

INTERVIEW WITH JUAN F. FRANCK, PROFESSOR AT UNIVERSIDAD AUSTRAL



Interview conducted by Quentin Wodon

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EXCERPTS:

- “Our limited knowledge will never allow us to decide whether the universe behaves deterministically or not. And even if it did, determinism and indeterminism would still be philosophical theses, not scientific ones. My personal conclusion is that they appear as a threat to freedom only if one concedes that physics is the ultimate level of analysis of reality.”
- “The conviction that our life is more than just an episode in the long history of the universe and that man has a higher destiny, prompts you to the additional effort of seeking for signs and hints of that in nature and in our human experience, when that is possible.”

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

I work at two different universities, Universidad Austral and Universidad del Norte Santo Tomás de Aquino (UNSTA), with a part-time dedication to each of them. It is quite common in Argentina that university professors teach and work at several institutions, mostly in the private sector. At Austral I am a research fellow at the Philosophy Institute, where we have interdisciplinary research projects, connecting philosophy with the sciences. We also run a postgraduate interdisciplinary program (M.A. and Ph.D.). Austral is a small university 50km north from Buenos Aires city. It supports the teaching of philosophy and theology in all its degrees but does not have a philosophy school of its own. The Philosophy Institute promotes interdisciplinary research among Philosophy professors who want to engage with the sciences, mainly the natural and the cognitive sciences. Presently, I also serve as Head of UNSTA's Center of Studies of Philosophy and Theology in Buenos Aires. The job is also part-time because all classes are concentrated in the afternoon only. UNSTA belongs to the Dominican Order and has a strong background in Christian, specifically Thomistic philosophy and theology.

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, Juan F. Franck, a Professor at the Universidad Austral in Argentina, shares insights about the work that he received an Expanded Reason Award for (Determinism or Indeterminism? From the Sciences to Philosophy) and about life in academia, with a particular emphasis on

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It pays however great attention to modern and contemporary philosophy, offering a very interesting balance between traditional and modern insights. Most professors of philosophy at Austral come from either UNSTA or Catholic University of Argentina. The two positions I now hold are complementary in many senses, and what I do in each of them benefits in different ways from my work in the other.

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

I don't really have an exclusive focus on a particular field. However, I have always been concerned with an inaccurate reading of modern philosophy –from the 16th century on– among many Christian philosophers, who sometimes see modern thinking as an inevitable progress towards the denial of transcendence. They thus fail to recognize important seeds of truth which are sometimes also fruits of the encounter between faith and reason present in modernity. This reactionary attitude is now receding, but it has prevented a constructive engagement with modern culture for more than a century. I have therefore dedicated some attention to philosophers such as Vico and Rosmini, who are essentially modern and have renovated Christian philosophy without renouncing neither metaphysics nor the openness to the supernatural. With some nuances, even Descartes can be read that way. But lately I have been focusing on what one may call the intersection between the philosophy of the human person and the cognitive sciences. I find phenomenological thinking most appropriate as a methodological and conceptual framework in that dialogue, because its concentration on consciousness and its universal openness to experience provide a firm ground towards understanding the structure of human subjectivity. Far from opposing a more traditional approach, phenomenology strengthens and enlarges its reach, and probably also corrects it in some respects.

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

I was one of the two main responsible persons for a research project called “Determinism or Indeterminism? From the Sciences to Philosophy”, co-funded by Austral and the John Templeton Foundation. The project consisted in a broad discussion of how to understand the question of determinism in nature from a scientific, a philosophical and a theological perspective. We focused on physics, biology and the neurosciences, and assigned specific questions to pairs of scholars, one from the sciences and one from philosophy or theology. They had to engage with each other over a period of several months in order to prepare a joint presentation about that question at a workshop, and then co-author a chapter for a collective book. Apart from coordinating the pairs of scholars and working on one of those questions, we

sought that the book would reflect a unity of intent, even if the conclusions arrived at differed in some respects. The challenge was double. First, to bring scholars with a very different academic training to understand and value each other's contribution to the question; and second, to ensure that the co-authored piece reflected that interdisciplinary approach in a coherent way. It was in fact a permanent exercise of expanding our own reason and of aiding others to do so.

The main worry with determinism is that it makes freedom impossible or unthinkable. A totally deterministic universe would be one where every event, everything that happens in it, is already fixed. So, if we knew the state of the universe at one point in all its details and all the laws that govern it, we would be able to know every event in the future, and also in the past. If the opposite, namely indeterminism, were true, then there would be no way to predict certain events and they would just happen randomly, and probably also arbitrarily. Since we are part of that universe, the most logical reaction would be to think that in neither scenario there would be room for freedom. Whether our actions are determined by fixed laws or are the result of random events in nature, our actions would not be in our power.

Perhaps one of the main general conclusions from the project as a whole is that our limited knowledge will never allow us to decide whether the universe behaves deterministically or not. And even if it did, determinism and indeterminism would still be philosophical theses, not scientific ones, assuming that everything that exists must obey physical laws. My personal conclusion is that they appear as a threat to freedom only if one concedes that physics is the ultimate level of analysis of reality. In other words, if one takes the physical level, which is an abstraction among other possible ones, to define the whole of reality. It is one thing to say that physical laws cannot be broken –presumably like any other laws– and a different one to say that they dictate everything that takes place in the universe. The rules of chess tell you how to move the figures but cannot predict the game. It is neither science nor epistemology which are defining, but ontology.

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

I teach at two different levels and in two very different contexts. My undergraduate students pursue mostly a philosophy degree and come from a Catholic background. Many of them have a religious call too. It is inspiring to see how passionate they are about learning and studying. They make you see and touch your responsibility in their education. I therefore don't have any difficulty to share or discuss openly my values with them, but since I teach philosophy, which tries to reach the bottom of things and achieve the greatest clarity possible, part of my challenge

is to make them see that some of their philosophical convictions may not be based on sheer reasoning but may be rooted in their faith. There is nothing wrong with that, but it is a good thing to learn to distinguish the two kinds of light, so to speak, and recognize one's assumptions. Some of what they take for granted may not be shared by others, simply because it is not so self-evident as it looks to them. That is a very strong motivation to seek greater clarity in philosophy and it also makes it easier to understand somebody else's positions, uncertainties or doubts.

At Austral, where I teach a graduate course on the philosophy of the person and the cognitive sciences, the audience is very different and the question of values almost never explicitly comes to the forefront. There is however an interesting challenge, which is to confront both philosophers and scientists with the depth of the human person, and therefore with the need to cultivate a humble attitude in our pursuit of knowledge. And that may also count as sharing values.

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

They probably don't affect research itself, but they may sometimes be reflected in the choice of topics and issues. If you are driven by values, there is probably something bigger giving sense to what you are doing. In this case, there is possibly a double challenge. On the one hand, one must learn to respect the rationality proper to each particular subject of research. One cannot bypass epistemology, so to speak, and come to the question of values without a good rationale. In this sense, there is a temptation to introduce values 'unlawfully' into the discussion. If there is something bigger at stake, that has to emerge clearly as a logical conclusion, or result from a reasonable assumption. On the other hand, the conviction that our life is more than just an episode in the long history of the universe and that man has a higher destiny, prompts you to the additional effort of seeking for signs and hints of that in nature and in our human experience, when that is possible. To see that by yourself and to help others see the same, always respecting the rationality of the discussion, is certainly a big challenge. But of course, not all topics of research are connected with specific values.

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

I would encourage them in the pursuit of truth, because the purpose is to obtain a greater knowledge of reality. I would advise them to follow both their deepest interest, but also find out what they are good at.

Research requires developing the right habits, both intellectual and moral, and also a lot of dedication.

Besides, learning to communicate our findings is an art and it demands the proper skills. Clarity in writing, cogency in reasoning, charity in interpreting other opinions make up a big part of our *métier*. So, I would encourage them to see graduate studies as a very enriching and inspiring challenge for their lives as well.

Finally, it would be good not to forget that there is also a pragmatic dimension to academic work. If they choose it as a career for life, it is not unreasonable to think about the following steps also during this stage: applying for a position, post-doctoral research, teaching, etc. My opinion however is that they should avoid the obsession with short-term impact, quotations, rankings, etc., and bear in mind that the academy is first and foremost a form of service.

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

After studying Philosophy in Buenos Aires, I went to the International Academy of Philosophy in Liechtenstein, where I obtained a doctoral degree with a thesis on Antonio Rosmini's philosophy. Then I spent about three years in Fribourg (Switzerland) as a postdoctoral fellow, and after that I returned to Argentina. I taught there in different universities and also at the University of Montevideo, in Uruguay, with which I am still very closely connected. In 2012, I joined Universidad Austral's Philosophy Institute to participate in interdisciplinary research projects. That was probably an unexpected outcome of a research stay at the University of Navarre (Spain), hosted by the Mind-Brain Group, where I became aware of the importance of interdisciplinarity. Parallel to that I continued teaching Early Modern Philosophy with the Dominicans and also became more and more involved in the Philosophy Department. As I said before, UNSTA's Faculty is quite varied and there is room for different philosophical schools and methods. That fits my somewhat eclectic mindset very well.

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

What I am probably most passionate about is seeing students learn and grow intellectually. I like to see them think by themselves instead of repeating ready-made answers, even if they agree with some of those answers, totally or partially. I also like to see them develop academic skills and become independent in their thinking and in their academic work. Each person is entitled to their own path in the pursuit of truth, and it is a critical task of those who teach to help students in that path. It is a great joy when students you have mentored along their studies and helped with their research, stand on their own feet. In the process one learns a lot, and also corrects and enlarges one's own views.