

‘Socrates in the City’—Are Reason and Spirituality Compatible?

(1). Socrates’ question, relentlessly pushed upon his fellow citizens, was “How should we live?” He well understood that only the correct deployment of reason **and** spirituality, in cooperation with each other, could answer that question. They are not only compatible, they are made to work together, and if they don’t human life falls into chaos.

(2). Today, of course, historical forces have forced them apart and in opposition to one another. “Spirituality” is a matter of feeling, ‘faith’, and arbitrary decision. And, sure enough, chaos has descended. A deadly opposition of faith and knowledge now reigns.

(3). What is spirituality or the spiritual? It is, first of all, non-physical—something sense perception, or sciences built up from sense perception, simply have nothing to say about. But, positively, it is—directly or indirectly—the personal. Try out as a description of spirit: **Unbodily, personal power.**

(4). In various ways, spirit and the spiritual are manifested in:

Self-awareness

Art: in the creation and in the experience.

Morality: intention and character

Meaning: gifts of transition, to move us onward.

Religion, or transcendental intrusion.

All of these derive from and largely consist in what is non-physical and personal.

(5). Art, for example, consists in mastery and employment of a physical, sense-perceptible ‘medium’ for the expression of a human vision of realities and values, which are then made available, as otherwise they would not be, to experience in the public realm for those who seek and understand.

(6). Morality has to do with intentions of good and evil, settled into character, and even into the bodies and life arrangements, of good and bad people (of varying degrees). Intentions and character are manifested in actions and social arrangements.

(7). But now this question forces itself forward: **Are these areas of “spirituality” accessible to reason, rightly deployed, resulting in knowledge?** “No!” is the response generally assumed today. But this leaves us with no rational and reliable guidance for life. And for most of human history the answer has been emphatically, “Yes!” Certainly for Socrates, Plato, and nearly all of the great thinkers recognized in the history of thought (Descartes, Locke, Kant). Were they stupid, or are we today misguided?

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(8). Knowledge: You have knowledge of something if you are able to represent it (speak about it, deal with it, etc.) as it is, on the appropriate basis of thought and experience. This is a description of knowledge as knowledge actually functions in human life.

(9). Knowledge of any subject matter is gained by bringing it before the mind, examining its properties and relations in all ways possible, formulating judgments about it, and logically organizing and testing them in ways which that particular subject matter allows.

(10) Possession of knowledge conveys to the one who knows (in a given area) rights and responsibilities to act, direct action, formulate policy and supervise its implementation, and to teach. This is why knowledge and claims to knowledge are so important, but also so contested, among human beings. Knowledge opens possibilities of harmonious relations with reality.

(11). Knowledge and the hope for knowledge opens up common ground for cooperation in shared activities, and for discussion and possible resolution of differences and disagreements. If no knowledge is possible, these are ruled out and force alone rules. Only knowledge lays a foundation for tolerance.

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(12), The effect of ruling the ‘spiritual’ out of the domain of reason and knowledge is to leave the most important matters of human life at the mercy of force, drift, human arbitrariness and feelings, with no rational direction of their development, classification, and ordering. So far as human events now stand, that is where we are. So they say, and many are saying, that that is how things must be. Shall we accept that?

(13). **Is there a way back?** Only if responsible and visible groups of people—institutions—are willing to develop an intelligible and defensible understanding of what knowledge is, and of how it is gained, and present the spiritual realities with which they are concerned as subjects of knowledge they actually possess. Knowledge functioning in human affairs has to be grounded in institutions. But that, so far as “the spiritual” is concerned, is exactly what is now lacking in our “knowledge institutions”: universities and their offshoots.

(14). Our university faculties are now socialized by their training, and confirmed by their professionalized setting, against knowledge in the “spiritual” areas. It could be “professional death” for an individual to claim knowledge in those areas. Especially with respect to religion. There is little or no hope of change in current attitudes toward reason and spirituality, arising from the universities in general.

(15). But institutions of higher education that are explicitly and strongly identified with the historical Christian movement might be able to do something about this situation, if they would come together around the project of reversing the expulsion of the content of their “faith” from the domain of knowledge. —Especially with reference to the existence of God, the spiritual nature of the human person, and the resurrection of Christ.

(16). They would then explicitly develop and defend an intelligible and realistic understanding of what knowledge is, and they would then present the basic contents of Christian teaching—“Mere Christianity” it is sometimes called—as knowledge, to which everyone is responsible because it presents realities with which all must deal. They would

publicly and reasonably declare this in all ways wise and possible, even before doubting and hostile onlookers, including “accreditation” committees.

(17). Only in a universe of a certain sort can knowledge (reason) and spirituality be at home with one another, and each function in relation to the other as is intended by their very nature. Given that, there would be a possibility of understanding how spirituality is rational and reason is spiritual, and of framing individual and social existence around their unity in a life guided by knowledge of what is true, good, and beautiful.

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SUMMARY: Properly understood, reason and spirituality call out for one another and serve one another in a life guided and informed by aims and habits that characterize a flourishing human existence. This stands forth clearly in the classical and biblical sources which still nourish what is best in contemporary life.

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