Global Faculty Initiative

The Faculty Initiative

seeks to promote the integration

of Christian faith and academic disciplines

by bringing theologians into conversation with scholars

across the spectrum of faculties

in research universities

worldwide.

www.globalfacultyinitiative.net

Disciplinary Brief

IS NATURAL ORDER STILL A WAY OF ACCESS TO GOD?

Javier Sánchez-Cañizares

Associate Professor, Institute for Culture and Society (ICS), "Mind-Brain" Group, University of Navarra, Pamplona, Navarra, SPAIN

Nigel Biggar's theological brief 'Order' is inspiring for natural sciences on many grounds. In this disciplinary note, I would like to focus on the link between the objective order of nature and our subjective understanding thereof —an assumption that, according to Prof. Biggar, "is basic to the natural sciences and should be basic to all academic endeavor."

First, let me introduce a famous quote from Einstein in a letter to his friend Maurice Solovine regarding the order we humans perceive in the universe.

> "You find it strange that I consider the comprehensibility of the world (to the extent that we are authorized to speak of such a comprehensibility) as a miracle or as an eternal mystery. Well, a priori one should expect a chaotic world which cannot be grasped by the mind in any way. One could (yes one should) expect the world to be subjected to law only to the extent that we order it through our intelligence. Ordering of this kind would be like the alphabetical ordering of the words of a language. By contrast, the kind of order created by Newton's theory of gravitation, for instance, is wholly different. Even if the axioms of the theory are proposed by man, the success of such a project presupposes a high degree of ordering of the objective world, and this could not be expected a priori. That is the 'miracle' which is being constantly reinforced as our knowledge expands." (A. Einstein, Letters to Solovine, translated by Wade Baskin, with an introduction by Maurice Solovine (New York: Philosophical Library, 1987), pp. 132-133; see https://inters.org/Einstein-Letter-Solovine)

The realism of Einstein's position drives him to speak about the miracle or the eternal mystery that the intelligibility of nature, not created by the human mind, evokes. As is well known, such order did not bring him to admit the existence of a personal God. By contrast, let me quote a less-known reflection of Benedict XVI on the same topic.

> "Mathematics, as such, is a creation of our intelligence: the correspondence between its structures and the real structures of the universe —which is the presupposition of all modern scientific and technological developments, already expressly formulated by Galileo Galilei with the famous affirmation that the book of nature is written in mathematical language— arouses our admiration and raises a big question. It implies, in fact, that the universe itself is structured in an intelligent manner, such that a profound correspondence exists between our subjective reason and the objective reason in nature. It

> then becomes inevitable to ask oneself if there might not be a single original intelligence that is the common font of them both. Thus, precisely the reflection on the development of science brings us towards the creator Logos." (Benedict XVI, Address to the Fourth National Ecclesial Convention in Verona, 19 October 2006; see https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2006/october/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20061019_convegno-verona.html)

Beyond the intrinsic interest of these two quotes, both reflect a different attitude regarding the correspondence between the objective order of nature and our natural reason —as manifested, e.g., by physical theories describing, even if partially, the world. Prof Biggar assumes that "the created world reflects the coherence, the rationality, the beauty, the order of the Creator (…) and so, in principle, intelligible by human minds or 'rational.'" Of course, faith in a rational Creator warrants the order of nature and the possibility of grasping it by rational beings created in the image and likeness of their Creator. However, the opposite is not necessarily true, namely, that intelligibility of the universe drives towards the acceptance of a personal Creator. Einstein and many other contemporary scientists do not believe in a personal God. Why is that so? Is the ultimate answer about the origin of the order of nature just a matter of naked faith, irrelevant for natural scientists, or is there anything that Benedict XVI's quote is saying to Einstein, who stops his reasoning on the miracle of intelligibility and rejects further epistemic commitments?

My answer leans towards the second possibility, as Benedict XVI has constantly defended the rationality of the Christian faith. The fundamental dilemma that Benedict XVI poses to natural scientists —and all human beings— is the following: if at the origin of the world we find ourselves before the logos-reason or, on the contrary, an irrational mystery. Let me illustrate this claim with some exemplary quotes extremely relevant to all scholars, particularly natural scientists:

> "In the end, to reach the definitive question I would say: God exists or he does not exist. There are only two options. Either one recognizes the priority of reason, of creative Reason that is at the beginning of all things and is the principle of all things —the priority of reason is also the priority of freedom—, or one holds the priority of the irrational, inasmuch as everything that functions on our earth and in our lives would be only accidental, marginal, an irrational result —reason would be a product of irrationality." (Benedict XVI, Encounter With the Youth, 6 April 2006; see https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2006/april/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060406_xxi-wyd.html)

> "Modern scientific reason quite simply has to accept the rational structure of matter and the correspondence between our spirit and the prevailing rational structures of nature as a given, on which its methodology has to be based. Yet the question why this has to be so is a real question, and one which has to be remanded by the natural sciences to other modes and planes of thought —to philosophy and theology." (Benedict XVI, Meeting with the Representatives of science, 12 September 2006; see https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg.html)

> "[T]he issue is clearly whether or not reason stands at the beginning and foundation of all things. The issue is whether reality originates by chance and necessity, and thus whether reason is merely a chance by-product of the irrational and, in an ocean of irrationality, it too, in the end, is meaningless, or whether instead the underlying conviction of Christian faith remains true: *In principio erat Verbum* —in the beginning was the Word; at the origin of everything is the creative reason of God who decided to make himself known to us human beings." (Benedict XVI, Meeting with the Authorities and the Diplomatic Corps, 7 September 2007; see https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2007/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20070907_hofburg-wien.html)

In other words, whereas intelligibility of the universe remains a cipher for non-believers, as a sort of end-station for rational thinking, believers may still invoke the Augustinian *intellectus quaerens fidem* to move forward in their bet for rationality and order. True, opting for a Creator is still a bet because nobody can provide a logical demonstration of the existence of a personal God. Yet such a bet is rational, as its content offers epistemic continuity between the order of the universe, human reason, and the eventual origin of both. Inference to the best explanation or abduction should play a role here. Even though priors and their probabilistic weight can be very different for each human being, in particular natural scientists, I think that this argument is sufficiently strong to overrule many of them.

No doubt, one die-hard positivist and non-believer could still reject the initial premise of this discussion, namely, the existence of a natural order of things. The appearance of such order would merely reflect an imposition by human reason on an otherwise meaningless universe. We have seen how Einstein strongly rejected such a stance. But, even worse, I hesitate that denying the objective existence of order improves the odds for non-believers, as it manifestly introduces an unbridgeable hiatus between the ontological order of nature and the epistemic order of human reason and cancels all objective grounding of moral order. The origin of human reason thus becomes a grander mystery for negationists of the order of nature.

To sum up, the objective order of the universe, beyond grounding for moral order, additionally offers grounding for an updated version of Pascal's wager: "Pascal argues that a rational person should live as though God exists and seek to believe in God. If God does not exist, such a person will have only a finite loss […], whereas if God does exist, he stands to receive infinite gains (as represented by eternity in Heaven) and avoid infinite losses (an eternity in Hell)." (See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pascal%27s_wager#cite_note-2). Now the bet is not about personal gain but about rationality itself. Having introduced the positions epitomized by Benedict XVI and Einstein, I thus submit to the reader's judgment the assessment of which one should be deemed more rational and potentially conducive to progress in the human understanding of the world.

For more information

www.globalfacultyinitiative.net