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Illumination, Healing, and Redirection: A Lutheran Philosophy of Reason

Angus Menuge

I. Introduction

Luther's paradoxical view of reason is a minefield for interpreters. Reason is pilloried as "Frau Hulda . . . the devil's prostitute," which "can do nothing else but slander and dishonor what God does and says,"¹ "a blind guide, the enemy of faith, [and] the greatest and most invincible enemy of God."² This makes it easy to read Luther as a theological irrationalist, who holds that faith must simply leave reason behind. Yet this same Luther declares that reason "is the most important and the highest in rank among all things and . . . something divine"; "a kind of god appointed to administer . . . things in this life," whose majesty was not removed but confirmed by God after the fall.³

In fact, it is clear that Luther gives great authority to reason in a number of areas. Reason is our best guide and judge in temporal matters and our earthly vocations. Further, Luther affirms that even fallen reason discerns the existence of God, because it is "written in all hearts,"⁴ and supported by several powerful arguments.⁵ Reason is also competent to apprehend the basic meaning of Scripture. The unbeliever understands "you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead" (Acts 3:15) just as well as the believer. But knowing there is a God is not the same as knowing who God is, or knowing his will for us. Seeing God only as wrathful judge, the natural man is an enemy of God (Rom 8:7) who suppresses the little he knows of the true God (Rom 1:18) and substitutes a false god of his own

¹ Martin Luther, *Against the Heavenly Prophets* (1525): vol. 40, pp. 174–175, in *Luther's Works, American Edition*, vols. 1–30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955–1976); vols. 31–55, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg/Fortress, 1957–1986); vols. 56–82, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009–), hereafter AE.

² Siegbert Becker, *The Foolishness of God* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2012), 1.

³ Martin Luther, "The Disputation concerning Man (1536)," theses 4, 8, and 9. Available online at https://www.uni-due.de/collcart/es/sem/s6/txt12_1.htm.

⁴ Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 73 vols. (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883–2009), vol. 19:207 (hereafter WA).

⁵ Becker, *The Foolishness of God*, 25.

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imagination (Rom 1:22–23). In this darkened state, reason is incapable of believing that God wants all men to be saved (1 Tim 2:4). Although he understands the meaning of texts that communicate the gospel, he cannot believe the gospel promises without the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. And there is no doubt Luther declared human reason incompetent either to demonstrate or fully comprehend important truths specially revealed in Scripture: the Trinity, the hypostatic union of God and man in Christ, the real presence of Christ in the sacraments, and, above all, the message of salvation by grace alone.

Though clearly not an irrationalist *tout court*, does that mean that Luther qualifies as an irrationalist in *this* area—the acceptance of the higher truths and mysteries of special revelation? The answer to this question depends on what it means to be rational. This is a normative question requiring us to think about the proper *telos* or purpose of reason. We value reason as a means to discovering truth. So is the best way to achieve this goal to accept the Enlightenment ideal of *autonomous* reason, where reason is *closed* to input that cannot be demonstrated by logic or empirical investigation? Or should we accept Luther’s view, that reason is *dependent* on God for its right use and must be *open* to higher input? And if we Christians take the latter view, can we answer the objection that our position is arbitrary, because other religions (such as Islam) offer quite different input?

There is no question that Luther rejected closed systems of reason. Luther holds that reason achieves its *telos* only when it is properly open to God’s guidance. For example, in his “Lectures on Genesis,” Luther writes: “In Adam, there was an enlightened reason, a true knowledge of God, and a most sincere desire to love God and his neighbor.”⁶ While darkened and damaged by the fall, even in this life our reason is illuminated, healed, and redirected to the extent it is captive to the word of God:

Let us learn that true wisdom is in Holy Scripture . . . [W]hat is more preposterous than that we undertake to sit in judgment on God and His Word, we who ought to be judged by God? Therefore we must simply maintain that when we hear God saying something, we are to believe it and not to debate about it but rather take our intellect captive in the obedience of Christ (2 Cor. 10:5).⁷

But, I will argue, this dependence of reason on external input does not make Luther an irrationalist even about the mysteries of the faith. If we attend to the *telos* of reason, we see that his open view of reason is, in the end, more rational than closed

⁶ AE 1:63.

⁷ AE 1:125, 157.

systems of rationality. And the preference for Christian sources is not arbitrary, because uniquely Christian revelation most deeply illuminates the nature of reality.

We will first consider the *telos* of reason (section 2) and offer two images to guide our reflection (section 3). Next, we argue that a closed view of reason is untenable: an open view of reason is unavoidable (section 4). Then we consider the right input for reason and how we can know what that is (section 5). Finally, we address the objection that the paradoxes and alleged contradictions of Christianity make it irrational, and we argue that it is precisely here that Christianity shows its rational superiority to alternatives (section 6).

II. The *Telos* of Reason

Aristotle distinguished theoretical reason (that concerns right belief) and practical reason (that concerns right action).⁸ Our focus here is only theoretical reason. The *telos* of theoretical reason is truth. But not truth on any terms. We can imagine people who simply believe everything they hear or read: they gain a lot of truths, but also a great deal of error, and their overall system of belief will include internal contradictions and mistakes. So we want not only a lot of truths, but a coherent system that is not contaminated by falsehood. But we can also imagine people so concerned to avoid error that they do not commit to any statement they cannot demonstrate (in different ways, the Pyrrhonic skeptics and W. K. Clifford both tried something along these lines). But as William James noticed,⁹ this may leave us without the most important truths; and it arguably implies that we should not accept *any* truth, since it is impossible to demonstrate every assumption on which a demonstration depends (see section 4).

So we don't want truth entangled with massive error, nor do we want to miss out on important truths that we cannot prove. But we also do not merely want a large *quantity* of particular truths. We can imagine someone devoted to minute observation of the differences between each pebble on a beach. This person might end up knowing more particular truths about those pebbles than anyone on Earth. But what is missing is any underlying principle that makes sense of the cosmos and human life as a whole.

What we want, then, is not merely truths, but the true *worldview*, the best view of the cosmos and our place in it. What I suggest is that the *telos* of (theoretical) reason is this: to acquire that worldview which is most substantively true and

⁸ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*.

⁹ William James, "The Will to Believe," in *The Will to Believe, Human Immortality, and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1960).

uncontaminated by error and incoherence, and most deeply insightful in its account of reality.

If that is correct, how do we decide which to prefer: closed worldviews that do not accept input from beyond human reason, or open worldviews that do? The fairest procedure is to compare the two approaches in terms of their ability to make the most overall sense of the world.¹⁰ Let me first paint two images that suggest the advantages of an open worldview (section 3), and then we will provide some argument to back up those images (section 4).

III. Two Images of Reason

Exploring a Landscape

Two explorers have spent their whole life investigating a landscape by perpetual moonlight. They discover many plants, animals, minerals, and sources of water. They figure out how to use the land to take care of their own needs while maintaining its resources for future generations. They develop technology to make their lives easier.

Then a wonderful thing happens. For the first time, the sun rises. The first explorer turns quickly and looks steadily up into the sun, trying to understand what he thinks is a new addition to the landscape. He is temporarily blinded and cannot see the sun, the other explorer, or anything else in the landscape. "I must just wait," he says, "for the return of the moon, when I can see again. Since the moon has shown me everything I have ever known, I will use the moon to investigate this new light." One day, his sight restored, the first explorer waits until the moon is in just the right position to cover the sun's blinding light. "Now," he says, "I shall be able to figure out this new addition to our world, and see if it will help with our farming and technology." But of course it is a total eclipse: he learns nothing more about the sun, and the moon itself and his whole world are cast into such total darkness that he fears he has gone blind again.

Meanwhile, the second explorer responds quite differently. When the sun first rises, she also turns around. But she turns in wonder, and realizing the direct light of the sun is too much for her, she shields her eyes. Looking down, she marvels at the brilliant rays and the warm glow all around her. Then, when she turns back around, she sees a different world. For the first time, she understands that all those resources in the landscape are creatures, products of the sun; the sun is the creator

¹⁰ In a recent article, Alister McGrath argues that it is in Christianity's ability to make maximal sense of reality that its rationality is to be found. See his "The Rationality of Faith: How Does Christianity Make Sense of Things?" *Philosophia Christi* 18.2 (2016): 395–409.

and owner, while she is only caretaker and steward. Then she turns to the first explorer and realizes with a double shock that he also is a product of the sun, but that he is paralyzed by blindness and does not really know the sun, the landscape, or even himself for what they are. She tries to explain, but at first he does not listen. “Only the moon,” he says, “allows a rational understanding of reality.” But his attempts to understand the sun by means of the moon end in failure. He remains ignorant of the sun, of the real character of the world, and even of himself. He is so lost he does not know that he is lost. She does not give up but offers him a new way to begin to see the world. “You cannot know the sun as you know other things in this landscape,” she says, “for it is greater than they and their creator. But if you trust in the sun, you will start to know it better, and in its light, you will better understand the world, other people, and yourself.”

The moonlight is man’s unaided reason. It has the power to describe, classify, and control our world. But the sun is God himself, and the sun’s light is the illumination of unaided reason by the word of God. The first explorer represents all of the closed systems of reason, like theological rationalism and materialism, which suppose that man’s unaided reason is sufficient to understand all aspects of reality. In pride, the closed system of human reason is used to investigate the divine reason itself (the approach of a theologian of glory).¹¹ This reduces the divine to a creature made in our image. It leaves us with a false God, and without the true God’s insight into the nature of things, we can never see the world, our neighbors, or ourselves as the creatures that they are.

The second explorer represents the open system of reason that Luther prefers. It is humble and recognizes that God cannot be fully comprehended by our unaided reason; yet, accepting him in faith, our reason is illuminated and we start to know God, his world, and his people. Though we cannot reason our way into faith, our faith is subsequently vindicated by helping reason develop a more insightful account of reality.

The Branches and the Vine

In John 15, Jesus compares himself to the vine and his disciples to branches. We may contrast the fate of two branches. The first branch, like the first explorer, has made some progress in studying adjacent branches, but feels too confined to one area of the plant. “The solution,” says he, “is to detach myself from the vine, so that I can move about at will and explore all the other branches, and the vine itself.” But when the first branch detaches himself, he finds to his horror that he no longer has

¹¹ Martin Luther, “The Heidelberg Disputation (1518),” in *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*, 2nd ed., ed. Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 30–49.

the strength to investigate anything. He cannot produce new fruit, and even the fruit he has starts to wither and die. Too late, he realizes that what insight he ever had was all derived from the vine.

But the second branch is like the second explorer. When she hears the words, “I am the true vine,” she believes them in faith, and she is rewarded with much fruit. Because she is open to the vine as a higher source, she comes to understand the vine, other branches, and herself better than before. She sees that all of the branches form a community and depend on the vine, who is the source of their life and everything they have.

Contrasting good and bad prophets, Jesus says “you will recognize them by their fruits” (Matt 7:20). By extension, we can compare worldviews by how fruitful they are as explanations. A worldview that is open to input that it cannot rationally demonstrate may commend itself to reason because it makes more sense of reality than worldviews closed to that input. Putting our two images together, the intuition driving the preference for an open view of reason is that it will provide a more illuminating and fruitful account of reality.

Still, images are not arguments. Why should we think closed systems of reason cannot be successful? Why cannot reason—either pure deductive reason or inductive scientific reasoning—stand alone? After all, there are rationalist philosophers like Descartes and his heirs who think knowledge can be founded in absolute logical certainty. And several of the new atheist philosophers and scientists defend a strong version of scientism, claiming that science is the only way to gain knowledge. Scientism denies the need for a “first philosophy” of non-scientific assumptions: empirical science alone is declared adequate to account for all aspects of reality, including the origin and nature of the cosmos and the scientist.

IV. Reason Cannot Demonstrate Its Own Foundations

Interestingly, reason can demonstrate that reason *cannot* demonstrate its own foundations. This applies to both deductive reasoning and inductive reasoning (the scientific procedure of supporting a hypothesis by data).

Deductive Reason

Deductive reason is exemplified by syllogisms and other strict proofs in mathematics and philosophy. It is not possible to demonstrate that sound deductive reasoning is reliable, for two reasons. First, suppose we try to argue for the reliability of deductive reasoning. Our argument will be either sound or unsound. If it is unsound, then it is not a demonstration. But if it is sound, then,

in order to accept this argument, we must assume that sound arguments are reliable, and this is what we had to prove. Using a sound deductive argument to show the reliability of sound deductive arguments is circular. Second, it is not possible to base one's beliefs on demonstration alone. Any argument has premises. But if we can only accept what is demonstrated, we cannot accept the conclusion of the argument unless we have a demonstration of the premises. But these demonstrations will also have premises, and we cannot accept the conclusions of these demonstrations unless we have demonstrations of their premises, and so on. In other words, if we demand a demonstration for everything we believe, this leads to an infinite regress of demonstrations, and no one (except God) has that kind of time.

Now, one might reply that some premises are just self-evident and are directly or intuitively known. This is very plausible. How could one demonstrate $A = A$, for example? Surely any premises for such a demonstration would be less certain than $A = A$ itself. Or how could we prove the law of non-contradiction? If we show that denying the law of non-contradiction is absurd—because it leads to contradictions—then our argument assumes the truth of the law of non-contradiction, which is circular. But as soon as we accept any premises as self-evident, we have given up the idea that it is only rational to believe what we can demonstrate. Deductive reason must be illuminated by some basic, direct insights that are simply given.

When Pascal said, "The heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing,"¹² he was not talking about our feelings but our direct apprehension of truth. His point was that all demonstration depends on truths we grasp intuitively that cannot themselves be demonstrated. If we do not simply see that the laws of identity and non-contradiction are necessarily true, then we cannot reason logically. But there is no question of proving either of these principles. We must, in fact, accept them on *faith*, because we trust that our powers of direct intuition can access truth. Behind the process of deductive demonstration, we find non-demonstrable assumptions about the reliability of human faculties.

The limitations of rational demonstration were themselves demonstrated by one of the most important results of mathematical logic: Kurt Gödel's incompleteness theorem (1931). Gödel showed that in any sound mathematical system S that includes the axioms of basic arithmetic, it was possible to construct a self-referential sentence (the Gödel sentence) that was clearly true about S , and yet not provable by S . The Gödel sentence says, "This sentence is not provable by S ." Suppose the Gödel sentence is provable by S . Then the Gödel sentence is false, and so S is unsound. So, assuming S is sound, the Gödel sentence must be unprovable

¹² Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (London: Penguin Books, 1966), 154, #423.

by S, and therefore true. It follows that S is incomplete: there are true statements in the language of S that S cannot prove.¹³

Generalized, what Gödel showed is that for any mathematical system whatever that has sufficient expressive power to allow self-reference, there will be true statements about that system which the system cannot prove, but which we can see are true. More philosophically, Gödel's result reinforces the idea that our ability to discern truth is not limited to what we can demonstrate.

Inductive Reason

Can we argue that the inductive reasoning employed in the sciences is a reliable way to gain truth about the world? Any such argument runs into the problem exposed by David Hume. No matter how much past evidence supports the hypothesis that all swans are white, the future discovery of a black swan is possible (and it has happened). So inductive arguments are not by themselves valid. We can make such arguments valid only by adding the premise that nature is uniform. But our only reason for thinking that nature is uniform is past experience, that is, induction. Since belief in the uniformity of nature depends on an inductive inference, using that uniformity to justify induction is a circular argument. Likewise, if we say that induction has worked well in the past and so can be relied on in future investigations, we are again assuming the reliability of induction to prove it. Hume concludes: "It is impossible, therefore, that any arguments from experience can prove this resemblance of the past to the future: since all these arguments are founded on the supposition of that resemblance."¹⁴

So if we continue to rely on induction, and science seems to have no alternative, we must assume that the cosmos is governed by rational laws, and that our mind is capable of discovering those laws. These assumptions about the cosmos and the human mind cannot be established scientifically because they are assumed by *any* scientific investigation. Scientism is therefore mistaken: science requires a first-philosophy of non-scientific assumptions. The project of science depends on a prior *faith* in the rationality of the cosmos and of the scientist, a faith that science cannot demonstrate.

So reason itself shows us that closed systems of reason are untenable. Whether our reasoning is deductive or inductive, it must be open to input that cannot be demonstrated. But which input should that be, and how can we know? Surely not

¹³ See Peter Smith, *An Introduction to Gödel's Theorems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

¹⁴ David Hume, "An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding," Section IV, Part II, in *Philosophical Classics, Volume III: Modern Philosophy*, 5th ed., ed. Forrest E. Baird and Walter Kaufmann (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, Inc., 2008), 371.

just any old input will do. We can't rely on reading tea leaves, crystal balls, urban legends, or "fake news." If reason is to fulfill its *telos*, it needs the right input to guide it into truth and away from error.

V. Right Reason

Right reason is rightly directed toward its *telos*. The best possible source of input would be (a) necessarily true, and (b) aimed at the flourishing of human faculties, including reason. For Bible-believing Christians, that input is the word of God. As Luther says, "Human beings can err, but the Word of God is the very wisdom of God and the absolute infallible truth."¹⁵ This is the word of an omniscient God who cannot lie (Titus 1:2), and who wants all people to *know the truth* (John 8:32; 1 Tim 2:4). If we accept that word, we must accept what that word says about the nature of fallen man's reason: it is turned away from God and neighbor, and used to rationalize sin and idolatrous "strongholds" (2 Cor 10:4)—false worldviews that are thrown up to suppress the knowledge of God and His world. So we need the *illumination* of the law to see our true condition and to confess with David that "Against you, you only, have I sinned" (Ps 51:4). And we need the further *illumination* and *healing* transformation of the gospel so that we can come to know God's will for us (Rom 12:2), to see the world as God's creation (Heb 11:3), and to see ourselves as adopted children of God (Gal 4:3–7). The new person in Christ receives input to which the natural man is blind, because it is spiritually discerned by those with "the mind of Christ" (1 Cor 2:12–16). Then our reason is *redirected* from self-love and enmity toward God to friendship with God, appreciation of his creation, and love of neighbor. In other words, the biblical view, and Luther's view, is that *right reason is reason illuminated, healed, and redirected by faith*.

How Can We Tell?

For Bible-believing Christians, this answer should be sufficient. Yet even the believer wants to understand his faith (*fides quaerens intellectum*) and benefits from seeing how the world makes more sense in light of that faith. And to make contact with the unbeliever, can we show that reason guided by Christian faith best fulfills the *telos* of reason, that many of the beliefs he shares with Christians are better explained by Christianity than by other worldviews? Here are four reasons for an affirmative answer.

¹⁵ AE 1:122.

Deductive Reasoning

Just about everyone believes in deduction—and if they don't, it is hard to see how they could convince us they are right. But which worldview best explains the reliability of deductive reasoning?

C. S. Lewis, Alvin Plantinga, Victor Reppert, and even atheist Thomas Nagel have all argued that materialism (the thesis, roughly, that only physical objects exist) undermines the reliability of deductive reasoning.¹⁶ On the materialist view, man himself is merely a material object whose abilities must be explained by natural selection and the causal interaction of human beings with the environment. Two problems arise.

First, as leading evolutionary psychologists and philosophers have admitted, natural selection is indifferent to the truth. Steven Pinker admits that in his own naturalistic evolutionary view, “our brains were shaped for fitness, not for truth.”¹⁷ If one's body avoids predators and finds food, it will survive long enough to reproduce. But it does not matter if one flees a lion because one thinks it wants to play hide-and-seek, or if one eats the food because one thinks an earth spirit commands it. Yet if natural selection is indifferent to truth, it is most unlikely to furnish minds capable of truth-preserving inferences.

Second, even if natural selection did account for some reasoning ability, that ability could only derive from past, contingent interactions of the human species with the environment, and so our reasoning would be limited to local rules of thumb that have worked so far. Yet deductive logic is able to show us that there are necessary truths that hold in the future and in other possible worlds, with which we have not interacted. For example, we can all see that if $A = B$ and $C = B$, then it must be the case that $A = C$. This knowledge is not based on the past track record of human experience. As C. S. Lewis says, “My belief that things which are equal to the same thing are equal to one another is not at all based on the fact that I have never caught them doing otherwise.”¹⁸

Theism fares better because it does not implausibly claim that reason emerges from mindless matter. Reason has always existed in the mind of God, and this makes

¹⁶ See Alvin Plantinga's “Is Naturalism Irrational?” chap. 12 of his *Warrant and Proper Function* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), his *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), and his *Where the Conflict Really Lies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Victor Reppert's *C. S. Lewis's Dangerous Idea* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003) and his “The Argument from Reason,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology*, ed. William Lane Craig and J. P. Moreland (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009); and Thomas Nagel's *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature Is Almost Certainly False* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

¹⁷ Steven Pinker, *How the Mind Works* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1997), 305.

¹⁸ C. S. Lewis, *Miracles*, 2nd. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1960), 20.

intelligible the idea that he could make creatures with a similar, if more limited, kind of reason.

But did he? Here a specifically Christian, biblical form of theism fares better than other theistic religions. The Christian teaching is that man is made in the image of a triune God, and though original righteousness was lost by the fall into sin, still man's reason is reliable enough to assist us in our vocation as stewards of the natural world. That vocation requires us to reason soundly about natural resources, which depends on deductive logic. Why suppose we have access to a reliable logic? One reason is that on the Christian view, all of reality is governed by a personal *logos*. As Paul writes to the Colossians,

He [Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. (Col 1:15–17)

The same personal *logos*, Christ, that lies at the foundation of all reality “before all things,” is also reflected in the reason of those made in God's image: our reason is not limited to what has worked in the past for human beings but is grounded in the divine reason that governs and unites all God has made.

Inductive Reasoning

A similar point applies to the inductive reason of science. Materialism does not explain how human observations and our intuitions of patterns can hope to discover approximate laws of nature. That natural selection has favored creatures who expect patterns to repeat does not show the expectation is justified. Granted materialism, there is no reason to think nature is uniform or that our intuitions of uniformity can be trusted. As Lewis pointed out, here theism has a clear advantage over materialism:

If all that exists is Nature, the great mindless interlocking event, if our own deepest convictions are merely the by-products of an irrational process, then clearly there is not the slightest ground for supposing that our sense of fitness and our consequent faith in uniformity tell us anything about a reality external to ourselves If the deepest thing in reality . . . is a Rational Spirit and we derive our rational spirituality from It—then indeed our conviction can be trusted.¹⁹

And unlike other theistic religions, Christianity affirms that the same divine *logos* reflected in the rational order of nature is also found in the reason of those made

¹⁹ Lewis, *Miracles*, 105.

in God's image: "the human mind in the act of knowing is illuminated by the divine reason."²⁰

Efficient and Final Causes of the Cosmos and Man

Regarding the cosmos and man, Luther argues that unaided reason may disclose the material and formal cause: their composition and structure. But it does not penetrate to the true efficient and final cause: what brought the cosmos and man into being and for what purpose. Pure reason cannot decide between an eternal or finitely old universe as both present problems. But even if some version of the cosmological argument is plausible, as many argue today on scientific grounds, it cannot show us who *the* efficient cause of the universe is or that the cosmos exists to glorify the creator (Psalm 19 and 148). Likewise, unaided reason does not show that man is especially made in the image of God "for the knowledge and worship of God."²¹

Materialism seems to end in absurdity here. For example, having denied all first philosophy and God's existence, Lawrence Krauss makes the heroic attempt to explain how the entire universe arose from nothing at all.²² But, as several critics have pointed out, he simply redefines "nothing" to mean something: expanding empty space, quantum gravity, or a multiverse. As he does not explain why any of these entities exist, the cosmos remains an inexplicable mystery. C. S. Lewis illustrates the problem in his depiction of Uncle Andrew, a stubborn materialist who witnesses the creation of Narnia, but closes himself to transcendent causes:

"Of course it can't really have been singing," he thought, "I must have imagined it . . . Who ever heard of a lion singing?" And the longer and more beautiful the Lion sang, the harder Uncle Andrew tried to make himself believe that he could hear nothing but roaring. Now the trouble about trying to make yourself stupider than you really are is that you very often succeed . . . He soon did hear nothing but roaring in Aslan's song. Soon he couldn't have heard anything else even if he had wanted to.²³

Man is perhaps even more of a problem. Materialists have no convincing explanation of the emergence of conscious, rational beings that can recognize moral obligations, so they cannot identify the efficient cause of man. And if our existence is an accident, then there is no final cause of man. Existentialists like Jean-Paul Sartre

²⁰ Lewis, *Miracles*, 34.

²¹ AE 1:80.

²² Lawrence M. Krauss, *A Universe from Nothing: Why There Is Something Rather Than Nothing* (New York: The Free Press, 2012).

²³ C. S. Lewis, *The Magician's Nephew* (New York: Harper Trophy, 1994), 137.

concluded from materialism that man simply “shows up” for no reason and must invent a purpose for his life. But this is a futile project, as without an objective purpose, no self-chosen project has any more meaning than its opposite. Sartre could serve in the French resistance and object to the Nazis, but he could offer no reason why embracing Nazism was wrong. So man becomes incomprehensible to man.

Yet the very nature of reason shows that man exists for *a* purpose because reason is inherently teleological: we reason to a goal, such as a conclusion or action. But which goal should that be? We need to know *what* our purpose is, what counts as human flourishing, before we can know to which goals we should reason. This is what Christian revelation tells us: we exist for community with God and one another. Once accepted on faith, we see this makes sense of our incompleteness and our need for family, fellowship, and society, but also of our restless heart that finds no refuge in worldly objects that are passing away, but needs the one who is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Heb 13:8).

Human Rights

Most people affirm the idea of human rights, basic natural rights that the state must recognize and protect. The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) demands “recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family.”²⁴ These rights are *inherent* (one has them just because one is human), *universal* (all humans have them), *equal* (all humans have them to the same degree), and *inalienable* (the state has no authority to remove them). But which worldview provides the best justification for these rights?

Materialism makes it hard to see how there could be human rights. If the world is a physical accident and all living creatures are the products of the blind watchmaker of natural selection, it seems arbitrary and chauvinistic to say that human beings have special rights. Thus Peter Singer urges that if higher value depends on sentience, then the whole idea of human rights is “species-ist,” since an adult pig or dog may feel more pain than a newborn human infant.²⁵ Nor will it help to argue that human beings have superior value because they are better adapted to their environment than other creatures, since in point of fact, this is false. As James Rachels points out, “We are not entitled—not on evolutionary grounds, at any rate—to regard our own adaptive behavior as ‘better’ or ‘higher’ than that

²⁴ United Nations, Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Paris, 1948), available at <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/index.html>.

²⁵ Peter Singer, *Animal Rights and Human Obligations* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1976).

of a cockroach, who, after all, is adapted equally well to life in its own environmental niche.”²⁶

More generally, if materialism is true, the grounding for human rights must be the natural capacities (such as consciousness, rationality, or understanding of moral rules) that emerge from the human organism. But this grounding is inadequate since not all people have these capacities or have them to the same degree (consider the unborn, those with brain deficits, Alzheimer’s disease, the comatose, etc.). So, as J. P. Moreland asks, “Why should we treat all people equally in any respect in the face of manifest inequalities among them?”²⁷

Matters are no better when we consider other religions. For example, Hinduism rationalizes human rights abuses of lower caste members, and Islamic societies do not support the full human rights of non-Muslims (Dhimmi), routinely denying their freedom of expression and religion.

By contrast, historic Christian teaching provides a sound basis for human rights. All human beings are specially made in the image of God. God sent his Son to die for all people, and Christ calls us to go beyond pagan prudence and to care for the “least of these” (Matt 25:45), giving aid to those who cannot repay (Luke 14:13–14). The leading secularist Jürgen Habermas recognizes the uniqueness of the Christian contribution:

Egalitarian universalism, from which sprang the ideas of freedom and a social solidarity, of an autonomous conduct of life and emancipation, the individual morality of conscience, human rights, and democracy, is the direct heir to the Judaic ethic of justice and the Christian ethic of love. This legacy, substantially unchanged has been the object of continual critical appropriation and reinterpretation. To this day, there is no alternative to it. And in light of current challenges of a postnational constellation, we continue to draw on the substance of this heritage. Everything else is just idle postmodern talk.²⁸

And even Jacques Derrida concedes:

Today the cornerstone of international law is the sacred, what is sacred in humanity. You should not kill. You should not be responsible for a crime against the sacredness, the sacredness of man as your neighbor . . . made by God or by God made man . . . in that sense, the concept of crime against humanity is a Christian concept and I think there would be no such thing

²⁶ James Rachels, *Created from Animals: The Moral Implications of Darwinism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 70.

²⁷ J. P. Moreland, *The Recalcitrant Imago Dei* (London: SCM Press, 2009), 144.

²⁸ Jürgen Habermas, *Time of Transitions*, trans. C. Cronin and M. Pensky (Cambridge: Polity, 2006), 151–152.

in the loft today without the Christian heritage, the Abrahamic heritage, the biblical heritage.²⁹

The ideal of human rights is not grounded on Enlightenment ideals of autonomous reason or our natural capacities as Steven Pinker³⁰ and Erik Wielenberg³¹ have attempted to argue.³² Reason requires enlightenment from above that tells us that all men have sacred value.

Without the illumination of Christ, reason, the cosmos, and human dignity are all cast into darkness, like withered branches that have detached themselves from the true vine. We have just the opposite of Colossians 1:17, the lament of W. B. Yeats: “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold.”³³

VI. Paradox and Contradiction

Still, advocates of closed systems of rationality (or of other religions) may claim that the cost of a specifically Lutheran open view of reason outweighs its benefits. The Lutheran view accepts the plain, literal teaching of Scripture about the Trinity, the hypostatic union of God and man in Christ, and the real presence of Christ in the sacraments, even though we cannot fully comprehend *how* these teachings can be true. The charge is that Lutherans thereby embrace irrational contradictions and paradoxes.

However, I will argue that the Lutheran view of reason does not embrace contradictions and that the paradoxes it does affirm make more sense of things than their non-paradoxical (rationalistic) alternatives.

Contradictions

Even Siegbert Becker asserts that in accepting the mysteries of the faith “Lutheranism simply says that we must believe the Word of God rather than the law of [non-]contradiction.”³⁴ Well, some Lutherans may say this, and mean well

²⁹ Jacques Derrida, cited in Paul Copan, “Grounding Human Rights: Naturalism’s Failure and Biblical Theism’s Success” in *Legitimizing Human Rights: Secular and Religious Perspectives*, ed. Angus Menuge (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 17.

³⁰ Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2011).

³¹ Erik Wielenberg, *Robust Ethics: The Metaphysics and Epistemology of Godless Normative Realism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

³² For a critique of Wielenberg, see my chapter “Alienating Humanity: How Evolutionary Ethics Undermines Human Rights,” in *The Naturalness of Belief*, ed. Paul Copan and Charles Taliaferro (Lanham, Md.: Lexington, 2018).

³³ W. B. Yeats, “The Second Coming.” Available online at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43290/the-second-coming>.

³⁴ Becker, *The Foolishness of God*, 192.

by saying it, but I do not think we need to say it. Consider the Trinity. In his “Disputation against Scholastic Theology,” Luther says: “No syllogistic form is valid when applied to divine terms.”³⁵ But he also says that this is not because “the doctrine of the Trinity contradicts syllogistic forms.”³⁶ Luther is clearly maintaining that no attempt to demonstrate or explain the Trinity by unaided reason can succeed, but also that this is no reason to say that the Trinity is contradictory in itself.

Contra Becker, the problem is not the law of non-contradiction. After all, there is no reason to think that the Trinity is contradictory to God with his infinite understanding and knowledge of all things, including himself. The problem rather lies in the inadequacy of our finite, human categories. They are not capable of making full sense of divine truths because they do not capture the fullness of divine categories. God reveals divine terms to us, terms that transcend our powers, such as holiness, perfection, and necessary existence. Since we are unholy, imperfect, and contingent beings, we cannot fully comprehend what these terms mean.

A good analogy for our situation is Edwin Abbott’s portrayal of “Flatland,” a world of two-dimensional objects on a plane. One day, a Square in Flatland is visited by a Sphere from a three-dimensional world. As one might expect, the Square at first interprets the Sphere as a two-dimensional circle. But the Sphere reveals that he is very much more:

I am not a plane figure, but a Solid. You call me a Circle, but in reality I am not a Circle, but an infinite number of Circles, of size varying from a Point to a Circle of thirteen inches in diameter, one placed on the top of the other. When I cut through your plane as I am now doing, I make in your plane a section which you, very rightly, call a Circle.³⁷

Despite many evidences of the Sphere’s reality, as it turns from a point to a large circle and back again, the Square resists this new revelation, because he cannot see how it can be true: “although I saw the facts before me, the causes were as dark as ever.”³⁸ Finally, the Sphere takes the Square up into his three-dimensional world, which allows the Square to look down on the plane of his world and to see it as it looks from beyond the limits of two dimensions. Not only does he see that the higher

³⁵ Luther, “Disputation against Scholastic Theology (1517),” proposition 47, in *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*.

³⁶ Luther, “Disputation against Scholastic Theology (1517),” proposition 48.

³⁷ Edwin A. Abbott, *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions*, ed. Philip Smith (Mineola, NY: Dover Thrift Editions, 1992), 58.

³⁸ Abbott, *Flatland*, 59.

dimensional world exists, he understands his own two-dimensional world, including himself, better than he did before.

This is very suggestive. If a divine being reveals some of his transcendent qualities to us, we have two options: we can either, in faith, accept these qualities as true, without fully comprehending them, or we can make the futile effort to reduce them to finite categories, thereby denying their divinity. If our faith is rational, it is not because we can demonstrate these higher truths, but because, once accepted, these truths make sense of other things which would otherwise remain inexplicable. In G. K. Chesterton's terms, it is rational to be a "mystic," that is, one who accepts the given mysteries of the faith, because they so richly illuminate our world, and it is irrational to embrace the reductionist schemes of closed reason because they make the world itself an impenetrable mystery.

The whole secret of mysticism is this: that man can understand everything by the help of what he does not understand The one created thing we cannot look at is the one thing in the light of which we look at everything. Like the sun at noonday, mysticism explains everything else by the blaze of its own victorious invisibility. Detached intellectualism is . . . all moonshine; for it is light without heat, and it is secondary light reflected from a dead world.³⁹

By *exclusive* reliance on reason, the rationalist theologian or materialist attempts to force all truth into the Procrustean bed of finite human categories. But since they do not fit, this inevitably leads to one of two erroneous conclusions: denying the truth, because it does not fit, or substituting a lesser truth that does. Chesterton contrasts the poet (the "mystic" who accepts higher givens that he cannot rationalize) and the logician (the rationalist theologian or materialist): "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."⁴⁰

Paradoxes

Still, the Lutheran view does emphasize many paradoxes, such as Christ being true God and true man, the real presence of Christ in the sacraments, and the Christian as simultaneously saint and sinner. Yet the paradoxical nature of these claims is only an objection if reality itself is *not* paradoxical in this way. Chesterton argues that part of the case for Christianity is that, while much of it is reasonable, it is "unreasonable" at just those points that reality is:

³⁹ G. K. Chesterton, "Orthodoxy," in *The Collected Works of G. K. Chesterton*, vol. I (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 231.

⁴⁰ Chesterton, "Orthodoxy," 220.

Now, this is exactly the claim which I have since come to propound for Christianity. Not merely that it deduces logical truths, but that when it suddenly becomes illogical, it has found, so to speak, an illogical truth . . . It is simple about the simple truth; but it is stubborn about the subtle truth . . . whenever we feel there is something odd in Christian theology, we shall generally find that there is something odd in the truth.⁴¹

This balance between reasonable and unreasonable is just what we find in the scientific theories we believe most closely approximate the truth. In physics, familiar macroscopic objects like tables and chairs are well-behaved: they are “reasonable.” But at the quantum level, “unreasonable” things happen: the same object can appear sometimes as a particle and sometimes as a wave, its behavior has no definite cause, and twinned particles mirror each other in explicable ways. Quantum physics is highly confirmed because it predicts both the “reasonable” behavior of tables and chairs *and* the “unreasonable” behavior of elementary particles. As Chesterton says, “A key and a lock are both complex. And if a key fits a lock, you know it is the right key.”⁴²

We see similar examples in biblical theology. How can it be that man is under a law that he can never keep? Our unaided reason protests, “Ought implies can, but man cannot.” Yet both the obligation to the moral law and our inability to fulfill it remain. It is a paradox, which, as Pascal saw, makes man an incomprehensible riddle to himself. The Christian teaching that man had original righteousness and lost it untangles and illuminates this riddle.

Know then, proud man, what a paradox you are to yourself. Be humble, impotent reason! Be silent, feeble nature! Learn that man infinitely transcends man, hear from your master your true condition, which is unknown to you.

Listen to God.

Is it not as clear as day that man’s condition is dual? The point is that if man had never been corrupted, he would, in his innocence, confidently enjoy both truth and felicity, and if man had never been anything but corrupt, he would have no idea of truth or bliss. But . . . we have an idea of happiness but we cannot attain it . . . so obvious it is that we once enjoyed a degree of perfection from which we have unhappily fallen.

Let us then conceive that man’s condition is dual . . . and that without the aid of faith he would remain inconceivable to himself.⁴³

⁴¹ Chesterton, “Orthodoxy,” 286.

⁴² Chesterton, “Orthodoxy,” 287.

⁴³ Pascal, *Pensées*, 64–65, #131.

More, Christianity teaches something that unaided reason, bound as it is to the law, could never see, that although it is impossible for man to do anything to regain his original righteousness, God can bridge the gap: “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible” (Matt 19:26).

But how can God do such a marvelous thing? Isn't the law only for man, and have not all men broken that law? Unaided reason, bound by the law, can only conclude that we deserve punishment, and cannot see how or why God would save us. But this becomes clearer in light of the incarnation. We do not fully comprehend the hypostatic union—how one person, Christ, can be both God and man—but if we accept it in faith, we can see how Christ's life and atoning sacrifice meet God's demands for justice and also gift us with the righteousness we need to be reunited with him. For if the Son of God did not become man (as Docetism claimed), then since God is not under the law, the Son could not live out that perfect life that the law demands. And if Christ were a creature (as Arianism claimed), then his death could not atone for the sins of all mankind. But if Christ is true God and true man, then as man he can live the perfect human life, and as God his sacrifice provides inexhaustible merit to cover our sins.

Without these teachings, man's life is a dark mystery. Like Joseph K. in Franz Kafka's *The Trial*, he finds himself condemned for a crime he does not understand and cannot undo. But with these teachings, man sees that the law of God is not a cruel and impossible demand, for God has acted in love to save us and restore us to be the people he always intended.

VII. Conclusion

Autonomous reason is a myth. Reason cannot “go it alone,” because all rational inquiry depends on non-demonstrable givens. Since reason must be open, the only real issue is where to find the right input. I have argued that God's word provides the illumination, healing, and redirection that make the most sense of our world and thus best achieves reason's *telos*. In its openness to God's revelation and mystery, a Lutheran philosophy of reason bears great fruit, and proves to be more rational than the dry and withered branches of theological rationalism and materialism. It is, paradoxically, those who attempt to rely exclusively on reason (like Chesterton's “maniac”⁴⁴) who are most irrational. Seen in this light, the charge that Luther was an irrationalist in theology is false: judged by the fruit, his critique of the limitations of unaided reason and his openness to the higher input of God's word are both

⁴⁴ This is the title of chapter 2 of G. K. Chesterton's *Orthodoxy*, which shows that, by its exclusive reliance on materialistic science, modern science makes our world unintelligible.

supremely rational. Reason, like a mighty ship, achieves its *telos* only when it has the right guidance.