

CAN YOU SEE THE TRUTH?: WHY PHILOSOPHY MATTERS

Surely college football fans have heard the anti-Cornhusker jokes— What does the “N” stand for on the University of Nebraska football helmets? A: Knowledge! Yes, the joys of Big Ten rivalries. All (tired) joking aside, the **pursuit of knowledge** is a key element that distinguishes the human person. Have you seen this online brain teaser— “Can you find all five letter Y’s in this image?” In this case, it was fairly easy to find them spread amidst the X’s throughout the image. For some it’s nearly impossible. I recall the opposite experience in the 1970’s of being frustrated that I **could not see** the word depicted on my grade school teacher’s desk (see sidebar). For the life of me, I stared at that plaque seeing only shapes, but **unable to discern** the letters forming a key word. Some fail to see what is incredibly obvious to others. It’s one thing if it’s a puzzle, it’s quite different if we are talking about substantive worldviews.

Consider the concept of **Natural Law**, which has formed the bedrock for much of Catholic moral teaching. It is the theory that the universe in which we live is **intelligible, ordered, and purposeful**. Things are what they appear to be. But like the optical illusions, some cannot see it, no matter how much they try. One of my nephews received his B.A. in Philosophy last month from a well-respected university in California. He did not matriculate with the idea of majoring in Philosophy but became enamored with the subject early on. I too was a Philosophy major in college, though his voracious appetite for reading **far surpassed** mine in college. Out of curiosity, I visited his university’s department website. I was disappointed that among the 59 courses offered this Spring, **not a single one was** in medieval philosophy. Mind you, that covers a pretty wide swath of time, 1000 years! There was a course entitled “Fine Tuning Arguments for God’s Existence,” and perhaps they covered medieval thought.

Since inquiring minds want to know, I e-mailed a professor emerita (retired), the **sole professor** among 40 profs whose biography listed medieval philosophy as an area of specialization. She specialized in **William of Ockham**, who was a Franciscan friar by the way. To my surprise, **she wrote back** within 15 minutes of my e-mail. Talk about modern efficiency from a medievalist! We had a fruitful exchange about how philosophy has changed in the past generation. While very respectful of her department, she acknowledged that the faculty is “not of one mind regarding the importance of teaching medieval philosophy,” noting that Medieval philosophy has mostly been limited to Catholic universities or “Great Books” universities for some time. Why is that? My own suspicion is that it was a “Christianized” philosophy that strikes many today as a melding of philosophy and theology.

A truly educated person in the Middle Ages would have focused study on the seven liberal arts. Here, *liberal* was used in the classic sense of the word, that is, what makes us truly free. It covered seven areas, embracing grammar, rhetoric, and logic, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music. Wait, no philosophy? Not so fast! Philosophy **formed the backdrop** for the seven liberal arts. In medieval manuscripts, philosophy was the anchor, surrounded by the seven liberal arts. It simply was not possible to be an educated person without having studied philosophy. Speaking of William of Ockham, his principle of “the law of briefness” (*lex parsimoniae*) is fascinating. In short (pun intended), *pluralitas non est ponenda sine necessitate*, “plurality ought not to be posited without necessity.” The simpler explanation is preferred to one requiring many more steps. The principle goes by the nickname of **Ockham’s Razor**. Keep.It.Simple!

Obviously, many well-educated people have never taken a single philosophy course. Still, the study of the liberal arts has **clearly waned** in our modern age, fixated as it is on technology, efficiency, practical and marketable skills. It’s the classic question: “What on earth will you do with a philosophy degree?” “How will you get a job?” While understandable, it is most unfortunate. Philosophy is the study of knowledge and the “love of wisdom,” the derivative of the very word itself. Natural law provided for and was predicated upon the idea of a **large-scale moral consensus**. The natural law can best be illustrated by some **basic human concepts**: it is wrong to steal or take the life of an innocent human being. Does any large-scale moral consensus even exist today? Sadly, Natural Law theory has fallen on hard times.

Consider the words of Saint Paul himself: “Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just,

whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things” (Phil 4:8). Indeed, **think** about these things. **Plato** (†348 BC) described the world as being “the product of a Mind which sets everything in order and produces each individual thing in the way that is best for it.” According to the **Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy**, Plato’s *Timaews* outlined a view in which the universe “is the product of rational, purposive, and beneficent agency. It is the handiwork of a divine Craftsmanship.” He discerned order in the Universe. This is a worldview that could be described as teleological (from the Greek *telos*), meaning that there is an “end,” a purpose to something and that purpose is able to be discerned. Hey, it’s refreshing to be old-fashioned!

- It’s a small world. When I inquired in last week’s column about **4th of July parades**, little did I know that one of our parish families attended the very small town (Cable, WI) parade that I inadvertently stumbled upon while driving near my brother’s cabin! They still exist and it was wonderful to see!
- Profound thanks to the **Cathedral Heritage Foundation** for sponsoring our own Cathedral Children’s Choristers so that they may attend the **Libera concert** (boys’ choir from South London, UK) on **Friday July 26**. This will be an outstanding opportunity to hear an extremely well-respected choir with a unique sound and repertoire. Please visit the Cathedral website for a link for ticket information.
- Many thanks to the **fifty youth** and chaperones from the **Diocese of Duluth**. They donated 300 hours of combined service here. In truth, they took upon themselves the jobs that we have been dreading for months! Ever notice the grates in the pews down by your feet? They collect a lot of dust– a lot! They have all been cleaned, bushes weeded, window wells cleaned, garages swept, etc. To assuage my guilt, they enjoyed **Jimmy John’s** subs, ice cream bars and a trip partway up the Cathedral roof for a great view!
- Thankfully, California Bill SB 360 was **yanked** from consideration a day before debate was to begin. This bill would have mandated clergy to violate the seal of the confessional if they learned of abuse during the celebration of the sacrament. No priest worth his salt would **violate the seal** under any circumstances. Tens of thousands of letters and e-mails flooded the offices of government. Deo Gratias!
- Our annual **Bloodmobile** Clinic is coming this Tuesday, July 16 from 1:00 to 6:00 p.m. I encourage your participation.

Sincerely in Christ,
Fr. John L. Ubel
Rector



Can you see the Lord?

