

Redemption of Reason

Talking Points for the First Lecture

By: Dallas Willard

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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