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Further Thoughts on James V. Schall, S.J.

Marc D. Guerra

James V. Schall is well known for being a learned theorist (and an equally learned practitioner) of so-called Christian Aristotelianism. That Schall affirms the basic compatibility of Christian faith and human reason, then, is not surprising. But the particular way that he affirms this is surprising. Schall regularly speaks of the relation of Christian faith and human reason in terms of the qualified incompleteness of both political philosophy and Christian revelation. The mutual incompleteness of political philosophy and Christian revelation indirectly sheds light on the characteristic error made by contemporary hyper-rationalists, whether they are overt modern rationalists or covert religious rationalists.

Taking the full measure of James V. Schall's thought is a herculean task—and not simply because most of us, like myself, lack both the capacity and learning to do so. It is daunting in its own right. For Schall seems to be able to write about nearly anything and everything—from the great to the small—with insight, clarity, and wisdom. And he has been able to do so for some time. In 1968, he wrote a book, *Redeeming the Time*, about the misguided and dangerous attempt to make the Catholic Church fully at home in this world. Since then, he has written books on human dignity, leisure, play, population control, worship, Christianity, politics, Christianity and politics, Pope John Paul II, liberation theology, heaven and hell, the foundations of political philosophy, education, economics, Jacques Maritain, Roman Catholic political philosophy, Chesterton, Reason, Revelation, radical Islam, the Catholic university, natural law and natural rights, war, technology, Belloc, and even, when the occasion required it, a sober article on Pope Francis. In other words, for fifty years James V. Schall has thought and written about things, or should I say “the things that are,” like one who knows.

Being a great admirer of prudence, it is tempting to end my remarks here. For unlike Chesterton, I do think that some things worth doing are not worth doing badly. But in this case following that principle would be both unmanly and uncharitable. My admittedly sketchy remarks simply draw attention to three fundamental, interconnected themes in Schall's writings that are, in my view, crucial for understanding his thought as a whole.

Schall is well known for being a learned theorist (and an equally learned practitioner) of so-called Christian Aristotelianism. More specifically, he is well known for being a Thomist who practices a form of Thomism that has blood in it. One of the hallmarks of St. Thomas's thought, of course, is its argument about the basic compatibility of Christian faith and human reason. That Schall affirms the same thing, then, is not surprising. But the particular way that he affirms this is surprising. Whereas Etienne Gilson provocatively spoke of a Christian philosophy that had a distinctively Christian flavor and content, and Charles De Koninck frequently spoke as if there was very little daylight between Aristotle's and St. Thomas's thought, Schall regularly speaks of the relation of Christian faith and human reason in terms of the qualified incompleteness of both political philosophy and Christian revelation.

According to Schall, political philosophy, at its best, attempts to arrive at "the higher understanding of political things insofar as these things account for what pertains to and rises out of political living . . . [and] are included in the explanation of . . . what [man] is."¹ Political philosophy is concerned with political affairs primarily, though not exclusively, because they help reveal the true nature of man and human excellence. But the account it can give is necessarily deficient, since it depends on philosophy's prior ability to articulate a comprehensive account of the whole of which political life forms a part. But as Schall routinely notes, philosophy cannot give such a comprehensive account; philosophers, especially modern philosophers like Spinoza and Hegel, may claim that they can do this, but they cannot. Recognition of this inability brings with it the recognition that political philosophy represents one of the fundamental paths that human reason can take to gain knowledge of "what is."

Christian revelation's incompleteness, as Schall sees it, has to do with the New Testament's conspicuous silence on the nature and concrete operations of political life. For the Christ of the Gospel makes abundantly clear that His Kingdom is not of this world. The undeniable effect of the Gospel is to focus a Christian's gaze on a non-temporal and non-political kingdom, to palpably remind the followers of Christ that they are wayfarers and sojourners in the earthly city.

Schall's position thus differs in kind from muddleheaded views that insist on seeing Plato's *Republic* or Aristotle's *Politics* as obvious proto-Christian tracts. He regularly notes that political philosophy does not necessarily lead to Christian revelation and he does not think that Christian revelation must make its relationship to human reason so clear that no one could ever doubt or dispute it. At the same time, he gives us an intelligible argument as to why the human mind can see that some relationship between Christian revelation and reason is plausible.

Unlike a number of teenage Thomists today (or a growing number of not-quite-teenage Suarezians, for that matter), Schall does not view faith and reason as forming two perfectly formed layers of a two layer cake. Each exhibits its own distinctive form of incompleteness that, when viewed in tandem, points to the need of another kind of account of things that is complete, according to Schall. The mutual incompleteness of political philosophy and Christian revelation indirectly sheds light on the characteristic error made by contemporary hyper-rationalists, whether they are overt modern rationalists or covert religious rationalists. By dogmatically exaggerating our real, but limited, powers of reason, both the man who thinks he can explain everything in the universe without leaving any room for God and the man who believes that Christian faith can demonstratively explain everything in the universe including itself ironically end up deforming human reason.

This brings me to my second point. For all the attention that Schall's Thomism regularly and rightly receives, Augustine plays a crucial, and in some sense central, role in his thought. Schall's Augustinianism is most visible in his repeated emphasis on the intractable limits of political life. *The City of God* outlines, in at times crushing detail, the political order's ever-present temptation to make itself the sole arbitrator of defining the nature and scope of human life. Prone to viewing men as political citizens, it is inclined to view human beings solely as citizens. Augustine's great accomplishment was to show how false and how dehumanizing this view ultimately is. The all-too-human desires and pathologies that frequently get played out in social and political life can never be satisfied—no matter how much more politicized or how much more pathological they get. Further still, the just and noble ends to which political life rightly aspires, as Augustine loved to remind the philosophers, cannot be fully secured or perfectly actualized by men in political life. Augustine appreciated that political life is, in fact, a legitimate good; he recognized that participation in political life can modestly contribute to the betterment of the human being. But he masterfully used Christian revelation to show how the transpolitical nature of the city of God allows politics to free itself from the desire to claim that it—and it alone—can offer man wholeness and completion.

In Schall's view, Augustine set out to "Christianize the whole theoretical order as that order had been conceived in Greek philosophy."²² Freeing politics to be politics, he articulated how the grace that Christ offers men in His Passion and Resurrection allows them to live a life of moral virtue, and how each man, not just the rare and lucky philosopher, is called to a life of transcendent perfection. (I note in passing that this is the overarching theme of Schall's 1996 book *At the Limits of Political Philosophy*:

From “*Brilliant Errors*” to *Things of Uncommon Importance*, and that this is the point Schall brings to bear in his own reflections on philosophic modernity’s attempt to immanentize the eschaton). In short, Schall leans on Augustine because “Augustine stands for the completion and coherence of political philosophy, not by itself, but through itself, through its own questions honestly posed and open to answers strikingly related to its own inadequacies, to the ‘restless hearts’ that Augustine knew.”³

And here we arrive at the last Schallian theme I want to mention: his defense of the importance of the person. That God is personal is a point Schall comes back to again and again. He also repeatedly reminds us that human beings, most fundamentally, are persons created, redeemed, and sanctified by God. Schall’s account of the human person differs from those accounts that have their roots in John Paul II’s hybridized phenomenological personalism. It also differs from the sometimes fuzzy, nuptial personalism favored by many theologians associated with the *Communio* crowd. Schall’s reflections on the human person are characteristically particularized and concrete. For example, he does not tend to speak about “the person and virtue” or “the person and human excellence” in broad and sweeping terms. He is more apt to speak about the particular courage of a particularly courageous person or the particular wisdom of a particularly wise person or the particular charity of a particularly charitable person. Schall’s emphasis is on the perfection of the real human person, not a philosophically or phenomenologically formulated description of some general human type or an abstractly conceived, nameless, faceless, and placeless modern individual. Schall’s understanding of the nature of the human person informs his insightful discussions of contemplation and love, and it also informs his deadly serious reflections on the unseriousness of human affairs and the importance of song, dance, and play in a fully human life.

Schall’s appreciation of the human person often leads him to point out just how sterile a virtue justice is—even as he powerfully defends its indispensable place in human affairs: “A thoroughly just world is a world of cold impersonality. The great things of life—honor, sacrifice, love, praise—are beyond justice.”⁴ It also helps explain the prominent role that friendship plays in many of his writings. For friendship, Schall reminds us, exists among and between persons. To be a friend is to be a particular person who is related to another particular person in a particular way. This relation, Christianity tell us, can even exist between human and divine persons. Moving beyond the impasse that Aristotle arrived at, Christianity’s teaching on the Incarnation offers an explanation as to how God and man, despite being two distinctly different kinds of persons, can be friends. It is not accidental, then, that when Schall discusses the Last Supper, Schall

tends to cite the account given in John's Gospel, that is, the account where Christ establishes the Eucharist and calls the disciples not simply His disciples, but His friends.

Let me conclude by raising a question about James V. Schall's thought: If Leo Strauss (who, along with Eric Voegelin is one of Schall's frequent intellectual interlocutors), is right, then the so-called Ancient/Modern distinction is *the* crucial distinction in the history of Western thought. But Schall's thought, strictly speaking, is neither ancient nor modern—at least as Strauss defines these terms.

Perhaps we can say that Schall's thought is medieval—in the good sense, not the Hollywood sense, of that term. Still, that classification does not seem quite right. For while Schall's thought draws on both classical philosophy and Christian faith, politics and political philosophy loom noticeably larger in his thought than they did in the thought of the medieval Scholastics. Here, I am reminded of Gilson's amusing, but revealing, quip that Thomas Aquinas writes as if the emperor Frederick does not exist. You cannot imagine someone saying the equivalent thing about Schall.

What, then, do we make of Schall? How would, or how should, we categorize his thought? I will close with a suggestion, which I am sure some will see as a dodge. I think it would behoove us to go back and carefully puzzle over the place (and the possible meanings) of Rome in Schall's notion of Roman Catholic Political Philosophy. I think that such reflection would not only help us understand Schall's thought better, but also help us better understand the Christian West and ourselves as persons.

Notes

1. James V. Schall, *Roman Catholic Political Philosophy* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2004), 178.
2. James V. Schall, *Reason, Revelation, and the Foundations of Political Philosophy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press), 82.
3. *Ibid.*, 91–92.
4. James V. Schall, "Political Philosophy Needs Revelation: A Conversation with James V. Schall," <http://www.claremont.org/basicPageArticles/political-philosophy-needs-revelation-a-conversation-with-james-v-schall/>.