

Inter Fidem et Rationem
**Discerning the Proper Intersection of Philosophical and
Theological Methodologies in the Works of Nicholas Rescher
and Joseph Ratzinger**

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Initially, the distinction between philosophy and theology seems clear enough: philosophy is concerned with modes of knowledge arising naturally in the human person while theology is concerned with the knowledge presented supernaturally by faith, and the God who reveals himself as such. In light of this, the age-old maxim that philosophy is the *ancilla theologiae* is still maintained by many. Philosophical study is still required, in most cases (and to varying degrees), for those pursuing theological studies. In short, there is, at least in most circles, no justifiably tenable case for philosophy and theology being anything other than distinctly different yet complimentary and coexistent sciences.

Such a simple compartmentalization is however—like all classifications seeking to over-simplify vastly complex ideas—bound to fail. The incredibly broad implications of both philosophical and theological methodologies are, in the end, bound to enter into areas of overlap insofar as their content is concerned. In some cases, there is simply no ‘easy answer’ to the question: ‘Is this a principle of theology or a truth of philosophy?’ Adding to the enigma of such questions is, in no small part, the ubiquitous “diffusion of complexity,” which seems to characterize the situation of intellectual pursuits in the twenty-first century.¹ While continuing to put forward the unique identity of each discipline, academia has produced an entirely new science, commonly referred to as ‘philosophical theology.’ The aim of this specialization (which for many years lurked seminally in the pages of countless ancient and medieval writers) is to articulate by way of philosophical method the claims and

¹ Cf. Rescher (2001, 262-3).

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principles proper to theology.² Quite naturally, this attempt to combine philosophical methodology with theological objectives introduces a host of difficulties, and in this paper I will seek to investigate the limits of their coalescence: I will attempt to demonstrate the proper expressions of both philosophy and theology at their point of confluence, and will do so with particular regard to the insight of Nicholas Rescher and Joseph Ratzinger, both of whom have written much on this very subject. Finally, I will put forward my own suggestion, namely that there is a fundamental difference between philosophical and theological science insofar as methodology and aim (*telos*) are concerned, and that a correct understanding of these two facets enables one to distinguish between what is properly philosophical and what, although ostensibly similar, belongs strictly to theology.

I. God in Philosophy: Rescher's Contributions

In his essay, "God's Place in Philosophy (*Non in Philosophia Recurrere est ad Deum*)", Nicholas Rescher presents a strong case for the suitable limits of philosophical methodology with regard to the divine.³ The challenge, as he correctly identifies, is to understand the universal import of philosophy without relying too much on the utilization of God as a source of knowledge.

[P]hilosophy is supposed to deal with "the big questions" and...[there] are no bigger questions than those that relate to the nature and role of God—his existence, his relation to ourselves and to the world, and in general his place in the grand scheme of

² Concerning the early Christian philosopher, Ratzinger writes: "[H]e carries in his hand the Gospel, from which he learns, not words, but facts. He is the true philosopher, because he has knowledge of the mystery of death." Moreover, citing Gerke, he goes so far as to say that the early Christian philosopher is "interpreted as the prototype of the *homo christianus* who has received the revelation of the true paradise through the Gospel." (Ratzinger 1995, 14).

³ Cf. Rescher (2001, 246-56).

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things... In this way, a prominent place for God in philosophy seems securely assured.

However, he continues:

The rival intuition runs in the opposite direction. Insisting that God should not be viewed as a mere philosophical instrumentality, it takes the line that God has far more important work to do than to help philosophers out of their difficulties. Apart, perhaps, from noting this fact itself, our philosophizing should proceed on a secular basis and keep God out of it. (Rescher 2001, 246-7)

The situation exposed by Rescher is fundamental: Seen from the philosophical vantage point, what is the place of God, whose import is quite obviously derived from philosophical investigation, but whose alleged power could presumably circumvent any philosophic quandary?

Rescher probes this difficulty from various angles and asserts a number of claims in response. Initially, his focus is dominated by a consideration of God in philosophy *per se*, and the implications of theistic versus naturalistic modes of enquiry. In other words, he seeks to show a distinction in species between questions concerning divine reality (supernatural) and those concerned with the world (natural). (2001, 247-8) His thesis on this point, I think, is only moderately satisfying. Speaking of the optimal method of approaching such a distinction he writes: “The operative principle would thus become that of question/answer coordination: If God is not involved (explicitly or obliquely) in the question, then he should not be referred to in the answer.” (2001, 248) From the outset, Rescher’s position appears rational, yet perhaps not altogether tenable; it offers—at least on a superficial level—some basic guidelines for the proper inclusion of God in the realm of philosophical examination.⁴ Still, Rescher’s understanding here requires a great deal of further qualification

⁴ Rescher formulates this same argument elsewhere in more comic terms: “Give unto nature what is nature’s and unto God what is God’s.” (2001, 249).

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before it is at all satisfying. He seems to recognize this shortcoming later, raising the pith of his analysis in a section of the essay titled “Philosophy & Theology.” In this portion of his work, Rescher digs even more deeply into the incommensurable relationship between the two sciences. “Of course,” he admits, “there are going to be various issues that spill over from seemingly secular questions into theological ones.” (2001, 251) He gives the example of philosophical anthropology, and man’s presumed relationship to the divine. How can we avoid asking the question, he suggests, not only of our conceptualization of God, but also of his actual relation to us, given our philosophical understanding of his existence? These queries, and others like them, are the very substance of theological philosophy.

At this point, Rescher’s analysis becomes quite fascinating and—one should think—quite original. He makes a distinction between “philosophical theology” and “theological philosophy,” proceeding to speak of their respective characteristics:

[T]heological philosophy occupies but a very small sector of the terrain of philosophy as a whole... Only a very small proportion of philosophical issues have theological involvements... By contrast, a substantially greater body of theology’s theoretical issues have philosophical involvements (although these are, for the most part, not the most crucial issues of the theological domain). Put differently, philosophical theology occupies a far larger sector of theology than it does of philosophy. (2001, 252)

It seems justified to agree with Rescher on this point. The fact of the matter is that philosophy quite evidently maintains a much broader horizontal scope than does theology; all the questions of metaphysics, ethics, natural science, politics and art are ultimately philosophic in character. With that in mind, however, Rescher’s claims nonetheless give rise to a series of further, more penetrating questions about the relationship between philosophy and theology. ‘What is it about philosophy that makes it so suited for interdisciplinary work (e.g.

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philosophical psychology, political philosophy, theology, etc.), yet so able to stand independently?’ ‘What is it about theology that requires it to assume philosophical methodology so often in its course of inquiry?’ ‘Does theology actually *require* philosophy at all?’ ‘If not, then why is it so often invoked?’ To investigate them will require another and further point of departure, namely an inquiry from the standpoint of theology.

II. Philosophy in Theology: Ratzinger’s Contributions

Addressing this issue of relationality from the opposing angle is no simpler. According to Joseph Ratzinger, the notions of “how the two disciplines [of philosophy and theology] are related in the concrete and how their distinct claims to rationality can be safeguarded within their relationship are questions which...require a methodical effort in their own right.” (1995, 16) In light of this significant proposition, Ratzinger briefly traces the long history of the two sciences, their initial cohesion, later division and final divorce, and ultimately raises his own fundamental question on the matter—a question whose answer will, for the most part, occupy the remainder of this essay: “Can philosophy and theology still enter into any kind of mutual relationship at the level of methodology?” (17) Certainly, we must admit that the jury is still out on this. Ratzinger, as we will show, believes that there is a meaningful relationship between the two disciplines. Thinkers, on the other hand, like Heidegger, Jaspers and many others, are of the opinion that “he who supposes himself in possession of the answer has failed as a philosopher.”⁵ (17) Regardless of the plausible answers given on both sides of the fence, and perhaps because of them, the rift between philosophical theologians and philosophical purists is still as deep as ever. Following Ratzinger’s question, however, it seems that a ray of

⁵ Cf. Heidegger (2000, 8): “A ‘Christian philosophy’ is a round square and a misunderstanding. To be sure, one can thoughtfully question and work through the world of Christian experience—that is, the world of faith. That is then theology... Philosophy, for originally Christian faith, is foolishness.”

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understanding surfaces in the otherwise stalemated debate. Instead of simply addressing the coherence of philosophy and theology in certain, handpicked tasks of intellectual interest, he seeks rather to understand the particular differences and similarities of their unique methodological constitutions. In other words, he asks the question: ‘What makes theology “theology,” and philosophy “philosophy”?’ This is a question with a definite and achievable answer.

In an attempt to reply, Ratzinger concedes the lingering perplexity of the situation:

It must be granted, in fact, that if a reason entirely neutral vis-à-vis the Christian faith is part and parcel of the philosophical act, and if philosophical knowledge necessarily excludes any prior given which streams into thinking from faith, then the philosophical activity of a believing Christian must indeed appear to be something of a fiction. (17)

This is a consideration that cannot simply be overlooked, and in many ways the existentialist argument is difficult to refute. “But,” responds Ratzinger, “are the answers of the Christian faith really such as to cut off the path of thought?” (17) In other words—from his point of view—it seems that there must be a common ground between philosophical and theological work from the viewpoint of methodology. Both make use of discursive, rational and organized modes of thought. As he writes elsewhere, the earliest trends in a Christian understanding of God “meant opting for the *logos* as against any kind of myth; it meant the definitive demythologization of the world and of religion.” (2004, 138) If it had not, then the views of theologians like Karl Barth and others would hold true; that is, it would “[become] logical...to interpret faith as pure paradox.”⁶ (1995,

⁶ Cf. (1995, 19): “Against this continuity between philosophy’s search for the ultimate causes and theology’s appropriation of biblical faith, Barth sets a radical discontinuity. Faith, according to Barth, unmasks all of reason’s image of God as idols. It does not draw its life from the synthesis but from paradox.”

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21) Surely then, if this position is to be refuted, one which would render all philosophical processes in the realm of theology meaningless, there must be some tenable basis for assuming a strong correlation between what is properly philosophical and what is actually theological.

Ratzinger's analysis here continues mostly along the lines of how philosophy and theology reside mutually in the life of the faithful Christian, who continually desires to understand more about who God is and how he can relate to such a divine being. While he gives this particular theme ample attention, Ratzinger also leaves quite unanswered the original question: "Can philosophy and theology still enter into any kind of mutual relationship at the level of methodology?" The answer is still obscure, indeed; but having been armed with some tools necessary in illuminating it, we might now proceed even farther along the path toward a fitting response.

III. Method and *Telos*: Understanding the Synthesis

Having explored two very different prefatory approaches in some detail, we are now prepared to offer an answer—or at least the beginnings of one—to our central question. At this point, it seems that a primary reflection might be offered, namely that theology and philosophy differ in two ways: 1) with respect to methodology and 2) in terms of *telos*. Each discipline, moreover, has a particular and exclusive internal relationality between these two elements, upon which is constructed the whole of its operative value. Here, it will be helpful to examine the relational aspects of each science, philosophy and theology, in greater detail.

a. Method and *Telos* in Philosophy

The distinctive methodology of philosophy, as we have already somewhat exposed, can be briefly identified as the quest of pure human reason toward the attainment of truth. In other words, it is "the search of unaided reason for answers to the ultimate questions about reality" (Ratzinger 1995, 16),

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or alternatively, the “mission of providing satisfactory answers to the ‘big questions’ that we have regarding the world’s scheme of things and our place within it.” (Rescher 2001, 3) Entailed in this methodology—from the perspective of both Rescher and Ratzinger—is an understanding of the *telos*, viz. the decisive nature of truth, and its significance as a result of independent human inquiry.

The proximity of relationality between method and aim is no coincidence. In fact, it is exactly this propinquity that enables philosophy to operate as it does. If truth were not achievable by the efforts of human reason, philosophical pursuits would offer no real value for the human experience. This much is certain. But there is indeed a further distinction that must be made. The nature of this second and further delineation does not concern the logical proximity of method and *telos*, but rather the character of the *telos* itself in relation to its actual achievement. It seems that one cannot hold the relationality of method and *telos* to be so intimate that the goal of philosophy is, in fact, presupposed by the philosophical method itself. In other words, one cannot do philosophy without an idea that the proper aim of such work is an understanding of the truth, in whatever light it may come to be seen. But truth—by what we intend it to mean in the philosophic sense—is only understood by means of rational investigation. In order for philosophical investigation to occur, the method employed must be such that it does not take for granted the end of truth as attained by reasonable argument and discursive understanding. After all, since truth is the goal of philosophical investigation, it cannot be the prerequisite of its very exercise, as we have shown. Thus, it appears that there is no means by which to conduct an authentically philosophical survey other than by a method aiming to arrive at some degree of naturally achieved knowledge. And subsequently, it would seem, that although the abstract conception of a *telos* is inherently present in the very idea of philosophical methodology, the *telos* itself—the actual end of philosophical inquiry—is not and cannot be presumed by the philosopher, but is only demonstrable as the product of a properly conducted investigation.

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b. Method and *Telos* in Theology

Discerning a clear methodological and teleological relationship in theology, on the other hand, seems at first to be a rather more straightforward enterprise. For theology, unlike philosophy, it is more feasible to depart from the standpoint of teleology, moving only subsequently toward a grasp of methodology. As is evident enough from the word itself, the *telos* of theology is ‘*theos*.’ On this ground, (and given that theology is, of course, a properly human enterprise) one possible formulation of the definition of theology would be, as Ratzinger suggests, a “rational reflection upon God’s revelation.” (1995, 16) This construction hearkens to the primary idea of theology as aimed inexorably toward God and the revelation by which one knows him through faith. Departing from this perspective, the notion of a ‘science of God from the standpoint of faith’—the *fides quaerens intellectum* of Anselm—is yet another possible definition of theology. However, we must note that the employment of ‘faith’ (or the ‘faithful one’) as the agent and source of theological investigation introduces an entirely new facet to the idea of theological teleology. Since it is by faith alone that one admits the very existence of God as knowable *in se*, and the veracity of revelation by which he makes himself known, the rational character of a theological method—as suggested in the first definition by Ratzinger—seems only secondary to the work of theology. What remains primary is the *telos*: God. Put otherwise, while the philosophical project is intrinsically concerned with a rational, discursive methodology, theology is caught up first-and-foremost with a *telos* provided by faith, and only secondarily with “rational reflection.”⁷

⁷ This is certainly a point of great debate. Indeed, some will argue, there may be cases where, in some sense, the secondary “reflection” precedes the primary recognition of *telos* presented above. Although I do admit that, especially on the level of ‘natural theology,’ reflection seems primary and faithful assent to God’s being appears secondary, if Anselm’s axiom is to be maintained, then we must always be willing to recognize an element of *fides* in any aspect of rational reflection. In other words, while theological reflection may arise outside of a conscious individual assent to

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This is not, however, to deny the intimate necessity for reason in theology. On the contrary, theology is theology only because it seeks to ‘understand’ its divine *telos*. For the human person, understanding—at least on the systematic level⁸—is impossible without reason. Consequently, any hope for a systematic theological methodology is incoherent without the inclusion of “rational reflection,” as Ratzinger says. Still, though, we must continue to admit that a notable disjuncture appears to persist as a result of the non-integral relationality of the theological *telos* with any particular method or system of understanding. In other words, since the proper end of theology is presumed to exist as a viable truth even before theological investigation occurs (at least in my and many other prominent understandings of this idea), there is no way of positing one absolute method over the rest in coming to realize and appreciate this veracity in its fullest sense. This does not mean that some methods of investigation are not superior to others in extracting certain details—to be sure they are: various methods of scriptural analysis, systematics, etc. are all useful in their own right. But for theology as a whole—and here I mean all genuine faithful assent seeking to understand its divine *telos*—there is no supreme method of investigation. The mystics are, at least in the eyes of the Church, just as much ‘theologians’ as are the great writers of the patristic period. In sum, there cannot be said to be one exclusive theological methodology. Theology is, by its very constitution, inevitably predisposed to a great number of methodological formulations. As for its systematic execution, however, it retains an ever abiding dependence upon philosophical modes of method and inquiry.

c. Rescher and Ratzinger on the Methodological-Teleological Distinction

God’s life and revelation, whatever is properly theological is by its nature arisen from faith, and thereby upholds the distinction that all theology is the expression of *fides quaerens intellectum*.

⁸ As opposed, for example, to some form of direct, mystical knowledge of God, with which theology, strictly speaking, is also concerned.

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From our brief foray into the works of Nicholas Rescher and Joseph Ratzinger on the distinctive characteristics of philosophical and theological methodologies, a few points come to light that we should now mention.

First, it seems that Ratzinger would agree with the points I have made regarding the relation of method and *telos* in theology. As a result of the characteristic openness to methods and processes, theologians are, for good reason, very appreciative of philosophical methods. As I stated in the beginning of this essay, the idea of philosophy as *ancilla theologiae* has not been discarded. In fact, more and more it seems that theologians are turning to philosophy for further perspectives on truth. Ratzinger, as we have seen, readily admits that “the answers of the Christian faith [do not] cut off the path of thought.” (1995, 17) From his own writings, it is evident that he values the diverse application of philosophical understanding for use in a variety of disciplines, and that he is not opposed to employing philosophical method in what is properly theological work.

Furthermore, regarding Ratzinger, it appears that our analysis has adequately responded to the question of whether “philosophy and theology [can] enter into any kind of mutual relationship at the level of methodology.” It seems that they can—and not only can but must! Because it is naturally so open to methodological possibilities, theology requires philosophical contributions in order to achieve an understanding of its *telos*, even though the objective truth of the matter in question is already supposed. This, I would argue, is the ‘mutual relationship’ par excellence, and precisely the sort of thing Ratzinger aims to achieve in his own contributions to the philosophical-theological debate.

Turning to Rescher, then, we can fill in what is still lacking in our discussion of relationality between theology and philosophy: namely, the extent to which philosophical methodology may rightly be employed in theological investigations. Rescher, like Ratzinger, agrees that philosophy does not assume the reality of its *telos* (truth) until it has been rationally demonstrated. “Explanation,” he writes, “in philosophy as elsewhere, has to proceed from what is in the sphere of cognition the more clear and accessible—from what is prior

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in the order of knowledge (even if not in the order of being).” (2001, 248) Such is indeed the limitation on implementing theological explanations in philosophical circumstances. For this reason, as we have seen, he writes that “a very small proportion of philosophical issues have theological involvements.” (252) But as for philosophical contributions in the theological sphere, “a substantially greater body of theology’s theoretical issues have philosophical involvements.” (252)

Conclusion

In light of the investigation at the beginning of this section—and with respect to Ratzinger’s question of methodological relationship—Rescher’s claims appear to have grown in clarity. Although each thinker contributes to the question in a very different way, the two positions together provide for a more cohesive and well-articulated understanding of a “mutual relationship [between philosophy and theology] on the level of methodology.” Ultimately, what we are left with are two sciences that differ immensely in focus, but whose exercises, by virtue of their distinctly human deployment, are nonetheless strictly bound up with rational insight and discursive expression. Moreover, while both Rescher and Ratzinger seem to point to a model of philosophy necessarily separable from theological involvement, both thinkers continue to hold that, in large part, philosophical methodology is precisely what provides for the majority of theological investigations. This disposition of openness on the part of theology to the philosophical method is, I argue, a product of theology’s *telos*-centered constitution, and the very characteristic of theology that makes it a science both thoroughly human and incontestably divine. Philosophy, for both Rescher and Ratzinger, is certainly considered to be the *ancilla theologiae*, without which and without whose methodological contributions theology—on the systematic and communicable level—would undoubtedly fail.

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