Faith and Public Reason

Nicholas Tonti-Filippini
John Paul II Institute for Marriage and Family
Melbourne, Australia

Introduction
Taking part in secular discussion is difficult for Christian philosopher.   An approach that has often been favoured by Catholic philosophers is to attempt to engage at a level of pure reason using natural law concepts.   Such an approach sells us short and represents a failure to engage in secular discussion on equal terms and a failure to give adequate witness to the teachings of Christ.

It is not true that reason has a wax nose, as former Cardial Ratzinger argued, there is a role for faith-derived concepts in secular discussion and for encouraging others to share their view whether faith based or not, and for subjecting those concepts to the scrutiny afforded by rational analysis in an effort to achieve an identified common ground of human goodness that both transcends individual culture and belief but has its individual origins within the disparate cultures and traditions.

Christian Ethics and Public Policy
Central to Christian ethics is a concept of human dignity founded on the imago dei, and informed by the incarnation and the teachings of Jesus Christ.

The Church however has many voices: prophetic, academic/professional, humanistic and artistic[1]. In the field of bioethics the proclamation of the Word of God and witness to the person and teachings of Christ are prophetic and essential, but not always the voice that a secular audience is prepared to hear.

Bioethics, as a secular system of regulation of biomedical research and practice, demands a voice other than the prophetic. For a Christian, upholding the dignity of the human person within Bioethics calls us to develop a language and reasoning that belongs to the secular rather than the religious world.   This of course may be seen by some as a conflict with the vocation of a Christian. It also means buying into the debate represented by Benedict XVI's comment as Cardinal Ratzinger that "reason has a wax nose", the shape of reason is determined by theological convictions[2]. In his 1996 address to the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, "Current Situation of Faith and Theology" Cardinal Ratzinger agrees with Karl Barth's rejection of philosophy as the foundation of faith independent of faith, but rejects Barth's claim that faith is a pure paradox that can only exist against reason and totally independent from it. He calls for a new dialogue between faith and philosophy. "Reason", he said, "will not be saved without the faith, but the faith without reason will not be human."[3]

Pope John Paul II commented on natural law:

> "Every people has its own native and seminal wisdom which, as a true cultural treasure, tends to find voice and develop in forms which are genuinely

philosophical. One example of this is the basic form of philosophical knowledge which is evident to this day in the postulates which inspire national and international legal systems in regulating the life of society."[4]

In *Fides et Ratio* he addressed philosophers saying:

> "They should be open to the impelling questions which arise from the word of God and they should be strong enough to shape their thought and discussion in response to that challenge. Let them always strive for truth, alert to the good which truth contains. Then they will be able to formulate the genuine ethics which humanity needs so urgently at this particular time. The Church follows the work of philosophers with interest and appreciation; and they should rest assured of her respect for the rightful autonomy of their discipline. I would want especially to encourage believers working in the philosophical field to illumine the range of human activity by the exercise of a reason which grows more penetrating and assured because of the support it receives from faith."

In that respect there is no dichotomy between faith and reason, or between theology and philosophy. Philosophy would be foolish indeed if it willingly blinded itself to theology and to Scripture and resolved never to consider propositions that emerged from consideration of the nature of the Creator and the relationship between created and Creator. What is different about philosophy is that it resolves to test those propositions against reason and to seek justification, rather than accept them simply as a matter of faith. For a Christian, there is no difficulty in considering the teachings of Christ, and in faith believing them to be true, but, because true, able to withstand the examination of reason.

The danger for us as philosophers is to think that, because in a secular society we cannot expect that others share our faith, we must not introduce Christian notions, and if we do, they must be under some other guise. Such subterfuge is beneath dignity. It is better to go into a committee meeting known for one's faith in Christ Jesus, but also for one's willingness to listen to others and to explore concepts with a view to seeking truth that is broadly recognisable by others. In other words, one seeks, as a matter of mutual respect, common ground between one's own unashamed and obviously Christian beliefs and the beliefs of others, and with a willingness to question and to explore together what is true and good.

Is Natural Law a Matter of Pure Reason?
In his earlier critique of the Vatican document *Gaudium et Spes,* Ratzinger asserts that "…. it seemed to many people, especially from German speaking countries, that there was not a radical enough rejection of a doctrine of man divided into philosophy and theology. They were convinced that fundamentally the text was still based on a schematic representation of nature and the supernatural viewed far too much as merely juxtaposed. To their mind it took as its starting point the fiction that it is possible to construct a rational philosophical picture of man intelligible to all and on which all men of goodwill can agree, the actual Christian doctrines being added to this as a sort of crowning conclusion."[5]

He goes on to attribute this error to the Thomists, "It can hardly be disputed that as a consequence of the division between philosophy and theology established by the

Thomists, a juxtaposition has gradually been established which no longer appears adequate. There is, and must be, a human reason *in* faith, yet conversely, every human reason is conditioned by historical standpoint so that reason pure and simple does not exist.[6]

It is worth noting in this respect his emphasis on historical standpoint and thus on culture and tradition is also a basis for much of Alasdair MacIntyre's approach and the latter has drawn criticism on the grounds of relativism for it.

My own experience in working within a secular environment towards an agreed policy on ethical matters is that each of us does bring our own culture and tradition and that is likely to include theological traditions. What is spoken about, however, is not theology as such, but rather the search for a set of agreed and basic values upon which a coherent policy can be formulated. The reasons why we uphold a basic value is not so much discussed as accepted and what then emerges is a position that is both determined by individual culture, but also which transcends individual culture, because it is held in common across cultures and has been made subject to scrutiny and the need for justification on its own propositional terms.

A philosopher thus has more to contribute to that discussion than a theologian precisely because as philosophers we are interested in exploring why a teaching is good for mankind and to justify it in human terms. As Christian philosophers we are informed by our faith but willing to see its propositions tested for their justification, knowing that what God wants for us is good for us because he loves us.

In that respect, the response I wish to make to the claim that reason will not be saved without faith is to claim that independent of faith, goodness is a property that is recognizable even by those are unfamiliar with the Scriptures. In public discussion in a context of participants who belong to a range of faiths and none, it is legitimate and worthwhile to adopt the role of mutually seeking to identify a common understanding of human goodness and what we call the Pauline principle with respect to not doing evil in order to achieve the good. In other words faith is informative and not separate from our experience of the good, but it also appears to be a property which remains recognisable even by those of no apparent faith. Faiths are not to be excluded from that pursuit, for that would be both arrogant and bigoted, but the task is one of seeking to find that which is transcendent of individual faith, culture and tradition.

At the level of discussing virtue, Aquinas himself accepted the division of virtues and saw the cardinal virtues as distinct from the religious virtues, holding that all virtues other than the theological are in us by nature, according to aptitude and inchoation, but not according to perfection. The theological virtues, he claims, are from without.[7] From practical experience in consulting in ethics within the practice of psychiatry, I would claim that the cardinal virtues transcend tradition and culture simply because to completely lack any one of them would be a form of mental illness. They are essential to living in community. The religious virtues however presuppose a God, but they are not without philosophical justification independently of faith in the person of Christ who so illuminates them by his personal witness and teaching.

A challenge for us as philosophers is to try to understand the Trinitarian mystery and through it Trinitarian anthropology. I would argue with respect to the latter that such a

philosophical understanding of the communion of persons of the Trinity and through that understanding the nature of humanity as designed for communion, does provide a deeper understanding of marriage and human sexuality. In this respect I hold that John Paul II did not replace appeal to what is supposedly 'against nature', with a radically biblical doctrine of nuptiality, as some have claimed[8], but rather he has insisted on understanding sexuality in terms of the communion of persons that is our ultimate vocation and which finds expression in this life in the gifts of marriage and by analogy committed celibacy.   In other words far from decrying the "against nature" arguments, he has instead tried to develop the notion of what is a human nature, and that part of that nature is the vocation toward forming a communion of persons. The imago dei is not of a single person but of three persons in a community of persons.   The task for philosophy is the task that he gave himself in *The Acting Person,* of understanding human nature in a vocationally relational way. This is far from rendering non-theological ethics redundant.   It is important that these developments of an understanding of human nature are challenged and justified on philosophical terms. It is only by doing so, that the Scriptural understanding of the human person which is the basis of the John Paul II Wednesday audiences on *Theology of the Body* can gain credibility through its internal coherence and consistency in philosophical terms.

When we are able to do that, we will then have a conceptual framework that can also be used in the engagement with our society.   The greatest distance between Catholic moral understanding and our Western culture occurs at the level of understanding nuptiality.   There is an urgent need to try to bridge that gap with a philosophical analysis of human nature that gives substance and justification to giving oneself in love. We need a way of constructing a common ground with others.

Critical analysis and evaluation as I was taught it at as a Philosophy post-graduate was a process that one learned by which the worth of a philosophical work could be judged by the number of distinctions made and defended.   This approach has had its detractors. The philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre argues that contemporary philosophy has condemned itself to engaging in irresolvable or more precisely stagnating disputes by virtually making a virtue out of difference and of splintering of positions. (MacIntyre, 1988, p.3) He claims:

> "Modern academic philosophy turns out by and large to provide means for a more accurate and informed definition of disagreement rather than for progress toward its resolution. Professors of philosophy who concern themselves with questions of justice and of practical rationality turn out to disagree with each other as sharply, as variously and, so it seems, as irremediably upon how such questions are to be answered as anyone else."

In my own experience on ethics committees and shaping policy, the much more important matter is not the fine points of disagreement and difference, but the development of agreement and consensus, for it is upon the latter that policy actually develops.   In my own teaching I have come to recognize that an important skill for Bioethics graduates to learn is how to be able to analyse and evaluate toward a resolution, not to achieve more difference.

An aspect I had noted about good graduate student essays is that they had picked up the need to consider a range of views, and to work with the different concepts within those

differences, but their method often seemed to be little more than to work to a favoured conclusion by dismissing other views on the basis of identifying some or multiple errors in those positions. Bad student essays did not even get that far and tended to resemble sermons rather than analysis.

My thought on the good student essays is that they have learned a skill, if it can be called that, which will not be particularly useful in policy-making. Instead of seeking resolution, they have learned to identify difference and then to adopt a view, like supporting a football team, and to support that view by decrying other views through seeking to identify error. This is not an approach that is likely to be effective on an ethics committee and would seem in fact to work against the idea of an ethics committee or policy-making being a process by which advice can be developed that is persuasive and broadly acceptable. The skill that they acquired was more suited to tyrants and dictators rather than to a rational democracy.

The much more difficult skill that I think is not well taught is how to use that understanding of difference to work towards consensus. The reality of ethical discussion between people who have different higher order beliefs is that they develop neuralgia points at which their basic higher order beliefs or assumptions are challenged. The skill of seeking resolution is to find formulations of words that either avoid or are at least acceptable to the variety of higher order beliefs or assumptions. In that way one can indeed reach a consensus that can be supported from a variety of points of view. Thus there is an active process of analysis that can yield a constructive outcome through the knowledge that that analysis brings. The problem that I referred to in the student essays is that they more or less stopped at identifying difference and error, rather than moving on to seek solutions that were constructive.

This might be seen as condoning relativism, a charge that has been levelled at Alasdair MacIntyre who also holds to respecting a person's culture and tradition. The counter that I would make to a similar charge is that, working on an ethics committee, the task is a very practical one of identifying goodness and goodness is not the preserve of any one culture or tradition, but transcends differences between culture, tradition and religion.

If the autonomy as moral trump approach dominated, then ethics guidelines would be little more than guidelines for providing information, obtaining consent and appointing representatives for those who lack the capacity. But that is not my experience on government committees and in secular bioethics.

In the task of developing ethical guidelines it is interesting that secular bioethics has had to call on notions that approximate to the Christian concepts of dignity and the language of moral imperatives. A moral language has developed to express ideas such as intrinsic evil and the Pauline principle, and, in Australia at least, there is an as yet unarticulated move away from both autonomy as a moral trump and utilitarian concepts and towards a theory of the good. This is most clearly expressed in the various ethical guidelines issues by the National Health and medical Research Council, for which I will give account.

The 1970 & 80's ideas of replacing utilitarianism with principlism[9], and the latter's emphasis on autonomy as a moral trump, has given way to ideas of professional integrity and a taxonomy of acts never to be undertaken. This is in part influenced by

virtue ethics but also embodies a thick notion of the human person and the good of the human person. The teleology is lacking in any sense of an explicit final end of the human person, but to some extent the dialogue is pervaded by an implicit sense of the transcendent nature of humanity.

This experience in secular bioethics regulation raises some pertinent practical questions about natural law reasoning and the internal debates about moral epistemology and whether human goods and the moral law are knowable or deducible in a sufficiently rich way as to give rise to an adequate ethic not based on the Word of God.

Public Reason in Bioethics
Basically the view that I have taken is that in engaging in moral discussion with people who do not share our faith, there is no reason to think that one must resort to pure reason and construct a morality from first principles.   One is entitled to explore what each believes and in that context of listening also present the teaching of Christ offered for evaluation according to reason and in that context by reasoning that applies the natural law.

My original approach had been to approach the bioethics issues in the public forum from the perspective that natural law is written in every heart and that we can appeal to natural principles in the public forum. As time has gone on I have been concerned that:

a)   the approach is not working and battle after battle is being lost on vital issues. This is no more so the case than in the UK which has rapidly become the most immoral of Western nations; and

b)   in doing so we are in danger of not advocating the essential Christian messages. In particular the theological virtues, which Aquinas recognised are not part of our individual heritage outside of revelation, are an important element in Bioethics.

The shift I have made is that the Christian moral message can be offered within the public domain alongside its competitors. Rather than trying to derive it from pure reason in some kind of Kantian way, it is legitimate to offer it and to argue that it is defensible through reason, even if not entirely derived from reason and first principles.   We ought not then feel restricted from seeking to promote the theological virtues and the particular human and divine good towards which they are oriented.   The approach I advocate is to encourage others to express their views and in listening to them gain the right to express my own.   The purpose then of a collaborative secular activity is to identify values and principles that are both widely held and can withstand robust critical analysis.

Secular dialogue does not mean using only a language of pure reason that is likely to be foreign to all parties, but rather listening to each and being willing to explore common ground.

I recognise the dangers of both positivism and relativism in this approach. Both of the latter, I hope, can be avoided through the robustness of the critical analysis.   The difference of the latter however is that I see its function as being constructive rather than to deconstruct. In other words, the approach is to identify virtue and goodness rather than to finish with nothing, which seems to be the result of secular discussion in the

Western societies.   To that end natural law theory is well adapted, not as a ground up construction of a morality, but as a means of testing and assessing the reasonableness of the concepts offered as a basis for formulating policy and in that way achieving common ground.

The role of a Christian philosopher in public policy formation is to encourage others (of all faiths and none) to be willing to put their own view rather than feeling constrained to express a view censored by the need to respect the new faith of atheistic secularism and a Cartesian scepticism or Kantian rationalism that will only allow that which can be derived from first principles through pure reason.   In placing our individual cards on the table, so to speak, we can then work together to analysis and synthesise a common moral ground.

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[1] John W. O'Malley, Four Cultures of the West (London: Harvard University Press, 2004) 7

[2] Tracey Rowland, *Ratzinger's Faith: The Theology of Pope Benedict XVI"* OUP 2008, p. 5

[3] Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger An address to the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, "Current Situation of Faith and Theology" (1996) http://www.ourladyswarriors.org/dissent/ratzsitu596.htm Accessed 18th June 2008

[4] Pope John Paul II *Fides et Ratio* (1998) n. 4

[5] Joseph Ratzinger "The Dignity of the Human Person" in Herbert Vorgrimler (ed) *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II* Vol V (Burns & Oates: London 1969), pp. 115-163

[6] Ibid.

[7] "Sic ergo patet quod virtutes in nobis sunt a natura secundum aptitudinem et inchoationem, non autem secundum perfectionem: prater virtutes theologicas, quae sunt totaliter ab extrinseco"S. Thomae Aquinatis *Summa Theologiae* (Marietti: Taurini/ Romae 1952) Prima Secundae Partis Q. 63, Articulus I

[8] See for instance, Fergus Kerr *Twentieth Century Catholic Theologians*(Blackwell: Oxford 2007) p. 179

[9] See for instance the approach taken by Beauchamp T L and Childress J F in successive editions of *their Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, 5th edn. Oxford University Press, 2001, though the latter edition has tended to move away from autonomy as the dominant value toward a virtue approach.