

Response to Kristin Heyer

J. Steven Brown

I am not a philosopher or theologian, and even worse, I have never studied either philosophy or theology. However, I would posit that all problems are somehow either anthropological; that is, “who is man/woman?” or theological; that is, “who is God?” and that these two questions are intimately related because as taught by Vatican II, “Christ ... fully reveals man to ... himself,”¹ or in the words of the Roman orator Vittorino, “when I encountered Christ, I discovered my humanity.”²

I would like to say that the topic of Kristin’s paper provoked dozens of questions. For example: What is good? What is the common good? Do we in the modern world still believe in a common good? If so, what does it look like and in what does it consist? Is it a question of democracy? Of will? What is the role of the academy? Is there a value to interdisciplinary studies? If so, what and why? What is knowledge? Why has knowledge become fragmented in the modern world and what are the effects of this fragmentation? What is truth? What is the relationship between truth and good? This list could go on and on.

In short, there were many challenging and thought-provoking ideas in Kristin’s paper that call for dialogue and further development. Here, I mention only a few: “growing the edges” of the Catholic intellectual tradition, hospitality, intellectual humility, encounter, dialogue, community, pluralism, interdisciplinarity, and solidarity. If I were to comment on any one of these, I would have insufficient time to do so. Thus, in my brief remarks,

1 Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*, 1965), 22, online at www.vatican.va.

2 Luigi Giussani, *L'io Rinasce in un Incontro (1986-1987)* (Milan: Bur Biblioteca, 2010), 182. Cf. Mario Vittorino, *In epistola ad Ephesios*, II, 4, 14.

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I will not address the themes and questions she raised directly but instead I will touch on and hint at two topics without doing justice to either: first of all, fragmentation of knowledge and unity of truth, and secondly the giftedness of reality. By proceeding in this way, my attempt will be to indirectly address several of Kristin's themes.

So firstly, fragmentation of knowledge. What I see in my own discipline, what I hear about in other disciplines and observe in the academy, and more broadly what I see in education and research, is fragmentation of knowledge. For example, consider the way in which my own small university of some 3500 undergraduate and 3500 graduate students is ordered. We consist of 12 schools with some 30+ departments and countless programs within these departments. We have disciplines, subdisciplines, and sub-sub-disciplines. It seems there is no end to the atomization of the disciplines. Even my own discipline of mechanical engineering is divided into 38 unique divisions by the American Society of Mechanical Engineering. Or think of a different example—the Internet. Its success partly lies in its ability to divide the body of knowledge into discrete, manageable units which quickly can be categorized, retrieved, and manipulated. Or what about the Human Genome Project, which has sequenced the DNA that makes up the 20,000–25,000 genes in our bodies? No one can deny the great successes and benefits that have resulted from these approaches. However, have they not come at a cost? Is there not something amiss in all this atomization? Why is it that many, if not most, in the academy recognize a value in interdisciplinary studies? Is it not perhaps an intuition or recognition that the ever more fragmented and reduced methodologies for engaging reality and truth are limited and ultimately are not able to answer the most fundamental, urgent, and human of questions? For example, when speaking of the Fathers of the Church, Cardinal Ratzinger wrote:

They were not interested in the questions of scholars, twisting around in an ever more refined subtlety. They were interested in the simple point that got lost to view behind such questions: they were interested in the simple basic questions of simple people. The panorama of academic reflections is in continual flux, but these basic questions have an enduring character, since the fundamental structure of human relatedness, the simple center of man's existence, is always the same. The nearer our questions come to this center, the more they lie in the very heart of what it is to be a man, and the simpler they are, the less it is possible to declare them obsolete.³

So then what does interdisciplinarity provide us? It seems to me that we often view disciplines as “packets of expertise” which when put together somehow create a “super packet of expertise.” Or, if not directly additive, we at least view them as being complementary “packets of expertise” which somehow interact and result in a whole greater than the parts. However, I would argue that the value of interdisciplinarity is

3 Joseph Ratzinger, *The God of Jesus Christ: Meditations on the Triune God* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008), 86-87.

that it serves as a framework for dialogue within and between particular disciplines and methodologies, allowing one to better understand his/her own particular aspect of reality as well as the whole since it is the whole, this unity, which gives meaning to the particular. Furthermore, I believe that we in the university do not engage seriously enough our true cultural mission, which in the words of St. Paul is “Test everything; retain what is good.” (1 Thessalonians 5:21). Is this not what interdisciplinarity should be? After all, it is this dialogue with truth, wherever it is found, that one ultimately seeks because if one pursues truth and pursues it to the bottom, one will be led to the one Truth—God, the Truth behind truths.

Now I would like to turn my attention to the second point—the giftedness of reality. I spent the 2008–2009 academic year on sabbatical at the University of Padova, Italy. There, above the door entering the laboratory where I spent a year, was a huge sign which greeted me each morning. It read: “Without data, you are no one.” Nowadays in my discipline and in other empirical sciences, and I would argue even more broadly, this statement seems to be true—everything somehow hinges on measured data, and reality is ultimately something to be interrogated through measurement and mathematical demonstration. What is affirmed to be true is what can be described mathematically—what one can touch, manipulate, measure, and predict—otherwise it is not “true.”

However, in this framework of knowing only through measurement, one cannot address the fundamental human questions raised by Cardinal Ratzinger; and thus is it any wonder, as I alluded to earlier, that nowadays it seems we no longer believe in truth and goodness, or at best if we do, they remain subjective and subservient to feeling, will, and power? After all, how can they be measured and mathematically described? So then what does it mean to speak of a common good? Is it possible? Notwithstanding this doubt or hurdle, it does seem most people still desire somehow their own good and the good of others, however they are understood. So, how is it possible to build upon this intuition and common experience of people and recover a true sense of truth and goodness? The starting point I believe is to recover a sense of reality as given. Returning to my original example of being no one without data, the aim would be to recover the original meaning of its Latin root—*datum*, that is, given. It would be to recover a sense of wonder in front of reality. It would be to recognize once again that reality is good and knowable because it is only in recognizing myself and others as beings created in love that I am able to speak of my own good and the good of others, otherwise everything will eventually disintegrate into relationships of power rather than ones of love, and without love is it possible to speak of a common good?

Now to try to pull together my undeveloped thoughts. What is the common denominator of my two points? A subject who is not anchored and does not know who he/she is, and because of this engages reality and life using impoverished reason, affection, and freedom. So is everything lost? Or is it possible to rebuild the subject? Romano Guardini said, “In the experience of the great love, the whole world is gathered together in the I-Thou relation and whatever takes place becomes an event within

this relation.”⁴ It is the event of an encounter by which the human heart, the human questions are born, or are re-born. So this should be our task in the universities and in our teaching and research—to allow the event of Christ to happen, because as John Paul II wrote at the beginning of his pontificate, “Christ is the center of the universe and of history.”⁵ It is only a subject generated by love and sustained by a community who is able to build something truly of value for all.

4 Romano Guardini, *Das Wesen des Christentums*, n. 42. Cf. Antonio López, *Gift and the Unity of Being* (Cambridge: James Clark & Co., 2014), 290.

5 John Paul II, encyclical *Redemptor Hominis* 1 (1979), online at www.vatican.va.