

The Hermeneutic of Limitation

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ENG 105

July 2, 2022

The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard once defined paradoxes as “grandiose thoughts in embryo.”¹ This is because when two truths seem to contradict one another, this contradiction implies the existence of a third, greater truth which reconciles and expands upon them. An example of such a paradox is found in the infamous case of Galileo, wherein the word of God appeared to contradict the heavens themselves. This apparent contradiction was discussed by Galileo himself in his letter to the Grand Duchess of Tuscany, and later reflected upon by Pope John Paul II in his 1992 address to the Pontifical Academy of Science. In both documents, these brilliant men express their conviction that scientists and theologians must be cognizant of the limitations of their respective fields; however, while Galileo does so largely as a means of self defense, John Paul II develops this conviction into a powerfully paradoxical hermeneutic of reality.

In his letter to the Grand Duchess, Galileo acknowledges the inerrancy of Scripture and admits that, unlike science, it speaks of matters relevant to our “highest goal,”² our salvation. However, motivated by a desire to defend himself against accusations of heresy, he dedicates most of the letter to expounding the limitations of Scripture as concerns scientific inquiry. The Bible, he says, quoting an eminent yet anonymous churchman, is meant “to teach us how one goes to heaven, not how heaven goes.”³ This being the case, he argues, one should not be accused of heresy for positing theories that do not concern eternal salvation. If the sole purpose of Scripture is the salvation of souls, he asks, how can one be said to contradict it in any meaningful sense by saying something which has nothing at all to do with salvation?

¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Journals of Kierkegaard*, ed. Alexander Dru (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1959), 59, <https://www.bookyards.com/en/book/details/12661/Journals-Of-Kierkegaard#>.

² Galileo Galilei, “Letter to the Grand Duchess Christina of Tuscany,” in *The Catholic Spirit*, Michel Bettigole, O.S.F., and James D. Childs (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2010), 126.

³ Ibid.

In his address to the Pontifical Academy, John Paul II vindicates Galileo's defense by stating that "the Bible does not concern itself with the details of the physical world."⁴ Rather, he clarifies, the study of the natural world is the domain of human reason, while supernatural studies are the object of divine faith. These two realms are indeed distinct, but not, he stresses, fundamentally opposed. In fact, when reason and faith (or, put another way, science and theology) appear to contradict, this, he explains, is meant to teach us "that often, beyond two partial and contrasting perceptions, there exists a wider perception which includes them and goes beyond both of them."⁵

This is the power in the paradox of the hermeneutic of limitation. The chains which bind our understanding are loosed only when we acknowledge that we are bound by our limited capacities. Each field of study must recognize the lines it cannot cross, for these lines—like the edges which distinguish one puzzle piece from the other—are precisely the mechanism by which humanity's various schools of study may be joined together. This was the insight of John Paul II. The line which distinguishes faith and reason is the very edge by which they unite to reveal a holistic image of reality.

⁴ John Paul II, "Address to the Pontifical Academy of Science," in *The Catholic Spirit*, Michel Bettigole, O.S.F., and James D. Childs (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2010), 132.

⁵ Ibid.

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