

# Ambiguity and Undecidability in *Fides et Ratio*

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**Abstract:** The article offers a response to the encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, identifying its ambiguity with respect to two issues: the nature of the relation between faith and reason, and the diagnosis of the relation of modernity and postmodernity. The tension between the different accounts in the encyclical is not a flaw but a positive feature of the encyclical as an exercise in catholicity.

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*Fides et Ratio* has provoked commentary not only extraordinary in its volume but also in its quality. One possible explanation for the latter is what might be called the pitch of the encyclical. The encyclical seems, on the one hand, to be sufficiently apolitical so as to encourage tempered and considered comment rather than excite immediate responses of resistance or acquiescence, as has been the case with some of the Pope's other encyclicals. And, on the other, the topic is significant, is covered richly and deeply, and has ramifications not only for thought but for Christian life. The encyclical leaves, therefore, a space for thought, and demands probing. As with all rich texts, *Fides et Ratio* has given rise to a variety of different interpretations. Some have interpreted the text as a paean of praise to the thought of St Thomas, others have read it as 'more catholic', as advocating a general commitment to tradition and reason and the tradition of reason's relation with faith in the face of modern irrationalism both without and within church. Again others have read the text in terms of the salvation history account that frames the discussion of the rise and fall of the right relation between faith and reason. All of these interpretations make valuable contributions, and the scholarly contributions will undoubtedly increase, as new facets of this rich text are unearthed. My own very general remarks are predicated on both interpretive needs and interests. Given the tendency in interpretation to miss the wood for the trees, it still remains necessary, I believe, to provide a general characterization of the encyclical. Fulfilling this interpretive need serves as the basis for proceeding to deal with two specific interests. The first of these is the issue of whether the encyclical is of one voice with respect to its articulation of the right relation between faith and reason. And the second is whether the encyclical is of one voice with respect to the account

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of the generation of modernity and in its assessment of postmodernity. I will bring in negative verdicts on both counts, but argue that the double-voice of the encyclical, ultimately, redounds to its credit rather than discredit.

### **General characterization of *Fides et Ratio***

*Fides et Ratio* is best characterized as an intervention in a cultural and ecclesial situation in which there exists a de facto either-or between faith and reason and an all but institutionalized separation of theology and philosophy. Before going into the motives behind the intervention, or the hopes that are essentially ahead of it, something should be said about the basic character of the intervention. On the basis of some of the Pope's more recent documents, as well as the intentionally close relationship between this text and the documents of Vatican 1 and Pope Leo's *Aeterni Patris* (1879), it is tempting to dismiss the document as another example of the appeal to the authority of the ordinary magisterium. The case for this kind of interpretation is helped when in placing his intervention in the context of a prior tradition of similar interventions, the Pope explicitly invokes the language of 'authority' (§50). Nevertheless, I would like to suggest that contrary to appearances *Fides et Ratio* is not juridical. The legitimacy of the magisterial point of view does not derive from its source. Its legitimacy rather derives from the cogency of its analysis of the contemporary situation, governed by the consequences of the separation of faith and reason, the plausibility of its account of the origin of separation in the modern period, the attractiveness of, and practicality of, its recommendations for change, and the intelligibility of its prognostications and hopes for the future. The encyclical, therefore, offers an argument that is to be engaged with and that can be accepted or rejected. The operative model is thus dialogical and persuasive, not authoritarian and coercive.

The motives and hopes for the intervention can be read clearly from the text. The motives essentially concern the consequences of the operative either-or between faith and reason in which both become attenuated and marginal, and thus fail to challenge the dominant culture and the discourses that have come to replace theology and philosophy as having cultural capital. The marginal status of faith is accepted when faith recedes from conversation with reason, specifically philosophical inquiry. In this fideistic contraction faith refuses the imperative of giving an account of itself (§53). While the reaction of withdrawal is comprehensible to some extent, it does not succeed in its aim of preserving and guaranteeing the purity of faith. Rather, in the withdrawal faith comes to be ruled by uncritically-held metaphysical assumptions that compromise the sought for purity. In the separation of faith and reason, philosophy is similarly contracted and disabled. Outside of its nurturing relation to faith, philosophy shows a tendency to surrender its vocation to truth. Moreover, it makes a virtue of humility by becoming purely formal or epistemological, or striving to become practical, thus assisting new authoritative social and cultural discourse such as anthropology and sociology.

The double contraction that constitutes the immediate result of separation in turn colludes with the dominant cultural drifts in the modern world towards relativism, skepticism, and ultimately nihilism for whose generation the separation of faith and reason is at least in part responsible.

The hopes entertained for intervention are correlative to the motives. The basic hope is to persuade of the need to recover non-contracted versions both of faith and reason, which is not possible outside the context of their relation. A non-contracted version of faith does not leave behind reason, which faith recognizes as an essential element of human being and of the human good. This means that no matter how high the status of the narrative of the faith, and no matter how imperative the rendering of its narrative, argument or reason-giving is indispensable (§66). In addition, the Catholic recognition of the priority of revelation should not be permitted to chill or to still inquiry. For the axiom of the superiority of revelation is balanced by the axiom that revelation completes creation, or the co-ordinate axiom that grace completes nature. Similarly, a non-contracted view of reason refuses to allow itself to be defined by utility. It invests in truth rather than technical control, where the former supposes that reality is a mystery rather than a problem to be solved.

The encyclical, therefore, essentially is an argument for a both-and rather than an either-or view of the relation between faith and reason, a call for their integration rather than their separation. In this argument, a double pathway is recommended, a movement from faith to reason (ch. 2) and from reason to faith (ch. 3). In this recommendation, there are both systematic-normative and historical reasons adduced. Spurred somewhat by my own genealogical interests – though hopefully without prejudice as to which kinds of reasons have more status in the encyclical – I will spend more time on the historical reasons. Still a few comments on the systematic-normative reasons are in order. A number of considerations support the necessity of affirming the value of a pathway from faith to reason. On the one hand, one should recognize that faith has a basis in human being precisely as questioner (§§26, 28), that human being seeks after a truth that is universal rather than local, and that this seeking is disinterested at least to the extent that the truth sought is not simply a function of the need for consolation (§24; also §68). This essentially is an argument for necessary presuppositions for faith. On the other, we should recognize that faith gives rise to thought (§80), for example, in the case of the articulation of the trinitarian God (§93), and that the profession of faith requires argument and justification in general (§66). This is essentially an argument for a teleological perspective for faith. Simultaneously, there is a need to open the pathway from reason to faith. Again, the Pope advocates a teleological perspective. Reason completes itself in faith. It gains new breadth and depth when it comes to reflect on features of reality that without revelation it would never attend to, for example, sin, death, and history (§75).

The historical reasons for recommending this double pathway that ties together faith and reason, theology and philosophy, play a crucially important argumentative role. The evidential weight of the premodern tradition in which faith and reason

relate positively rather than negatively, and conversely, the lack of such evidential weight in modernity, which generates and justifies their separation, provides the basic frame in which the Pope conducts his discussion. Speaking of the premodern tradition, the Pope cites the successful adaptation of philosophical discourses by Christian faith. The plural is important here, for the Pope does not wish to suggest that a particular philosophical discourse does or can get privileged in Catholicism. Of the classical philosophers neither Plato nor Aristotle is preferred in principle. Both have been successfully appropriated in the Christian tradition, with Augustine representing an emblematic appropriation of Platonism (§39), and St Thomas representing an emblematic appropriation of Aristotle (§§39; 43–44). There are other even more weighty sources of evidence of positive relation between faith and reason. Although the warrant scripture provides is not simply historical, at the depth-historical level, especially in the Wisdom tradition that finds its summation in Romans 1:20 (§22), scripture itself supports the positive connection. The selection of Romans 1:20 seems intentionally chosen to mark an agreement with the common Catholic interpretation and a disagreement with the interpretation of Luther, who critiqued the common interpretation as he endorsed the separation of faith from the 'whore reason'.

The status of the presentation of supposed premodern general consensus about the right relation between faith and reason is not immediately clear from the text. Specifically, it is not clear whether scripture carries more or less weight than the tradition. Nor is it clear why presenting the premodern consensus regarding the appropriation of philosophy by Christian faith, and providing paradigms of this appropriation, justifies taking the premodern tradition as the baseline for judging modernity, and in particular its separation of faith and reason. On the face of it, the canonization of the premodern seems to function more as a presupposition than an argument. Which is not to say that the prioritization cannot be argumentatively redeemed. Indeed, it can be by appeal to something like a Gadamerian rehabilitation of tradition, in which traditions of discourse of long duration and staying power should be given the benefit of the doubt. While the encyclical does not explicitly make this appeal, on the virtual, if not actual, level one can read *Fides et Ratio* as involving an argument on behalf of the prerogatives of tradition.

Conversely, there is a lack of evidential weight in the modern tradition, which is the tradition of the separation of faith and reason. An important aspect of this argument for the illegitimacy of modernity is the point that the separation of faith and reason is contingent (§§45, 46). That is, the separation is not due to any intrinsic weakness in the way the connection is exemplified in premodern thought. What provokes this assertion is the fact that in modernity the separation of faith and reason is justified in terms of the need to secure the autonomy of philosophy, which supposedly is trammled in the premodern environment where philosophy is ancillary to theology. Against this view, the Pope asserts that the autonomy of philosophy is fully secured in the premodern environment (§77), just as it is fully securable now. Of course, at issue between the Pope and Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment thinkers in particular is the meaning of 'autonomy'. By this term,

post-Enlightenment thinkers mean an investigation by reason as reason is conceived as immune from solicitation, influence and completion by faith. Contrariwise, the Pope means by this term a reason that is not immured within itself, and which is thus fundamentally incomplete. The autonomy of reason, therefore, is hermeneutical rather than free-standing. Working with this hermeneutic sense of autonomy, the Pope feels that one can provide something like an argumentative justification for thinking of philosophy as an ancilla of theology. Undoubtedly the suggestion will be provocative to those who hold an Enlightenment or post-Enlightenment view of philosophy. But again, only aspects of the overall argument are made fully explicit. Operating implicitly is an argument of belatedness that shadows the Gadamerian assumption of the value of tradition as such. Belatedness functions in part at least to delegitimize a discourse that not merely instantiates the separation of faith and reason but also justifies it.

### **Ambiguity and undecidability**

It is unlikely that anyone is going to be persuaded by the historical argument, who has not already taken a negative attitude with regard to the contemporary situation presumed to be the outflow of modernity. In addition, not all the available argumentative warrants are produced in support of the position the Pope advocates. Arguably, however, these problems pale by comparison with a deep ambiguity about what articulations of reason are appropriate conversation partners for faith in the present and the near future. In recommending the reconnecting of faith and reason, theology and philosophy, there seem to be two different views about what articulations of reason are appropriate, the one relatively inclusive, the other relatively exclusive. The Pope seems to advocate the more inclusive, and weaker view, when he recommends the reinstatement of relation between faith and reason, without specifying the brand of philosophy. In fact, at one point the Pope denies the fact and even the possibility of such specification: 'The Church has no particular philosophy, nor does she canonize any one particular philosophy in preference to others' (§49). The inclusive view does not issue a blank check. Ecclesially useful species of philosophy have certain determinate features. There are three such features that function as criteria for appropriation: (i) commitment to meaning (§81), (ii) commitment to truth (§82), and (iii) acceptance that philosophy in general is metaphysical in orientation (§83).

The pivotal criterion is the second. On the one hand, meaning transcends itself in the disclosure of reality as it is, and, on the other, 'metaphysical' is defined in significant part by its vocation for such disclosure. Within this scheme of things a philosophy admits of being called 'metaphysical' even in cases where it is not focused directly on the relation of language and concept to reality. Phenomenological, hermeneutical, transcendental, and even linguistic species of philosophy admit of being called 'metaphysical' to the degree to which there is evidence of genuine ontological commitment. Thus, all of these modern Western styles of

philosophy, many of which are well known to this Pope, are legitimate conversation partners for faith. Needless to say, these more ontologically indirect styles of philosophy are not privileged over more ontologically direct styles of philosophy, above all that of Thomism. But importantly, within the inclusive perspective Thomist realism is just one of many examples of appropriate philosophical discourse (§61). Indeed, Thomism is simply an important Western European discourse that exemplifies adequately the relation between faith and reason. The outmost limits of the inclusive thrust of the encyclical are reached when the Pope suggests that European forms of philosophy have no priority over forms of philosophy in the Indian sub-continent or China (§72). Nor for that matter do the forms of philosophy generated within Western Europe have priority over forms generated in Eastern Europe and which find expression in such Russian thinkers as Soloviev and Florensky. The inclusive view, therefore, is culturally and historically pluralistic about the available philosophical resources for the defense of and the elaboration of faith, while clearly proposing criteria of selection. Moreover, specifically twentieth-century species of philosophy are not only not ruled out, but praised for the contribution they have made to the development of the understanding of faith.

In tension with the inclusive view is a more exclusive view that is anything but culturally and historically pluralistic. The exclusive view elevates the thought of Thomas Aquinas above all others. St Thomas is not regarded as one example of faith-friendly philosophical style, but as the normative example of an unsurpassable synthesis. The shift from the weaker inclusive to the stronger exclusive view is not only observable between paragraphs, between §61 and §§43–44, for example, but within a single paragraph (§78), where one moves quickly from St Thomas being an example of rapprochement of faith and reason to being the example. In asserting that St Thomas serves as the norm for the relation between faith and reason the Pope effectively adds a further criterion to the three criteria that are generally operative. He now stipulates that the commitment to the criteria of meaning, truth, and metaphysical depth must be directly rather than indirectly displayed. It is St Thomas's direct realism that sets him apart from other philosophies East and West, Eastern European and Western European, ancient and modern. The Pope is clearly conscious of the retro move, and suggests that his commitment to multi-cultural resources of philosophy does not rule out giving a certain privilege to a particular cultural style that is European, and a particular historical moment. He suggests that his privileging does not contradict the principle that the church has no philosophy and that it is in fact, as well as in principle, open to a multitude of philosophies, including modern ones, provided there is no abrogation of semantic and ontological commitment. But these suggestions function for the most part as assertions. We are offered little by way of justification for this compatibility, and even less as to how the exclusive emphasis squares with the more inclusive notes struck in the encyclical.

It is possible, however, that in seeking justification we are asking the wrong question, at least to the extent to which justification is theoretical in nature. In

grasping what can be expected of this encyclical one has to take account, on the one hand, of the nature of encyclicals, even relatively theoretical ones such as *Fides et Ratio*, as well the previous magisterial treatment of the issue of the topic of the relation of faith and reason, and, on the other, of the particular character of this encyclical as an intervention.

Two points should be kept in mind about encyclicals in general. First, all encyclicals without exception are pastoral. This means that no matter how close encyclicals approach the style of a treatise, they do not proceed under the same argumentative obligations. Relative to a treatise in fundamental theology, the encyclical is argumentatively disappointing. But the genre imposes limits with respect to argumentative obligations. And compared with other encyclicals, and especially those that concern its topic, *Fides et Ratio* fares quite well from an argumentative point of view. Second, there are the restrictions set to encyclical discourse by previous encyclicals, and especially encyclicals that concern the basic topic. At the very least a later encyclical does not controvert previous magisterial announcements on the topic. And by and large the relation between encyclicals is much stronger, with the previously articulated position functioning as a code for the new elaboration. Concretely, this strong intratextual relation between *Fides et Ratio* and *Aeterni Patris*, for example, will force at least an airing of the normativity of Thomistic philosophy.

To remind of the intervention character of the encyclical is also apropos. For depending on the perception of the severity of the malaise, different therapies are to be recommended. For a general drift towards relativism and skepticism, the antidote might well be supplied by forms of philosophical discourse that emphasize the mysteriousness of reality and have real, although indirect ontological commitment. Given a view of the contemporary world as characterized by an excess of relativism, skepticism, and even nihilism (§§86–90), stronger medicine is required. In what is regarded as a crisis of culture as well as faith – there are evocations of Husserl's famous *Crisis* essay – only philosophical discourses that are willing to assert a direct and adequate connection between concept and reality, and language and reality can be sanctioned. In addition, one has to raise the question as to whether some modern philosophical discourses – largely European discourses – are contaminated by the anthropological and immanent culture towards which they should take a critical posture.

There seems, then, to be two views concerning the range of philosophies recommended for Christian and Catholic appropriation, and thus two views about what constitutes the definition of a 'Christian philosopher'. An important question is whether one is ultimately preferred. If one were to answer this question in the affirmative, then the advantage would clearly go to the exclusive view, which relativizes the view of philosophy as question, search and penetration into the mystery, which has classical (Plato, *zetesis*; Aristotle, *thaumazein*) and modern (e.g. Heidegger and Rahner) precedents, undermines the cultural plurality of its production, and prioritizes a particular style of philosophy at a particular moment in time. But need one answer in the affirmative? Is there not an essential

undecidability between these two options? One support for the undecidability hypothesis, arguably, is provided by the Pope's own philosophical education and his performance, which seems to indicate a betwixt and between of scholastic and modern continental modes of thought. Obviously, the mixed and plural character of the Pope's philosophical culture cannot be decisive for explanation. First, the value of psychological arguments is questionable. Second, debate rages over whether this mixed character of his own philosophical productions prior to becoming Pope can itself be resolved into dominant and recessive poles. Nonetheless, the affirmation of two different kinds of philosophy is of long standing in Karol Wojtyła and, therefore, one cannot rule out the possibility of a repetition. A consideration that bears on the nature of encyclicals themselves adds significant support to the undecidability hypothesis. That is, that as essentially pastoral, no matter how interventionist, and no matter how constrained by previous magisterial documents, this encyclical will evince a strong tendency to include as many Catholics as possible who agree about the modern malaise, even if they disagree about whether propositionalist or non-propositionalist discourse, in fact or in principle, is better suited to play a therapeutic role in late modernity. Thus, the encyclical genre itself encourages, though it does not determine, ambiguity about the recommended nature of the relation between faith and reason.

### **Genealogy of modernity and the postmodern condition**

Whether the tension-relation between the inclusive and exclusive views of the relationship of reason and faith, philosophy and theology, is decidable or not, it is obvious that a similar, and consequent, tension or ambiguity attends the encyclical's ruminations on the emergence of modernity and its relation to postmodernity. Formally, modernity is defined as the cultural context in which human beings lose the sense of what holds faith and reason together and how theology and philosophy are neighboring discourses (§§45–46; also §§75, 86–90). Materially, however, there are two paradigms of loss. In line with the inclusive view of the relation of faith and reason, there is a softer view of modernity at work in which there are less serious as well as more serious ways of being unfaithful. This softer view avoids determinacy in identifying the origin of the breakup. The most that can be said is that from the fifteenth century to the seventeenth century styles of thought emerge that either intentionally or effectively separate faith and reason. Labels like 'immanence' and 'rationalism' assigned to the discourses generated in this period, and subsequently, do not function as categories so much as marks for a process for which a unified theory is either lacking, or, given the fundamentally pastoral interest of the encyclical, more or less beside the point. In line with the more inclusive view of 'and', however, there is operative also a much stronger thesis about modernity. Modernity represents nothing more nor less than the breakup of the mediaeval synthesis superbly, even unsurpassably, represented by St Thomas. This gives the emergence of modernity both a definite date, that is,



the fifteenth century, and identifies a definite culprit, that is, Nominalism. Here it seems as if the Pope is offering a view of modernity that goes hand in hand with the hallowing of a particular style in philosophical and theological discourse and the privileging of a particular historical moment. This much more determinate view, which makes the fall from positive relations between faith and reason precipitous, suggests that modernity is totally a period of eclipse. In addition, depending on which of these two genealogical schemes is operative, the critique of postmodernity and its discourses will be more or less severe, since whatever else can be said, the 'post' of 'postmodernity' is not automatically allowed.

In a substantial paragraph (§91) it is obvious that the Pope wants critical leverage against what has been referred to as 'postmodernity'. Acknowledging that 'postmodernity' is difficult to mark epochally, and almost as difficult to define, the Pope seems interested in not legitimating claims that postmodernity launches a new and productive period beyond the confines of modernity, nor that postmodernity essentially goes beyond the immanent and relativistic discourses of modernity that show the consequence of the separation of faith and reason. The Pope is far from certain that, *pace* Lyotard, 'postmodernity' is not just another way of talking about 'late modernity'. Moreover, the Pope suggests that it is possible, if not likely, that postmodern discourse is nothing more than the apotheosis of the implicit nihilism of the discourses of modernity.

The truly interesting points in the encyclical concern not the Pope's epochal stance, but his view about the nature of postmodern discourse. Again, in line with the stronger and weaker views of modernity and its origins, there is a tension in the Pope's comments between a weaker critical assessment in which questions about postmodernity's commitment to meaning and truth are raised, and a stronger view in which a relativistic and nihilistic characterization of postmodern discourses is actually asserted. But whether giving postmodernity something of the benefit of the doubt or not, the Pope is clearly not willing to sustain any celebration by postmodernists of the semantic and ontological incapacity of faith or reason that supposedly liberates. Mourning rather than celebration is more appropriate, for thought beyond meaning and truth represents not a liberation but an irresponsible surrendering of its genuine mission, and makes us captive to immanent networks of concepts and language that can only prove illusory. Although the word appears nowhere in the encyclical, the Pope seems ready to enter a guilty plea when philosophical modes of thought in the Western tradition are characterized as 'ontotheological', that is, identifying reality as such with its highest instance 'God'. The triune God of Christian faith, or its philosophical pseudonym, 'mystery', indeed, establishes the horizon of meaning and truth that cannot be established in any other way. Moreover, Christianity not only repeats, but fundamentally radicalizes the indeterminate ontotheology of the classical tradition. Nevertheless, the discourse of genuine philosophy, and most certainly the discourse of faith, is not a discourse in which God is fully mastered and conceptually secured, which is, of course, precisely the crux of the 'ontotheology' accusation, made initially by Heidegger, and following him Derrida and his successors.

Relatedly, one can read the Pope as agreeing with the postmodernist view of the premodern tradition of discourse as being essentially logocentric. This is indicated by the Pope's willingness to subscribe to the view condemned, for example, in Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, that it is the incarnation that fundamentally guarantees the link-up between signifier and signified. Guaranteeing linkage, however, does not idolize language's capacity, or ignore the fact that in many instances language is inadequate to reality. Rather it provides the horizon that supports human striving and hope. Short of this link-up, language is caught in an infinite immanence that mirrors and exacerbates the disposition of modernity and its hopelessness.

There is one further point that I would like to make. In §91 nihilism has two different senses. The first sense is epistemological, and makes nihilism the function of relativism and skepticism. This we have already treated. The second sense, however, bears on nihilism being the outcome of the collapse of the 'rationalist option', specifically history viewed as 'the triumphant progress of reason', or otherwise put, the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment narratives of reason. There are two interesting aspects to the Pope's treatment of this particular postmodern complaint. First, he refuses to associate the modern narratives of reason with the claims that can be legitimately made on behalf of reason. Reason puts us in connection with reality, it does not master it. Second, in what might be considered as an amendment to Lyotard, who suggests that all narratives, the biblical as well as Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment narratives, make not only a claim of total conceptual adequacy, but conceptual adequacy of a self-justifying kind, the Pope suggests that neither the biblical narrative, nor any of the major theological assimilations of this narrative, are guilty of asserting that their truth claim cannot be contested. The Christian narrative of redemption, then, not only differs in content from Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment narratives, it differs in form. This uncoupling of the narrative(s) of faith from the triumphalist modern narratives of reason in turn functions negatively to associate the narratives of modernity to postmodernity, despite the latter's supposed disavowal of grand narratives.

## Concluding remarks

*Fides et Ratio* operates on a high intellectual level as it aims to persuade that it has grasped adequately the fundamental complexion of modernity and postmodernity and proposed the right solution to the difficulties they present to faith. That its argument displays ambiguity and tension between stronger and weaker views both with respect to diagnosis and recommendation should neither surprise nor appal. Indeed, given a sense of what is possible in the encyclical genre, this ambiguity or tension is not only not a flaw but a real benefit, an exercise in catholicity in which stronger and weaker views of how we got to be where we are culturally and religiously and how we go beyond the malaise are spelled out. And no matter how

darkly our condition, whether modern or postmodern, is painted in the encyclical, the final note is hope. For the encompassing horizon of history, of faith and reason, and of our successes and failures to integrate them, is the trinitarian God who is the God of the future as well as the present and the past.