but to be converted as primary movers of effecting change for the environment by changing the way we look at our priorities and inclinations. Ecological conversion is a conversion of our attitude to nature as something to be taken care of prompting us to be more careful and caring in everything that we do.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Catholic Church and John Paul, 27.

¹⁸ Pope Francis, 3.

The consideration of moral responsibility to sustain the natural environment is a turning point in human history for it marks the attempt to turn the tide to nature's goodness. As such, what is good in human action must always be extended to how it affects the natural environment we are in. It is however to be emphasized that with the prioritization of profit or financial gain, the challenge to ecological conversion is always a matter of personal conversion.

Politics that are geared towards advancing personal interests also pose as threats to the advancement and execution of positive environmental laws. In the long run, Pope Francis' ecological conversion has a long way to go granting the fact that aside from profit and political interests, poverty is still in the forefront of human concerns. The educational systems of third world countries are geared towards economic upliftment through production and industrialization and what is sad is that the ecological conversion as we want it to be has yet to instill its roots in this economic environments and in the consciousness of the people. Pope Francis however is still hopeful in *Laudato Si* that the future cannot be that hopeless. That the meaningfulness of existence will always be a question to be raised somewhere and guides us to discover what it really means to search for truth. Truth as an end should shape an environment of people being rational as stewards of the earth for it harmonizes the way we think and the way we look at reality.

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