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**Does Faith Make Sense of Things? Dorothy L. Sayers on Science and Intellectual Order**

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One of the most distinctive features of human nature is an innate yearning to try and make sense of the strange and puzzling world we see around us. We find this desire to understand and explain in the natural sciences, which set out to make sense of the working of the natural world. One of the distinguishing features of the natural sciences is their emphasis on intelligibility, expressed in the scientific quest for making accounting for natural phenomena in ways that are logically coherent.[[1]](#footnote-1) Yet this emphasis on making sense of things is found far beyond the realm of the natural sciences. It is found, for example, in Christianity – not, perhaps, as its dominant theme, but certainly as an important aspect of its overall vision of reality.

The philosopher Keith Yandell offers a good account of this aspect of faith: “A religion is a conceptual system that provides an interpretation of the world and the place of human beings in it, bases an account of how life should be lived given that interpretation, and expresses this interpretation and lifestyle in a set of rituals, institutions and practices.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Many, of course would suggest that there is more to making sense of reality than simply offering an explanation. What of the related notion of coherence, for example, which concerns how things are related to and interconnected with each other? Many would link this pursuit of coherence with a specifically religious agenda: “This is our first demand of religion – that it should illumine life and make it a whole.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

So how do we make sense of things? For the scientist, one of the most important general approaches is that of induction – the generalisation from specific examples, in which universal patterns are discerned on the basis of empirical observation. On the basis of such observations, we generate more general and universal ways of understanding our world, which are expressed in theories and hypotheses. The widespread acceptance of this method of induction in the natural sciences should not be allowed to obscure the fact that it is somewhat problematic. Its rational basis is somewhat tenuous. As the philosopher David Hume pointed out in the 18th century, there seems to be no obvious logical justification for this process of inductive reasoning.[[4]](#footnote-4) So why do scientists, and so many others, keep on using this form of reasoning, and believe that is to be relied upon? The answer seems to be pragmatic: because it seems to work. This, of course, is a hopelessly circular form of argument which uses inductive reasoning to defend and justify itself. Many philosophers have tried to solve the problem of induction, but without success. It still remains true that we do not yet have an independent rational justification for one of the most widely used forms of reasoning employed in everyday life and in scientific research.

Charles Darwin is one of many scientists to appreciate this problem, and the enigmas that arose in its wake – not least the difficulties that it created for his own research, and the conclusions he reached on its basis. In his *Origin of Species*, Darwin conceded that his core concept of natural selection – which was itself an inference, rather than something observed – rested on inductive forms of reasoning, and as a result he was unable to prove it was true. In defending his approach, Darwin argued that this form of reasoning was widely used in everyday life and in science as a whole. “It has recently been objected that this is an unsafe method of arguing; but it is a method used in judging the common events of life, and has often been used by the greatest natural philosophers.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Everyone else in the scientific world seemed happy to employ this approach, despite its obvious vulnerability; so why should he not use it as well?

Now many will be unsettled by the suggestion that our knowledge of the empirical world is based on the essentially pragmatic judgement that the inductive method seems to work. This method, however, is open to refinement in several ways. Many of you will know the work of Charles Peirce, the great American pragmatist philosopher of the nineteenth century. Himself a scientist, Peirce argued that the fundamental principle of scientific thinking was the process that he called abduction – namely, the attempt to find an intellectual pattern which made sense of what was observed, even if this pattern was not itself disclosed by those observations. Abduction is a kind of non-deductive inference which can be thought of as “the process of forming explanatory hypotheses.” Perhaps most importantly, Peirce argued that this process is a “logical operation” which introduces a “new idea” – an idea that seems to connect up all the observations to disclose a pattern, rather than just a random collection of facts.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Peirce invites us to generate theories and explanations, and test them to find out how well they seem to accommodate the evidence. Abduction is the “provisional adoption of an explanatory hypothesis” – an intellectual strategy for generating ideas, explanations, and theories; we then have to confirm the theory by checking it out against observation.[[7]](#footnote-7) As Peirce understands it, abduction is thus a kind of “search strategy” which leads us to generate some “promising explanatory conjecture which is then subject to further test.”[[8]](#footnote-8) For Peirce, the best example of this kind of thinking is found in the natural sciences. Yet the same pattern of thought can be found elsewhere – as in medical diagnosis, and detective fiction.[[9]](#footnote-9) Our observations are essentially clues to the deeper meaning or inner workings of our world.

All of this helps us understand why we like detective novels so much. Writers such as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie, Raymond Chandler, Earl Stanley Gardner and Dorothy L. Sayers built their reputations on being able to hold their readers’ interest as countless mysterious murder cases were solved before their eyes. We devour the cases of fictional detectives such as Sherlock Holmes, Philip Marlowe, Perry Mason, Lord Peter Wimsey, and Miss Jane Marple. These writers skilfully assemble a body of evidence, a series of observations, and challenge us to find the hidden pattern that makes sense of them.

Dorothy L. Sayers particularly appreciated this point, noting how her own detective novels were about discerning a pattern within events, which pointed to the way in which an intellectual puzzle could be solved. She developed this theme in a lecture which she proposed to broadcast to the French nation in early 1940, to bolster their morale in the early stages of the Second World War by emphasising the importance of France as source of great literary detectives. Unfortunately, Sayers’s talk celebrating the French literary detective was never transmitted to a doubtless appreciative French public. Paris fell to invading German armies shortly before she was scheduled to speak. One of the central themes of Sayers’s lecture is that detective fiction appeals to our deep yearning to make sense of what seem to some to be an unrelated series of events. Yet within those events are the clues, the markers of significance, which can lead to the solution of the mystery. We ‘follow, step by step, Ariadne’s thread, and finally arrive at the centre of the labyrinth’.[[10]](#footnote-10)

We need to pause here, and focus on the central image of Sayers’s analogy. Steeped in a classical education, Sayers here drew on the ancient Greek legend of Minos, king of Crete, who instructed the great architect Daedalus to build a labyrinth near his palace at Knossos to house the Minotaur – a hybrid of a man and a bull. The labyrinth was famously complicated. Once inside its dark passages, it proved impossible to find your way back out again. Those unfortunate enough to enter were doomed to be eaten by the Minotaur.

Having conquered the city of Athens, Minos demanded that every year Athens would send seven maidens and seven youths as tribute, to be devoured by the Minotaur. Theseus, son of Aegeus, king of Athens, volunteered to join the band of youths who were to be sent to Crete to be sacrificed. Ariadne, daughter of Minos, fell in love with him, and offered to help him conquer the labyrinth and kill the Minotaur if he would marry her and take her away from Crete. He agreed – although, of course, in the end he failed to make good on his promise. Trusting him, Ariadne gave Theseus a ball of red thread, which he unrolled as he entered the labyrinth. By following the thread back to its source, Theseus could find his way out of the labyrinth, after having found and killed the Minotaur. Ariadne’s thread was the key to finding the way through a dark and confusing structure. Sayers realized how this potent image could be used as an analogy for the intellectual framework within which the detective novel was set.

Sayers, like so many before her, appreciated that the detective novel appeals to our implicit belief in the intrinsic rationality of the world around us, and our ability to discover its deeper patterns. Something important or interesting has taken place – such as the mysterious death of Sir Charles Baskerville. But what really happened? We were not there to observe this event. Yet by careful analysis of clues, we may identify the most likely explanation of what really happened. And here again the image of the thread reappears, in a slightly different mode. Here, we are speaking of a thread of argument, a way of linking together a series of events or observations so that we can see their pattern. To use an image popularized by the great British philosopher of science William Whewell (1794-1866), we must find the right thread on which to string the pearls of our observations, so that they disclose their true pattern. “The facts are known but they are insulated and unconnected. . . . The pearls are there but they will not hang together until someone provides the string.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

Sayer’s detective novels can be seen as a literary application of what is now known in the philosophy of science as “inference to the best explanation”. For every set of observations, there are several competing explanations. So which of these is the best? Which thread best connects and displays the pearls of our observations? And what criteria might be used to make this evaluation? We can see this process of reflection in Sayer’s novel *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club*, set in London’s high society during the 1920s. Sayers opens her chapter describing Lord Peter Wimsey’s break­through in the mystery surrounding the curious death of General Fentiman by reflecting on the criteria that might be used in choosing one theory over another:[[12]](#footnote-12)

“What put you on to this poison busi­ness,” [Detective Inspector Parker] asked.

“Aristotle, chiefly,” replied Wimsey. “He says, you know, that one should always prefer the prob­able impossible to the improbable poss­ible. It was possible, of course, that the General should have died off in that neat way at the most con­fusing moment. But how much nicer and more probable that the whole thing had been stage‑managed.”

Once Wimsey had found this pattern, he was able to superimpose it upon the otherwise puzzling series of events at the Bellona Club, and show how these threads were woven together in his intellectual solution, disclosing a pattern.

For Sayers, life was a quest for a pattern of meaning in life. She was convinced that Christianity gave her a tool by which she might “make sense of the universe”, disclosing its otherwise hidden patterns. Her partly autobiographical work, *Cat O’Mary*, makes reference to this process, and the intellectual pleasure it brought to its central character, Katherine. “When Katherine sat down to prepare a passage of Molière, she experienced the actual physical satisfaction of plaiting and weaving together innumerable threads to make a pattern, a tapestry, a created beauty.”[[13]](#footnote-13) Sayers was always convinced that such patterns were not human inventions, but represented a “pattern of the creative mind”,[[14]](#footnote-14) itself echoing the deeper patterns of divine rationality. Sayers prized the rationalizing capacity of Christianity so greatly that she occasionally wondered whether she had actually fallen in love with its intellectual patterns, rather than its content – above all, the historical figure of Jesus Christ.

Sayers thus leads us into one of the most important discussions of our time – the question of the rationality of our beliefs, whether these are religious, moral, political, or secular. Our culture prizes rationality – even if it does not fully understand what it means for something to be reasonable. For most of us, it means that there are good reasons for believing that something is true – that accepting it does not involve shutting down normal human mental processes. The Oxford writer Austin Farrer made this point when reflecting on the significance of C. S. Lewis as an apologist.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Though argument does not create conviction, the lack of it destroys belief. What seems to be proved may not be embraced; but what no one shows the ability to defend is quickly abandoned. Rational argument does not create belief, but it maintains a climate in which belief may flourish.

The cultural debate about the rationality of faith is driven by deep rhetorical agendas. For the writers of the New Atheism, it is essential to establish a cultural consensus that religious belief is irrational – because if that is indeed so, the debate is effectively over. Yet the New Atheism applies criteria of rationality to religion which it signally fails to apply to its own views. It judges others by standards which it refuses to acknowledge as normative for itself. The New Atheism seems to suggest that we can only believe what can be proved, totally ignoring the major philosophical discussion of warranted or motivated belief in its naïve reassertion of a somewhat crude scientific positivism. Christopher Hitchens, for example, boldly declares that New Atheists like himself do not hold any beliefs, holding only to what can be proved to be right. “Our belief is not a belief.”[[16]](#footnote-16)

Yet Hitchens’s anti-theism actually rests on a raft of moral values (such as “religion is evil” or “God is not good”) which he is unable to demonstrate by reason. Hitchens simply assumes that his moral values are shared by his sympathetic readers, who are unlikely to ask the kind of critical questions about their origins, foundations or reliability which New Atheism writers ask about religious beliefs. I’m with Bertrand Russell here, who famously declared that one of the chief benefits of philosophy is to teach us “how to live without certainty” without “being paralyzed by hesitation.”[[17]](#footnote-17) Living without certainty is both a superb characterization of the human dilemma, and an affirmation of the importance and inevitability of faith.

Against our cultural obsession with trying to prove that God exists or does not exist, we need to recognize that we simply cannot prove anything of ultimate importance, although we can certainly give reasons why our convictions take us in this direction rather than another. We can certainly justify our beliefs; yet proving them to be true is rather more difficult. Only shallow truths can be proved; the deeper existential and moral truths by which we live prove to be much more problematic.

Leading representatives of the Enlightenment certainly seem to have thought that they could find their way to the certainties of objective truths. But that, we need to remember, was a long time ago. Even mathematics and logic are now known to be much more problematic than our forebears of the eighteenth century realized. At the beginning of the 20th century, some logicians and philosophers of mathematics still believed it was possible to establish firm logical foundations for mathematics and similar formal systems – think, for example, of Bertrand Russell and Alfred North Whitehead’s *Principia Mathematica* (1910-13), which signally failed to deliver those firm foundations. Why?

For a start, Russell had to face up to the problem that logical proofs and mathematical theorems have to start from assumptions (or axioms) that are themselves unprovable. Sometimes – as in the case of some forms of deductive reasoning such syllogisms – these assumptions are derived from empirical observations and generalisation, arrived at using the method of induction (which, as we saw earlier, cannot offer any form of certainty). The situation became more complex in 1931, when the logician Kurt Gödel set out his two “incompleteness theorems”. These offered rigorous logical proofs that any sufficiently complex mathematical or logical system must contain truths that cannot be proven from within that system itself. Russell conceded this represented a fatal blow to his enterprise, especially as Gödel had proved that unprovable truths existed, even in mathematics.

The Oxford philosopher and intellectual historian Sir Isaiah Berlin (1909-97) pointed out some years ago that human convictions can be broken down into three broad categories:[[18]](#footnote-18)

1. Those that can be established by empirical observation;
2. Those that can be established by logical deduction;
3. Those that cannot be proved in either of these ways.

The first two of these categories include those truths that can be known reliably through the natural sciences on the one hand, and what through logic and mathematics on the other. The third category concerns the values and ideas that have shaped human culture and given human existence direction and purpose down the ages. And these, Berlin insists, cannot be proved by reason or science.[[19]](#footnote-19) Nor, in Berlin’s view, could they be sorted out by philosophy, which he was inclined to think incapable of solving anything of ultimate importance to human beings.

In January 1697, the great English philosopher John Locke wrote to his close friend William Molyneaux, celebrating the joy of the pursuit of truth in life: “I know there is truth opposite to falsehood, that it may be found if people will, and is worth the seeking, and is not only the most valuable, but the pleasantest thing in the world.”[[20]](#footnote-20) I keep coming back to Locke’s words, which I find a constant source of inspiration. They could serve as the motto for science, philosophy and theology. However, Locke was acutely aware of the limits of reason. After surveying the significant problems we confront in trying to understand our world, Locke remarked: “From all which it is easy to perceive what a darkness we are involved in, how little it is of Being, and the things that are, that we are capable to know.”[[21]](#footnote-21)

Locke’s point was well taken by his contemporaries. Think, for example, of Alexander Pope’s *Essay on Man* (1733-4), which locates human life and thought within with a larger cosmic order, whose rationality is not always transparent to its observers. We are, Pope tells us, “born but to die, and reas’ning but to err,” trapped in an unsettling shadowy world suspended delicately between scepticism and certainty.[[22]](#footnote-22) Pope’s famous declaration that humanity should study itself, not God, does not arise from hostility towards religion, or even disinterest in theology. Pope’s point is that the fundamental human inability to penetrate the divine wisdom forces us to focus on ourselves instead.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Know then thyself, presume not God to scan,

The proper study of mankind is man.

Pope’s *Essay on Man* takes the form of a rich and complex poem which offers us shrewd reflections on the aspirations and limits of being human, and our difficulties in making sense of the universe within which we find ourselves placed.[[24]](#footnote-24) Pope recognizes that this universe appears incoherent and morally ambiguous, perhaps characterized by evil more than by good. Yet, Pope suggests, we have to take account of our frail and fallible moral and intellectual capacities in reaching this judgement. Perhaps the universe appears imperfect and incoherent to us because of the limits placed on human perception. Life seems chaotic and purposeless to us because we are immersed within the flux of things, and cannot extricate ourselves from it to catch a tantalizing full glimpse of reality which alone could disclose that we have a meaningful place in a coherent universe.

The Irish writer John Banville, who, won the Booker Prize in 2005 for his novel *The Sea*, is worth listening to at this point. His earlier writings explore how many in the early modern era hoped to find meaning and truth in the natural sciences, seeing these as offering the most reliable source of knowledge about our world. For Banville, scientists such as Copernicus, Kepler, and Newton sought to impose order on the world, and then tried to live in accordance with this. “I saw a certain kind of pathetic beauty in their obsessive search for a way to be in the world, in their existentialist search for something that would be authentic.”[[25]](#footnote-25)

Yet gradually, the power of that vision faded, as it was confronted with the irreducible fragility and provisionality of human knowledge. The western cultural investment in science as a tool of discernment of meaning proved to be something of a misjudgement. As its failure became more widely appreciated, western culture experienced a transition from “Cartesian certainty to Wittgensteinian despair”, in which the early hope of finding the Enlightenment’s Holy Grail, the crystalline clarity of rationalist certainties, gradually gave way to a realization of the irreducible complexity of the world.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Banville chronicles this slow and seemingly irreversible transition from rational certainty to existential despair and cynicism with a graceful prose that sweetens the bitter medicine of his sceptisicm. What one generation took to be rational certainties were found by another to be cultural constructions. It is a problem that earlier generations suppressed, hoping that the rhetoric of their “glib and shallow rationalism” (C. S. Lewis) would distract people from acknowledging and acting on its striking lack of traction on reality.[[27]](#footnote-27) While those rational certainties seem live on in the curious backwater of the “New Atheism”, everyone else is trying to figure out how to cope with the predicament in which we find ourselves. Not even the sciences can deliver secure answers to the questions we ask about meaning, value, and purpose.

Let’s come back to Dorothy L. Sayers, with her distinct emphasis on Christianity offering a rational view of reality, which invites us to see ourselves and our world as we really are, not as we have constructed ourselves. For Sayers, Christianity was a discovery of the way things really are, not an invention of the way we would like things to be. The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein realized that meaning and happiness arise when we believe that we are thinking and living in accordance with something deeper and greater than ourselves. “In order to live happily I must be in agreement with the world. And that is what ‘being happy’ means.”[[28]](#footnote-28) We need to grasp the “big picture” of the universe, and position ourselves within it.

Yet we seem unable to grasp this full picture by ourselves. We need help if we are to see beyond the tantalizing limits imposed upon us by being human. This is, of course, a classic theme in Christian theology. The notion of divine revelation is about the disclosure of of a view of reality which we did not invent, and which lies beyond the capacity of human reason to grasp fully. Revelation is not about the violation of human reason, but a demonstration of its limits, and a disclosure of what lies tantalizingly beyond its limits. It is about the illumination of the landscape of our world, so that we can see things more clearly. For Christians, this capacity to see things as they really are – rather than as they are glimpsed from the surface – is a gracious gift of God. Our eyes need to be opened, so that what we once deemed to be an incoherence is recognized as arising out of our inability to see fully and properly.

For Christian writers, religious faith is not a rebellion against reason, but a revolt against the imprisonment of humanity within the cold walls of a rationalist dogmatism. Logic and facts can only “take us so far; then we have to go the rest of the way toward belief”.[[29]](#footnote-29) Human logic may be rationally adequate, but it is also existentially deficient. Faith declares that there is more to life than this. It doesn’t contradict reason but transcends it. It elicits and invites rational consent, but does not compel it. Sadly, some of those who boast of being “free-thinkers” are simply imprisoned by a defunct eighteenth-century rationalism, unaware of the radical changes in our understanding of rationality that have emerged in the last fifty years.[[30]](#footnote-30)

The Enlightenment’s appeal to the authority of reason as the ultimate reliable source of authority ends up being trapped in circular forms of argument. How could it possibly be checked out to make sure it was reliable? Some retorted that reason itself could demonstrate its own authority. But to its critics, this was unpersuasive. Surely such a defence of the authority of human reason was ultimately circular and parasitical, assuming and depending upon its own conclusions? If there was a flaw in human reasoning processes, reason itself would not be able to detect this. We would be locked into unreliable patterns of thought, without any means of escape.

The recent rise of postmodernity is really not a symptom of irrationalism (as Hitchens and Dawkins assert), but a protest against the existential inadequacy of rationalism, and the authoritarianism it has encouraged. People came to realize the manifest deficiencies of an approach to life that is *determined* – as opposed to merely being *informed* – by reason, and protested against those who tried to shoehorn them into a rationalist cage.

That’s why the idea of a “mystery” is so important theologically. The great physicist Werner Heisenberg argued that scientific thinking “always hovers over a bottomless depth,” given the limits placed on human understanding.[[31]](#footnote-31) We are confronted with the “impenetrable darkness” of the universe, and our difficulties as we struggle to find a language adequate to engage and represent this.[[32]](#footnote-32) Similarly, Christian theology recognizes that it is utterly impossible to represent or describe God adequately using human language. Theology uses the term “mystery” to refer to the vastness of God, which inevitably causes human images and words to falter, if not break down completely, as they try to depict God fully and faithfully. A mystery is not something that is contradicted by reason. Rather, it is something that exceeds reason’s capacity to discern and describe – thus transcending, rather than contradicting, reason. To speak of some aspect of nature or God as a “mystery” is not to attempt to shut down the reflective process, but to stimulate it, by opening the mind to intellectual vistas that are simply too deep and broad to be fully apprehended by our limited human vision.

Our universe is a mystery – something with so many impenetrable and uncomprehended dimensions that our minds simply cannot take it in. We can only cope with such a mystery either by filtering out what little we can grasp, and hope that the rest is unimportant; or by reducing it to what our minds can accommodate and thus reduce it to the rationally manageable. Both strategies distort, disfigure and mislead. They offer us nothing more than half-glimpses, momentary insights which vanish before we can grasp them.

Some suggest that mystery is just a superstitious person’s way of referring to an irrationality. As a slogan, this suggestion may be both slick and simple; as a guide to reality, however, it is superficial and deeply misleading. Those of us who have studied quantum theory know it has developed its own rationality of our fuzzy world, which calls into question inadequate common sense conceptions of what is reasonable, shaped by our limiting experience of reality. Lesser rationalities – such as those of the bygone “Age of Reason” – tend to evade the challenge of more expansive visions of rationality by dubbing them “irrational”.

For many, the Christian doctrine of the Trinity represents a classic instance of the irrationality of faith. Augustine of Hippo offered us one of the finest accounts of the limits of our ability to capture God in neat formulae. “If you think you have grasped God, it is not God you have grasped” – *si comprehendis non est Deus*. If you can get your mind around it, it’s not God. It’s something else that you might incorrectly *think* is God. Anything that we can grasp fully and completely *cannot* be God, precisely because it would be so limited and impoverished if it can be fully grasped by the human mind. It is easy to create a god in our own likeness – a self-serving human invention that may bear some passing similarity to God, but falls far short of the glory and majesty of the God who created and redeemed the world.

There’s a story about Augustine which makes this point rather nicely. Augustine was bishop of Hippo Regius, a Roman colonial administrative centre in North Africa. While writing his major work *On the Trinity*, he decided to take a break and went for a stroll along the beautiful beaches nearby. As he walked, he came across a young boy behaving rather strangely. Over and over again, the boy went to the edge of the shoreline, filled a spoon with seawater, and then emptied this into a hole in the sand.

Augustine watched this diverting scene for some time, mystified. What was going on? Eventually, he decided to ask. The boy pointed to the Mediterranean Sea and informed Augustine that he was going to empty the ocean into this hole in the sand. Augustine dismissed this. “You can’t do that! You’ll never fit the ocean into that tiny hole.” The boy is supposed to have replied: “And you’re wasting your time writing a book about God. You’ll never fit God into a book!”

Now I need to concede that there are some very awkward questions about the historical reliability of this story! But whether it is true or not, it makes a point that we simply cannot evade as we try to wrestle with God. In the end, our minds just aren’t big enough to cope with conceptual vastness of God, generally expressed in the theological notion of “glory”. God simply overwhelms our mental capacities.

Let me draw on my own experience here. I began to love science about the age of eight and eagerly tried to absorb scientific works that I now realize were far too advanced for me. At the age of thirteen, I plucked up the courage to ask one of my teachers to explain Einstein’s theory of relativity. He loaned me one of his books to read, and a week later we met for half an hour to talk about it. I’ll never forget how the conversation ended. “You’re not ready for this just yet. Your brain needs to grow before you’ll be able to take it in. We’ll talk again in five years’ time.” We never had that later conversation, partly because I worked out the theory of relativity for myself about two years later. But the point my teacher made was fundamentally right. My mind needed to expand before I could make sense of Einstein. It’s no accident that some of the ancient Greek philosophers talk about education as *psychagogia* – an “enlargement of the soul.” The vastness of the reality we inhabit simply cannot be grasped in anything other than a partial and limited manner by the human mind.

C. S. Lewis made this point when reflecting on human difficulties with the doctrine of the Trinity. We see things from a limiting and constrictive human perspective. He suggests that we think of ourselves as “Flatlanders”, two-dimensional people who are trying – and failing! – to visualize three-dimensional objects.[[33]](#footnote-33)

Flatlanders, attempting to imagine a cube, would either imagine the six squares coinciding, and thus destroy their distinctness, or else imagine them set out side by side, and thus destroy the unity. Our difficulties about the Trinity are of much the same kind.

Lewis doesn’t actually offer his readers a defense of the doctrine of the Trinity or any new evidence for believing in it. Instead, he provides a visual framework that allows us to perceive things in a new way and to realize that our previous difficulties arose from seeing them from a limited (and limiting) perspective. The Trinity is indeed a mystery – but that does not mean it is an irrationality.

So let me offer you a way of thinking here that you may find useful in thinking about the rationality of the Christian faith. How does the Trinitarian logic of faith relate to the logic of our everyday world? Are they the same? Or are they different? And if so, how are they interconnected? For the New Atheism, the logic of faith is an irrational web of nonsense, having no connection with the rational processes of normal human intellectual transactions. It’s a hopeless overstatement, as I know you will agree. But there is an issue to be explored here.

My suggestion is that we think of the Christian faith as offering a *metarationality* – by which I mean a greater vision of rationality, which is able to accommodate and account for classical human rationality, while at the same time helping us to grasp its limits. Let me illustrate what I mean by reflecting on the transition from classical Newtonian mechanics to relativistic quantum mechanics, which took place during the first few decades of the twentieth century.[[34]](#footnote-34)

In the eighteenth and nineteenth century, classical mechanics was seen as a self-sufficient and intellectually autonomous area of theory, capable of accounting for what could be observed in nature. Based on the extensive earlier observational and analytical work of individuals such as Nicolas Copernicus (1473-1543), Johann Kepler (1571-1630), Galileo Galilei (1564-1642), and Isaac Newton (1643-1727), classical mechanics was widely regarded as a fundamental theory, capable of mathematical formalization.[[35]](#footnote-35) It did not require to be positioned within a richer intellectual framework to be understood, but was seen as an autonomous and essentially complete theory.

Yet following the work of Max Planck (1858-1947), Albert Einstein (1879-1955), and Niels Bohr (1885-1962) in the early twentieth century, it was realized that there was in fact a more fundamental theory, of which classical mechanics was a special, limiting case. As the theory of quantum mechanics developed in response to a growing body of evidence which older theoretical models simply could not accommodate, it became clear that relativistic quantum mechanics was the more fundamental theory, capable of far greater explanatory capacity. And, perhaps most importantly of all for our purposes, this more fundamental theory was able to account both for the successes and the failures of classical mechanics, by identifying its limited sphere of validity. The “correspondence principle”, first identified by Niels Bohr in 1923, sets out, clearly and elegantly, how quantum mechanics reduces to classical mechanics under certain limits.[[36]](#footnote-36)

Now neither relativistic quantum mechanics or quantum field theory invalidated classical mechanics; they were able to position it within a wider and more comprehensive context, which indicated that it possessed validity in some circumstances – but not all. The classical model was not autonomous and complete in itself, but was a special case of a more comprehensive and complex theory.[[37]](#footnote-37) In effect, classical mechanics was seen as a special case of relativistic quantum mechanics, applying to large bodies moving at low speeds – in other words, the everyday world that we experience, and which classical mechanics mistakenly (though understandably) assumed to amount to the totality of things. The classical model was thus accounted for on the basis of the greater explanatory capacity of the relativistic model, and the limits of their correspondence established. And, perhaps more importantly, the relativistic approach explained why the classic theory worked in certain situations, and not in others. Its validity was affirmed within certain limits.

We see here an important and well-understood insight from the world of scientific theory development: that a better theory is able to accommodate all the valid insights of an earlier theory, while at the same time expanding its horizons and identifying the basis of its plausibility.[[38]](#footnote-38) A theory with considerable explanatory capacity is able to create conceptual space, valid under certain limiting yet significant conditions, for a theory which might, at first sight, appear to be quite independent, yet, on closer examination, turns out to be a special case of the higher-order theory.

You can see where I am going with this. I am suggesting to you that we think of the distinct Trinitarian logic of the Christian faith as the greater framework – a way of understanding ourselves and our worlds which transcends the limits of human reason, yet at the same time helps us position what we might call our “native” rationality within an informing context. This kind of position is developed by John Polkinghorne, who once suggested that a “Trinitarian theology” offers a “true Theory of Everything.”[[39]](#footnote-39) A Trinitarian view of reality, Polkinghorne argues, offers a lens through which the scientific enterprise can be satisfactorily explained.[[40]](#footnote-40) Science raises questions which it cannot answer on the basis of its own methods, thus pointing the way to the need for a renewed theological engagement with nature. “Science offers an illuminating context within which much theological reflection can take place, but in its turn it needs to be considered in the wider and deeper context of intelligibility that a belief in God affords.”[[41]](#footnote-41) Theology is able to address the fundamental questions raised – though not answered – by science.

For example, Albert Einstein once commented, the “most incomprehensible thing about the universe is that it is comprehensible.” So why is the world so beautifully ordered and rationally transparent, with a seeming resonance between the rationality of the universe and that of the human intellect? What way of looking at things makes sense of this? How can we render the intelligibility of the universe intelligible? Christianity provides us with a framework that offers an explanation of what is otherwise a miracle or accident. The logic of faith can render this discovery intelligible, through its understanding that the order and beauty of the world are grounded in the mind of God, its creator.

Polkinghorne thus speaks of a “wider and deeper context of intelligibility” which arises from the Christian vision of reality. I suggest that we can develop such an approach with profit, exploring the outcomes of such a Trinitarian logic of faith for the theme of the rationality of faith. It allows us to add in layers of complexification – for example, the historical and cultural variations in human reasoning that posed such a difficult challenge to the Enlightenment’s dream of a universal human rationality. But more importantly, it helps us understand how human rationality operates within limits – and how outside those limits, it distorts and impoverishes our understanding of God and our universe.

Now there is much more that might be said on these topics, but you will appreciate that our time is limited! In our next lecture, we shall consider whether science is complete in itself, or whether it can act as a pointer or signpost to something that lies beyond its boundaries. In developing this approach, we shall consider C. S. Lewis’s critique of naturalism, and identify its strengths and weaknesses.

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