

INTERVIEW WITH CLAUDIA VANNEY, DIRECTOR OF THE PHILOSOPHY INSTITUTE AT UNIVERSIDAD AUSTRAL

Interview conducted by Quentin Wodon

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EXCERPTS:

- “To reverse the excess of specialization and make room for the cross-enrichment of disciplines, it seems necessary to migrate from the current epistemic plurality towards a collaborative project of social cognition that demands specific intellectual virtues.”
- “Good values are attractive by their own. The role of the professor is to make easier for students to discover values by themselves. Values are not imposed from the outside; on the contrary, they should be freely assumed.”

Would you describe where you work, and some of the particularities of your university?

I am currently the director of the Philosophy Institute at Universidad Austral in Argentina. The Philosophy Institute was created in 2008 in order to promote interdisciplinary research between science, philosophy and theology. The investigations that are developing are oriented particularly to sustain philosophically the specific areas of knowledge in which Universidad Austral is involved in research or teaching. These investigations tend to focus on new approaches that contemporary science is opening up as it progresses.

Since 2010, we have uninterruptedly carried out at the Philosophy Institute several research projects involving physicists, biologists, psychologists, neuroscientists, philosophers and theologians, most of whom are from Latin America. Through these projects, the Philosophy Institute research team has tried different ways to promote collaborative work between university scholars with diverse academic backgrounds.

Box 1: Interview Series

What is the mission of the Global Catholic Education website? The site informs and connects Catholic educators globally. It provides them with data, analysis, opportunities to learn, and other resources to help them fulfill their mission with a focus on the preferential option for the poor.

Why a series of interviews? Interviews are a great way to share experiences in an accessible and personal way. This series will feature interviews with practitioners as well as researchers working in Catholic education, whether in a classroom, at a university, or with other organizations aiming to strengthen Catholic schools and universities.

What is the focus of this interview? In this interview, Claudia Vanney, Director of the Philosophy Institute at Universidad Austral in Argentina, shares insights about the work that she received an Expanded Reason Award for and about life in academia, with a particular emphasis on her work for the Philosophy Institute.

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We understand interdisciplinary research as a practice that, without denying the individual identity of the disciplines involved, results in the production of new knowledge with insights from different fields. In interdisciplinary research, experts from different disciplines work in a joint, not independent, manner on a common problem, engaging in a creative pluralism that requires them to share the way of thinking of others, and not only to learn new content from different fields. In this sense, interdisciplinarity differs from a mere multidisciplinary approach because it tries to bring forth an integrated vision, whereas multidisciplinary works usually consist of a juxtaposition of results obtained in an independent process, and therefore their conclusions lack deep unity. Since philosophy and theology are sapiential disciplines, they play a leading role in the interdisciplinary dialogue.

What is your main field of research, and why did you choose that field?

My main field of research has changed over the years. It is currently the epistemology of interdisciplinary research. This kind of research raises new challenges for cognitive sciences in general, and for epistemology in particular. In my opinion, to reverse the excess of specialization and make room for the cross-enrichment of disciplines, it seems necessary to migrate from the current epistemic plurality towards a collaborative project of social cognition that demands specific intellectual virtues.

As I mentioned, through the various projects developed at the Philosophy Institute we have tried different ways to foster collaborative work between scholars with diverse academic backgrounds. These experiences conducted me to the study of the intellectual character, since the intellectual virtues involve both a motivational component and a component of success as essential to achieve the desired results. In this way, the very specific topic I am researching now is the development of the intellectual virtues that favor the realization of interdisciplinary work between science and the fundamental questions.

You are a recipient of the Expanded Reason Awards. What was your contribution for receiving the Award?

One of the most paradigmatic results of the interdisciplinary initiatives carried out at the Philosophy Institute was the volume *¿Determinismo o Indeterminismo? Grandes preguntas de las ciencias a la filosofía*. We received the Expanded Reason Awards for this book. Each of the 18 chapters that constitute the book is focused on a question that simultaneously requires and exceeds a purely empirical approach and is the object of study by a team comprising a scientist (a physicist, biologist or neuroscientist) and a philosopher/theologian. In this way, each chapter involved collaborations between coauthors who have, in the past, published in different

domains. Their dialogue culminated in three workshops that were held at Austral University in 2013, 2014 and 2015, but this dialogue was not limited to the workshops.

Prior to the meetings, each pair of researchers began an exchange of ideas to prepare their presentations. During the workshop sessions, the various topics were discussed in depth. Finally, after the meeting, each pair of researchers continued working in collaboration until they assembled an integrated interdisciplinary document. This process required each pair of researchers combining their individual knowledge to generate a cognitive output that they could not have produced alone. Thus, for at least a year, two researchers with different disciplinary training were encouraged to focus jointly their attention on a common question. This methodology of collaborative work faced challenges related to the interaction between specialists, the overcoming of problems such as the communication between them, and the reciprocal evaluation of their different points of view. While the willingness of the researchers made it possible to conclude the book successfully, many of them stated later that the process of writing together involved a much greater effort than initially planned.

The process of writing of this book led me to consider the challenges of interdisciplinary works that bridge the "two languages" of the humanities (especially philosophy and theology) and the sciences. That is, those academic investigations that include different epistemological emphases and refer to multiple levels of analysis.

How easy or difficult is it for you to share your values with students when teaching?

It is neither easy nor difficult for me. I do not seek to communicate my values to students as contents that must be transmitted. It would be more appropriate to think that sharing values involves spreading a way of seeing life, and this usually happens naturally. In any case, the starting point is a great respect to others, to their way of seeing things and to their personal experiences.

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How do your values affect your research? And what are some challenges you face?

I would like to introduce a little nuance before answering. My values are not something that I add externally to what I do, but something intrinsic to the way I live. In other words, they are always present when I act and, in this sense, of course, my values affect my research, as they affect everything I do. However, they do so in a much

more profound way than, for example, simply incorporating an ethical research protocol.

Some contemporary thinkers often speak of a flourishing life to refer to the archetype of the mentally healthy adults, with high levels of emotional well-being, content and satisfied with themselves, with a clear meaning of their life, self-acceptance, with a sense of autonomy and seeking their own personal growth. All this requires having well-defined values.

I believe that cultivating a rich intellectual life that contributes to the harmonious development I have just described is the main challenge for me and for every researcher.

What is your advice for students who may be Catholic and are contemplating doing graduate work or a PhD?

My advice would be to always try to be consistent with themselves. It is important not to be afraid to think, and also not to be afraid to share ideas with people who think differently. Other people's looks often open up new perspectives and enrich our own approaches.

With some frequency, John Paul II used to speak of the splendor of truth. A few years later, at the general audience of May 11, 2011, Benedict XVI remarked that "Man bears within him a thirst for the infinite, a longing for eternity, a quest for beauty, a desire for love, a need for light and for truth which impel him towards the Absolute ". I think that the most important thing is to face these things in depth, and to rely on the force of truth, beauty and love when we discuss with others.

Could you share how you ended up in your current position, what was your personal journey?

From a very young age, the desire to understand things better led me first to read a lot, and then to combine my university studies in physics with courses for a degree in philosophy. Subsequently, I devoted a few years with intensity to research in physics, concluding my doctoral thesis and publishing in this discipline. During that time, I experienced the rigorous research methodology of the natural and formal sciences, but also its limited scope to answer the deepest questions. The need to complement an intense research experience in science led me to attend simultaneously several doctoral seminars in philosophy. Then I lived three years in Rome, where I concentrated on research in epistemology to conclude my PhD in philosophy. I also took the opportunity to study various subjects for a degree in theology.

Upon my return to Argentina in 2007, I dedicated myself exclusively to the government of the Austral University for three years, as Vice President of Academic Affairs. Those years helped me not only to understand more deeply the existence of a variety of "academic tribes," but also to perceive the potential of a university project that contributes to collaborative research between experts from different disciplines. This insight gave rise to the Philosophy Institute, which I have directed since 2011.

I should mention that in the last 10 years, it was possible to develop interdisciplinary projects at the Institute of Philosophy, also thanks to the support of the John Templeton Foundation and Templeton World Charity Foundation, which financed several grants.

Finally, could you share a personal anecdote about yourself, what you are passionate about?

I find this question difficult to answer... because I am passionate about everything. I like to enjoy everything I do, whatever it is.