

The Turn to Husserl and Phenomenology by Protestant and Catholic Philosophers for the  
Redemption of Reason

By Ken Archer  
Graduate Student  
School of Philosophy  
The Catholic University of America  
[archerovi@hotmail.com](mailto:archerovi@hotmail.com)

## I. Introduction

A century ago, Western philosophy split into the two streams of Continental and Analytic philosophy. One of the figures at the center of that split was a German philosopher named Edmund Husserl, for whom the defense and correct understanding of reason was a central concern. While the two traditions that emerged since Husserl have largely abandoned this concern, Christian philosophers in the past four decades have returned to the work of Husserl to continue his project, a project called phenomenology, a particular emphasis of which could be called the redemption of reason. Within both the Protestant and Catholic traditions, these philosophers have not only made major contributions to Husserlian phenomenology, they have then gone on to make significant contributions to theology.

This paper looks at the influence of Husserlian phenomenology in the contributions to theology of one Protestant philosopher, Dallas Willard, and two Catholic philosophers, Msgr Robert Sokolowski and Karol Wojtyla/Pope John Paul II. This paper provides an overview of Husserlian phenomenology as understood by these three philosophers. It will then be shown that the implications for theology of Husserlian phenomenology drawn by these three philosophers are largely the same. These implications are (a) a reading of Scripture, and of any text, rooted in epistemic realism and (b) a nonfoundational doctrine of ethics that simply describes what ethical people do and a consequent concern for the formation of ethical people within Christian theology. These implications reveal the critical role one's doctrine of reason plays in all of life, not simply confined to epistemology or even philosophy, and the consequent central role that reflection on reason must play in spiritual and theological education. As Willard writes in his *Renovation of the Heart*, "The prospering of God's cause on earth depends upon his people thinking well."<sup>1</sup>

## II. Brief Description of Phenomenology

It will be helpful to begin with a brief introduction to phenomenology, which can be provided nicely within the context of the topic of the present conference – redeeming reason. The appeal of a conference, like this one, on the topic of reason might seem to be limited to philosophers or even, more narrowly, to philosophers specializing in epistemology. The reason for the narrow appeal of the study of reason within modern academia can be found in the narrow range of functions accorded to reason in modern thought. Modern reason is often limited to generating tools for inferring conclusions from valid premises, or discovering abstract concepts from particular experiences.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, NavPress (Colorado Springs), 2002, p. 105

<sup>2</sup> "Philosophers have often had a too limited understanding of what makes us rational. They have taken our rationality as primarily the power to abstract universal concepts from particular experiences, the power to carry on syllogistic reasoning, and the power to have insight into self-evident truths." Robert Sokolowski, *Introduction the Phenomenology*, Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 117

What is to be noticed here is that reason is viewed in modern thought as a faculty not used by most people, most of the time. Rather, to be rational is reserved to those who have mastered the activities of the mind through the application of methods of inquiry that are rational. This seems like a specialized task that philosophers should take up. This is precisely what has happened in modern thought, and is behind the central role played by epistemology and logic in modern philosophy. Epistemology and logic in modern thought are largely driven by the task of mastering the activities of the mind through the creation, critique and refinement of rational methods of inquiry. For the assumption in most modern thought is that the mind, to be rational, must learn to rule over itself and its power to know. Once the power to rule over one's mind is created by the specialists within philosophy, it is generally assumed, these rational methods of inquiry can then be disseminated to the other disciplines in the academy, thus allowing their inquiries to be governed by reason rather than tradition or vague intuition. One could thus be forgiven for thinking that, until one has learned rational methods of inquiry from the philosophers, one is not using reason in his everyday life or is using it only by accident every once in a while.

Phenomenology can be fairly understood as the rediscovery of reason as a faculty possessed by everyone, and used by most people, most of the time. Phenomenology reveals everyday reason as a part of everyday life. For it is a central assertion of phenomenology that reason is not a tool, is not a method, but is inherent in everyday thinking. Sokolowski describes the phenomenological view of reason as follows.

The life of reason is a public thing. It is not enclosed in the solitude or privacy of a "sphere of consciousness." It is expressed in manifest conduct and achievements, in human beings who are walking around, talking to one another, examining scientific instruments, focusing a laser beam on a target, digging a trench at an archaeological site, writing a letter to a friend, trying to persuade someone to vote for a certain proposal.<sup>3</sup>

The task set for themselves by phenomenologists is therefore not the mastery of mental activity with reason but the description of the structure of all cognitive experience present in all human living. Whereas for much of modern philosophy our daily cognitive experiences are naturally clouded by so much tradition and prejudice that, to be rational, they must be mastered and directed by our reason, phenomenology views our daily cognitive experience as already structured towards revealing the truth of things. As Sokolowski describes it, "The most important contribution phenomenology has made to culture and the intellectual life is to have validated the truth of prephilosophical life, experience, and thinking. It insists that the exercises of reason that are carried out in the natural attitude [everyday life] are valid and true. Truth is achieved before philosophy comes on the scene."<sup>4</sup> Discovering and describing the structure of cognitive experience is thus, for phenomenology, the discovery and description of everyday reason.

---

<sup>3</sup>*Introduction the Phenomenology*, p. 119

<sup>4</sup>*Introduction the Phenomenology*, p. 63.

Why, therefore, should the appeal of a conference on the topic of reason extend beyond epistemologists and logicians, beyond philosophers, even beyond the academy? To better understand reason is to better understand what we're already doing. To better understand reason is to better understand what we're already doing as economists, as biologists, as spouses, as friends, as pastors, and so on. For to understand reason is to understand the structure of our mental life in all areas of human living. The practical importance of this right understanding lies in the greatly increased responsibility we feel to act rationally once we learn that reason has been trying to tell us the truth of things all along. Reason is thus revealed as the basis of human responsibility. Our responsibility to act rationally is not on hold until that day comes when we acquire reliable knowledge of ourselves and others on which we can act rationally. Our rational experiences are there already, stored up in our memories, to be reflected upon and acted upon. This ethical dimension of our understanding of reason will be developed at the conclusion of the present paper.

Why do phenomenologists make this claim about reason? Our daily cognitive lives are inherently structured towards revealing the truth about reality, phenomenologists claim, and are thus inherently rational. But is this claim simply a baseless postulate advanced by phenomenologists? Why should we believe it? The answer to this question requires a brief history of phenomenology, which is provided here.

When reason is discussed in modern thought, two presumed attributes of reason soon become evident. First, as was brought out above, reason is taken to be a method or tool of the mind that is used to master the activities of the mind. Second, reason is taken to operate in a spatial context. That is, reason is a method used by the brain to know the truth of things existing outside of the brain. This leap from one's mind to the world outside of one's mind is the problem that much of modern epistemology tries to solve.

Both of these features of reason are the result of the extended reflections on reason by various early modern philosophers, most notably Rene Descartes in his aptly titled, *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting the Reason, and Seeking Truth in the Sciences*. Descartes' aim is repeatedly stated here as "freeing us of all prejudices". He was so distraught over the prejudices that cloud the minds of men (an understandable concern for one writing in the midst of the Thirty Years War) that he sought in this discourse for an indubitable foundation for unprejudiced knowledge. Descartes not only refused to accept the authority of previous thinkers, he also refused to accept even the obvious evidence provided by his own senses. Both of these were subject to prejudice and thus not beyond doubt. Once he discovered a foundation for knowledge that could not be doubted, thought Descartes, it could be treated as an axiom of mathematics is treated. That is, the rigorous methods of deduction in mathematics could be used to build an objective body of knowledge on such a foundation.

The foundation stumbled upon by Descartes on which he sought to build an objective body of knowledge was certainty of consciousness. This is the meaning of Descartes' certain claim that, "I think, therefore I am". Consciousness, or "I think" (cogito), was his indubitable foundation. Through a deductive step, "therefore I am"

(*ergo sum*), he could therefore be certain that he exists. Both elements of modern discussions of reason are present here. First, reason is taken to be a method, and, second, the goal of thinking is to overcome the spatial distance between the mind and extra-mental reality. Consciousness is enclosed upon itself, is solipsistic, and needs the support of rational methods of inquiry to acquire the truth of the world outside of the mind.

Descartes wrote in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. As modern thought proceeds, we find occasional thinkers who voice concern with the dismissal of sensory appearances as unreliable by early modern thought. Many of these thinkers use the term phenomenology to describe their work to study and take seriously the obvious evidence of our senses. Among these early writers were Lambert, Kant, Hegel, Brentano and Mach. However, the real beginning of phenomenology is usually taken to be with the work of Edmund Husserl in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Husserl took the obvious evidence of our senses more seriously than any of his modern predecessors. This was a consequence of his view of consciousness. Husserl assumed that consciousness is always consciousness *of* something in extra-mental reality. For Husserl, then, solipsistic consciousness is unthinkable. This is because we cannot think without thinking *of* something or other.

As was said earlier, for much of modern thought, consciousness was closed in upon itself. To think of things meant to watch a sort of movie screen in one's mind. The methods of reason were used to ensure the correlation of the mental movie screen with the world.

For Husserl, there is no mental movie screen in between consciousness and the world. Rather, consciousness and the world are so directly and inseparably related that, without the world, there would be no consciousness. This is because, again, consciousness is always consciousness *of* something in the world. So, thinking for Husserl works as follows. Rather than watching a mental movie screen about the world around us, our interaction with this world is evidenced by our senses and presented as our consciousness. Thinking is thus not a representation of the world around us, but a more direct and unmediated presentation of the world as evidenced by our senses. Likewise, when we remember something, we are not watching a mental movie screen of our memories, rather we are reactivating the evidence of our senses and presenting the world as consciousness all over again.

Husserl thus rejects both elements of reason introduced by Descartes. First, he rejects that spatial severing of consciousness from the world as being based on the groundless postulate of solipsistic consciousness. Rather than beginning our understanding of the thinking process with a postulate – that consciousness is a thing separable from all else – Husserl assumed that we should begin our understanding of the thinking process with a careful reflection upon actual acts of thinking. And actual acts of thinking are impossible without thinking *of* something or other in the world. Second, he rejects the view of reason as a tool or method of rational inquiry that is used to master the activities of the mind and overcome this spatial distance between mind and world.

Reason as tool is simply another postulate, in this case a postulate created to solve the postulated problem of the spatial distance between mind and world. It is therefore a postulate necessitated by a postulate – a sort of second-order postulate. For Husserl, a return to actual acts of thinking reveals the direct and unmediated relationship between mind and world in which the mind presents the world as consciousness. This return to actual acts of thinking demonstrates that consciousness is naturally ordered towards revealing the truth of things. The structure of consciousness – the structural components of the revealing of the truth of things – thus reveals the reasonableness of thinking itself.

The claim of phenomenologists, that our daily cognitive lives are inherently structured towards revealing the truth about reality and are thus inherently rational, is therefore no baseless postulate. Rather, this claim is based on a careful reflection upon actual acts of thinking, on what Husserl refers to as “inner experience”, in response to the many baseless postulates that had confused the issue of reason in modern thought. For example, Husserl discusses in his first book, *Philosophy of Arithmetic*, the postulate of Kant that our ideas that contain relational content are the result of the relating activity of the mind. Husserl replies, “Inner experience, and it alone is decisive here, shows nothing of such ‘creative’ processes. Our mental activity does not *make* relations. They are simply there, and, given an appropriate direction of interest, they are just as noticeable as any other type of content. Strictly speaking, creative acts that produce some new content as a result distinct from them are psychological monstrosities.”<sup>5</sup>

### **III. Two Theological Implications of Right Reason**

Three prominent Christian philosophers - Dallas Willard, Msgr Robert Sokolowski and Pope John Paul II – have returned to this right understanding of reason in Husserlian phenomenology over the past four decades. The remainder of this paper demonstrates the broad implications for theology of this right understanding of reason according to these three writers. The theological and ethical implications drawn by these three philosophers are largely the same, and thus reveal the critical role one’s doctrine of reason plays in all of life, not simply confined to epistemology or even philosophy. These implications, again, are (a) a reading of Scripture, and of any text, rooted in epistemic realism and (b) a nonfoundational doctrine of ethics that simply describes what ethical people do and a consequent concern for the formation of ethical people within Christian theology.

### **IV. First Implication of Right Reason - Texts**

The first implication for theology of the right understanding of reason lies in the proper treatment of texts, including scriptural texts. An appropriate approach to texts requires an understanding of the role that language plays in reason. We will discuss three ways of conceiving of the role of language: the Cartesian, Husserlian, and Fundamentalist views of language and texts.

---

<sup>5</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Philosophy of Arithmetic*, trans. Dallas Willard, Kluwer (Dordrecht, the Netherlands) 2003, pp. 43-44

First, within the Cartesian paradigm discussed earlier, language is assumed to be a tool created by man that is used to overcome the spatial distance between mind and world. We throw words up on our mental movie screens and hope that they correlate with what is in the world. Language is thus an intermediary between the mind and extra-mental reality. To think, therefore, is to use language; thinking without using language is thus impossible. This view of language is the dominant view within modern thought.

Husserl introduced a second understanding of the role of language that is evident in the hermeneutics of Willard, Sokolowski and John Paul II. For Husserl, as discussed earlier, reality is disclosed via the rational structures of consciousness. This disclosure happens as follows. Initially, reality is evidenced via our senses, and the evidence of our senses is then disclosed as concepts. This conceptual flow of consciousness is prior to the final disclosure of reality using language. Within this disclosure of reality, it is important to notice, thinking precedes the use of language. Husserl's description of conceptual thinking preceding linguistic presentation directly opposes the modern view of language discussed earlier, according to which language acts an intermediary between mind and world such that thinking requires language. Sokolowski succinctly describes this contrast between the modern and Husserlian views of the role of language as follows, "It is not the case that we can think because we have language; rather, we have language because we can think."<sup>6</sup>

Willard contrasts the modern and Husserlian views of the role of language in a manner very similar to that of Sokolowski. "It is precisely because concepts do not confer a new characteristic or nature upon the object of the thought or cognition that we are not locked 'inside' thought or language and faced with the futile task of finding something unmodified by thought or language. The 'riddle' of objectivity is the result of a massive misunderstanding and misdescription of subjectivity (thought)."<sup>7</sup> What is this "massive misunderstanding and misdescription of subjectivity (thought)"? Willard describes it in another article – a review of an article by Vanhoozer - as follows, "True, [Vanhoozer] states, and I applaud it, that 'Language does not bar us from reality...' But he adds as a part of the same sentence, '...though reality comes mediated by language.' The problem is: How to spell out this latter clause in such a way that the former can be true. How to have mediation without modification. If in his clauses we replace the word 'language' with the word 'experience' or 'consciousness' or even 'thought,' we find our location in the problematic of modern thought, persisting ever since Descartes 'discovered' consciousness. Once you 'discover' it you get out only by a miracle."<sup>8</sup>

Sokolowski and Willard thus both affirm a realist approach to language and, consequently, a realist approach to texts. That is, for both Sokolowski and Willard, language and texts disclose the world rather than shut us off from the world.

---

<sup>6</sup> *Introduction the Phenomenology*, p. 91

<sup>7</sup> Dallas Willard, "How Concepts Relate the Mind to its Objects: The 'God's Eye View' Vindicated", <http://www.dwillard.org/articles/artview.asp?artID=4>

<sup>8</sup> Dallas Willard, "Hermeneutical Occasionalism", in *Disciplining Hermeneutics: Interpretation in Christian Perspective*, ed. Roger Lundin, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI, 1997, pp. 167-172. (Proceedings from the 11/94 Wheaton College conference on "Hermeneutics and a Christian Worldview."), <http://www.dwillard.org/articles/artview.asp?artID=31>

John Paul II makes very similar arguments. In his primary philosophical work before he was Pope, a book entitled *The Acting Person*, he described the shift from classical thought which contemplated being to modern thought, beginning with Descartes, which contemplated subjectivity. This theme continues in his writings as Pope. In his famous encyclical, *Fides et Ratio*, John Paul II makes the following observation, “Abandoning the investigation of being, modern philosophical research has concentrated instead upon human knowing. Rather than make use of the human capacity to know the truth, modern philosophy has preferred to accentuate the ways in which this capacity is limited and conditioned.”<sup>9</sup> John Paul II responds to this, “Human language may be conditioned by history and constricted in other ways, but the human being can still express truths which surpass the phenomenon of language.”<sup>10</sup>

Along with the modern and Husserlian views of the role of language, a third view has arisen in reaction to the modern view. This third view is the product of conservative theology, and is intended to protect the authority of scripture against the modern view of that anything lying outside of method-based science is unreliable and prejudiced. This fundamentalist view of language decides based on which text one is reading whether the language of the text is authoritative or not. Language that is found in the Bible is authoritative for having been biblical language, while non-biblical language is less authoritative.

Therefore, whereas Husserl responded to the modern view of reason as a tool used to master irrational prejudice by providing a contrasting view of reason as naturally ordered towards revealing the truth of things, conservative theology responded to the modern view of reason by attacking reason. As we would expect, then, we can find consistent lines of reasoning in Willard, Sokolowski and John Paul II that contrast with this fundamentalist view of language and texts.

For Willard, the teachings of Jesus aren’t merely true because Jesus spoke them, as much fundamentalist theology asserts. Rather, they would have been true whether spoken by Jesus or not, whether they appeared in the Bible or not. Willard whimsically illustrates this point as follows, “We can be thankful that God did not give the multiplication tables to Moses, because then we would not be able to teach them in our public schools.”<sup>11</sup> The multiplication tables, like the ethical claims of the Ten Commandments, are true whether they appear in scripture or not. The reticence on the part of conservative theology to view the Ten Commandments, or Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, as addressing the same set of questions, the same reality, as is addressed by philosophers and religious thinkers throughout history is rooted, Willard points out, in the reaction of conservative theology against the modern notion of reason as more reliable than the texts of scripture. “The reaction on the part of fundamentalism was mistakenly to attack reason.”<sup>12</sup> Willard elaborates on this conservative reaction in *The Divine*

---

<sup>9</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, Sec. 5

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, Sec. 95

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Dallas Willard, “The Redemption of Reason” on tape - is available at the following address for \$5. The Sower’s Yield Jan Clifford, Tape Division 9519 Hunt Club Lane Chatsworth, CA 91311

*Conspiracy*, “Historically, conservative Christians became suspicious of any talk of Jesus as ‘teacher’ because liberals, or ‘Modernists,’ used it as a way of saying that he was not the divine Son and supernatural savior but ‘just a good man.’”<sup>13</sup>

Therefore, Willard defends reason against not only the modern view of reason as a method for mastery of the mind’s activities, but also against the fundamentalist view of reason as sinful. In both cases, Willard is defending the Husserlian view of reason as ordered by the structures of cognition towards revealing the truth of things around us. For Willard, language is used by thinkers from Aristotle to Jesus to best reveal the truth of things and bring them into full presence for others. Willard writes, “Almost no one would consider [Jesus] to be a *thinker*, addressing the same issues as, say, Aristotle, Kant, Heidegger or Wittgenstein, and with the same logical method.”<sup>14</sup>

Sokolowski and John Paul II also demonstrate the fundamentalist fallacy of according authority to a particular type of writing, such as scripture, and denying authority to all other types of texts. Like Willard, their conviction here is rooted in their Husserlian view of language as something used by rational thought to reveal the truth of the world. That is, with language, we can bring the world to greater presence for ourselves and others. If language plays this role, then the particular style or category of language – scripture, polemical essay, poetry, math equation, a script of a play, etc – is irrelevant to the authority of a text to present the world to us.

Sokolowski writes that, “it is often said that we no longer live in the ‘world’ the Bible talks about, that the world defined by the Bible, and taken for granted by it, is not congruent with ours.”<sup>15</sup> Like Willard, Sokolowski argues that a correct understanding of reason and texts as revealing of realities in the world necessitates a recognition that the world that is revealed in Scripture is fundamentally the same as our world today. Sokolowski points out, for example, that since we are reading the Scriptures in the absence of Christ, “we and our contemporaries are less different from the Corinthians or the Thessalonians than the Corinthians and the Thessalonians were from those who knew Christ directly.”<sup>16</sup> Sokolowski concludes with the following insights into what he calls a “theology of disclosure”

The theological reflection on presencing makes it possible to take more things in the Bible seriously and not just as positions once held by others; we do not have to understand them only in terms of their historical circumstances. The theology of manifestation can bring out both biblical and patristic truths that have been neglected because of the philosophical attitude toward appearances that has prevailed in recent centuries.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, Harper Collins, 1997, p. 56

<sup>14</sup> Dallas Willard, “Jesus the Logician”, in *The Best Christian Writing 2000*, ed. John Wilson, Harper Collins (New York), 2000, p. 262

<sup>15</sup> Robert Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason*, p. 119

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, p. 121

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, p. 131

Sokolowski illustrates the role that all types of texts can potentially play in revealing fundamental realities in his discussion of pagan myth in his book, *The God of Faith and Reason*. Sokolowski asserts that, far from being empty fairy tales, the Olympian gods “are the expression of necessities that men encounter in the world, necessities that men must respect.”<sup>18</sup> Thus, just as the Genesis story reveals necessities in the relation between man and God, so pagan myths reveal other necessities that are part of being human. Furthermore, advances in man’s understanding of the necessities that structure his world were revealed in subsequent developments of the Greek myths. “The poets were theologians who would reinterpret the myths and formulate shifts of position and of relation among the gods and the other mythical beings, to bring out new aspects of what had to be, aspects that different circumstances or greater insight permitted to come into view.”<sup>19</sup>

The view of John Paul II on the role that any use of language can play in the disclosure of reality is perhaps best seen in his own life as a playwright and a poet as well as a philosopher. The plays that John Paul II wrote were written and performed in secret during the days of the occupation of Poland by the Nazis and then by the Communists. In these plays of dissidence, scripts were not mere fiction but disclosures of reality for audiences. In fact, such plays were much like the origin of playwriting in antiquity just discussed as seen in the deep connections between drama and real life that is performed on stage. As one of John Paul II’s biographers described it, “In a certain sense, his first initiation to phenomenology came about indirectly and outside of orthodox philosophy, through the theory of theater.”<sup>20</sup>

## V. Brief Discussion of Nonfoundationalism

It is essential to notice, at this point, the contrast between the importance of indubitable foundations for knowledge in modern reason in contrast to the nonfoundational approach of Husserlian reason. The approach to texts just discussed does not look for axiomatic claims in texts to serve as foundational premises for knowledge of reality to be certain, rather it allows any text to disclose any essential elements of reality for the reader. An insightful text thus fills in our knowledge of our world by unfolding and revealing more essentials of our world to us.

---

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*, p. 12

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*, p. 13. As an example, Sokolowski recounts, “Aeschylus has Prometheus admit that he both brought fire to men...and that he also hid from men the time and circumstances of their death....Because men henceforth did not know the day they were to die, they were caught in a combination of certainty and ignorance: they knew that they must die, but they did not know when or how. This combination of assurance and blindness is necessary to men as a spur to use fire, and all that fire allows, to hold off death as long as possible.” *ibid.*, p. 14

<sup>20</sup> Rocco Buttiglione, *Karol Wojtyła. The Thought of the Man Who Became Pope John Paul II*, trans. Paolo Guetti and Francesca Murphy (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997), p. 21. “Wojtyła’s poetical reflections always accompany philosophic reflections and, on some decisive points, precede it. It is noteworthy, for example, that *Love and Responsibility* was published in the same year as *The Jeweller’s Shop*. The latter is a poetic reflection on the identical problem discussed in the former – so much so that the interpretation of the philosophical text is enriched if one reads it alongside the poetic text.” *ibid.*, p. 233.

Willard concretely describes such a nonfoundational approach to Scripture and theology in an evangelistic role-play between Willard and a hypothetical college student described below.

*I want to believe. But I fear that in coming back to the church I would have to pretend that I am certain about some things that I feel like I can never be certain about again.*

This is a common case. This is why people prefer a non-committal position. People have been sold this idea that, whether in culture, politics or religion, in order to commit to an idea they have to be absolutely certain—and absolutely certain that everything else is wrong. That's where I would say to her: "No, you don't have to be certain about anything you're not certain about. In fact, certainty is not something you can choose, anyway. Certainty and uncertainty are not things that are under the will."

She says, "You are telling me I could be a Christian, and still have doubts?" That's right. It is possible to go to heaven with a lot of doubts, and it is possible to go to hell with a lot of certainty—people do it every day. But you cannot stay at such an abstract level for very long. You're going to have to bring it down to a practical level with questions like: what do you believe about Jesus?

*"Okay," she says, "I can acknowledge that. You know, I have read the gospels, and I think that Jesus was the greatest teacher there ever was. In fact, I'd like to live my life like him. But it feels like I have to 'buy' an awful lot more."*

What I would say is this: you don't have to buy anything you don't want. We have to help people understand that belief is something that comes along as you experience. You don't have to fake anything. The way faith works is this: you put into practice what you believe. If you're attracted to Jesus, what do you believe about him that you can act on? Experience shows again and again that when you allow people to act on the little that they do believe, the rest will follow.<sup>21</sup>

## **VI. Second Implication of Right Reason - Ethics**

The implications of a right understanding of reason are very similar when we move from how reason approaches texts to how reason approaches ethics and ethical discourse. The predominant contemporary theories of ethics may be divided into two camps: consequentialist or utilitarian theories and deontological or duty-based theories. What both of these have in common is a foundationalist approach to constructing ethical

---

<sup>21</sup> Cutting Edge Magazine, Winter 2001, <http://www.dwillard.org/articles/artview.asp?artID=14>

systems. What we see in Willard, Sokolowski and John Paul II is a nonfoundational approach to ethics that simply describes what ethical people do. The focus of their ethical discourse is, therefore, the formation of ethical persons rather than the construction of ethical systems.

Willard presents in *The Divine Conspiracy* a lengthy discussion of the moral knowledge revealed by Jesus, particularly in the Sermon on the Mount. According to Willard, Jesus simply described what people do in the Kingdom of God. Jesus was not building a prescriptive system of ethics divorced from reality. This, as we have seen, is not how reason works. Rather, Jesus describes and illustrates what life is like in the Kingdom of God and then invites his hearers to follow him there.

Willard contrasts Jesus' descriptive account of moral knowledge as simply describing what those in the Kingdom do with the legalistic account of Christian ethics asserted by the Pharisees and by much contemporary Christian theology. For example, the central focus of much Christian theology in regards to sin, according to Willard, is to manage sin through receiving forgiveness available as a result of Jesus' work of atonement on the cross. When this is the primary approach to sin, Willard writes, Christians buy into a "gospel of sin management" according to which the avoidance of and forgiveness for sins are the keys to Christian ethics. Willard writes that Jesus contrasted the legalism of this approach with his call to simply become the type of person who doesn't want to sin anymore. The starting point of Jesus' ethical discourse is thus not ethical laws, but the ethical person (the person living in the kingdom of God), who can only be described. Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount uses illustrations of common ethical dilemmas to repeatedly contrast the legalistic "goodness of the scribes and Pharisees" with the Kingdom life, for the Kingdom life is not defined or deduced, but is instead described, revealed and lived.

In Matthew, chapter 5, Jesus works us through six situations in which the goodness that lives from the heart and through the Kingdom Among Us is contrasted with the old *dikaiosune* [righteousness] focused merely on 'doing the right thing.'...Having worked through these contrasts in well-known and frequent life situations, one should be able to see very clearly the kind of inner character or heart that belongs to those whose life truly flows from the kingdom of God.<sup>22</sup>

Willard concisely describes the distinction revealed by Jesus as the Sermon on the Mount proceeds, "The Pharisee takes as his aim keeping the law rather than becoming the kind of person whose deeds naturally conform to the law."<sup>23</sup>

Sokolowski, like Willard, contrasts the legalistic approaches to ethics found in modern ethical discourse with a description of ethics as simply consisting of what ethical people do.

The moral good is almost always seen as an obligation, as

---

<sup>22</sup> *Divine Conspiracy*, pp. 146-147

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, p. 184

something that is binding and imposed. It is interpreted as alien to us, alien to how we would normally behave. The possibility of its being so much a part of an agent that the agent himself becomes the standard of what should be done is not admitted and certainly not exploited in moral understanding; the possibility of virtuous character, of harmony between moral reasoning and inclination, is not factored into what we say about morals. In fact, the very experience of conflict between obligation and inclination seems to be required for authentic moral behavior; only a person who has to master himself seems deserving of moral approval.<sup>24</sup>

Sokolowski's understanding of ethical discourse as the description and disclosure what ethical people do is informed by Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, which is famous for taking this approach to ethical discourse. According to Sokolowski, Husserl's right understanding of the role of reason allows us to approach pre-Cartesian, premodern texts with greater understanding. The fresh return to Aristotle's discussion of ethics as simply revealing what ethical people do thus looks a lot like Willard's call to return to Jesus' discussion of ethics as simply revealing what ethical people do.

In fact, both Aristotle and Willard use very similar language to discuss the starting point of ethical discourse as the formation of ethical people, rather than the construction of systems of ethical knowledge. Aristotle writes, "[T]he present undertaking is not for the sake of theory, as our others are (for we are not inquiring into what excellence is for the sake of knowing it, but for the sake of becoming good, since otherwise there would be no benefit in it at all)."<sup>25</sup> Willard makes a similar claim that the ethical person is the goal and anchor of ethical discourse in an article on the moral foundations of rationality.<sup>26</sup>

John Paul II makes the same distinction in various writings, primarily in his article, "On the Directive or Subservient Role of Reason in Ethics".<sup>27</sup> The Holy Father also adds another dimension to the right understanding of ethics that follows from right reason. In his primary philosophical work, *The Acting Person*, John Paul II broadens the

---

<sup>24</sup> *The God of Faith and Reason*, p. 62

<sup>25</sup> *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Christopher Rowe, Oxford University Press (Oxford), 2002, p. 112 (Sec II. 2, Line 1103b27-29)

<sup>26</sup> "Here, I submit, is the fundamental distinction within moral phenomena: the one which is of primary human interest, and from which all the others, moving toward the periphery of the moral life and ethical theory, can be clarified. We can call it, simply, "good will." For example: the moral value (positive and negative) of acts; the nature of moral obligation and responsibility; virtues and vices; the nature and limitations of rights, punishment, rewards, justice and related issues; the morality of laws and institutions; and what is to be made of moral progress and moral education, and so on. A coherent theory of all these matters can, I suggest, be developed only if we start from the distinction between the good and the bad will or person--which, we have already admitted, very few philosophers are currently prepared to discuss." Dallas Willard, "How Reason Can Survive the Modern University: The Moral Foundations of Rationality", Paper presented to the American Maritain Association meeting at Notre Dame, Oct 19th to 22, 2000, <http://www.dwillard.org/articles/artview.asp?artID=33>

<sup>27</sup> Pope John Paul II, "On the Directive or Subservient Role of Reason in Ethics: In the Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas, David Hume and Immanuel Kant", in *Person and Community: Selected Essays*, Karol Wojtyla, Trans. Theresa Sandok, OSM, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Citta del Vaticano, 1993, pp. 57-72

Husserlian notion of the intentionality of consciousness to claim that moral action is also essential to human living. Man interacts with reality continuously not only via consciousness but also via moral action, which is made possible by the continuous presence of reason which is the basis for responsible action. He writes at one point, “In each of his actions the human person is eyewitness of the transition from the ‘is’ to the ‘should’ – the transition from ‘X is truly good’ to ‘I should do X’.”<sup>28</sup> To say that I act is as much a redundancy for John Paul II as it is to say that I am conscious of something, for action and thus moral agency is a constant concomitant to reason. Therefore, John Paul II sees in the reflection upon one’s action the disclosure of one’s being, for it is through deliberate action that we come to be.

The reader may have wondered if the implications of right reason for theology are not rather limited, confined to the fields of hermeneutics and ethics. John Paul II’s understanding of the true scope of ethics given the persistent presence of reason and thus the persistent responsibility to act rationally demonstrates why this is not the case. For right reason does not simply give us answers to occasional ethical dilemmas that we face, rather it reveals all of life to be a continuous occasion for moral action.

It is often pointed out by biographers of Pope John Paul II that this call, to see in the moral actions of a person who the person has chosen to become, is very much a reaction against the routine hypocrisy required for survival in communist Poland. It thus has much in common with the calls to consistent ethical living by other anticommunist dissidents such as Vaclav Havel, calls which may be summed up by saying, “You are who you are, not who you would be if the system was different.”

This historical context certainly contributed to the primacy which a phenomenological study of ethics held in John Paul II’s work. It is important to point out, however, that John Paul II’s conclusions nonetheless follow strictly from his doctrine of right reason, and are accordingly to be found in the writings of Sokolowski and Willard as well. Willard broadens the range of ethics in a section of *The Divine Conspiracy* titled, “The Indispensable Role of Ordinary Events”.

First we must accept the circumstances we constantly find ourselves in as the place of God’s kingdom and blessing. God has yet to bless anyone except where they actually are, and if we faithlessly discard situation after situation, moment after moment, as not being “right,” we will simply have no place to receive his kingdom into our life. For those situations and moments *are* our life.<sup>29</sup>

Sokolowski, likewise, describes the ubiquitous presence of “moral transactions” in human living. Whereas the prominent ethical theories – both consequentialist and deontological – are directed towards moral thinking, life constantly presents us with moral transactions that may or may not be addressed by such categorical moral thinking.

---

<sup>28</sup> Pope John Paul II, *The Acting Person*, Trans. Andrzej Potocki, Edited by Anna-Terea Tymieniecka, D. Reidel Publishing Company (Dordrecht), 1979, p. 162

<sup>29</sup> *The Divine Conspiracy*, pp. 348-349

Our moral thinking, then, should begin with moral action that is performed in these moral transactions.<sup>30</sup>

## VII. Conclusion

The correct understanding of reason, or right reason, is thus of critical importance for the greater part, if not the entirety, of Christian theology. The implications drawn from right reason as revealed by Husserlian phenomenology for theology by Willard, Sokolowski and John Paul II are so similar as to compel us to place the work of these three figures in greater dialogue with each other in the future. While these three philosophers have differences in their approaches to phenomenology, differences which they have written about, these differences must not conceal the common insights that they have drawn from phenomenology for Christian theology. Such a common vision reveals the central role that a careful reflection on our use of reason must play in spiritual and theological education.

---

<sup>30</sup> See Robert Sokolowski, *Moral Action: A Phenomenological Study*, Indiana University Press (Bloomington), 1985