



Assumption
University

Digital Commons @ Assumption University

Theology Department Faculty Works

Theology Department

2004

Profiles in American Thomism

Marc D. Guerra

Assumption College, mguerra@assumption.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.assumption.edu/theology-faculty>



Part of the [Political Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Guerra, Marc D. "Profiles in American Thomism." *Democracy and Its Friendly Critics: Tocqueville and Political Life Today*. Edited by Peter Augustine Lawler. Lexington Books, 2004. Pages 125-136.

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the Theology Department at Digital Commons @ Assumption University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theology Department Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Assumption University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@assumption.edu.

Chapter 10

Profiles in American Thomism

Marc Guerra

John Courtney Murray observed that one of the enduring political tasks of American Thomism is to defend the kind of “realist epistemology” that grounds liberal democratic thought.¹ As an American and as a Catholic, Murray had a healthy appreciation of the “political goods” articulated by what he called the “American proposition.”² Murray praised American democracy for upholding such goods as the basic equality of human beings, the defense of religious freedom, the belief that legitimate government must respect the consent of the governed, and the belief that human beings are endowed by the Creator with rights that limit the exercise of popular sovereignty. The American proposition was, then, worth defending precisely because it gave powerful political expression to the moral and spiritual truth about human beings. But Murray also believed that there was something potentially self-destructive about the way in which the notions of freedom and truth could be understood in America. Murray saw in the more rationalistic formulations of the writings of the American founding a tendency to “obscure” human freedom’s constitutive relation to transcendent moral truth. This is why, Murray believed, Thomism would have to be able to defend a realist epistemology, since only a realist epistemology could explain the grounds of the genuine human goods upheld by the American proposition.

Murray then did not view the temptation to divorce human freedom from the notion of truth as a recent innovation in American moral and political thought. Rather than simply seeing this temptation as an outgrowth of the radical liberationist ideologies of the 1960s, he saw it as “a possibility . . . inherent from [America’s] beginning.”³ Murray identified a tension in the political science of the American Founding between “a voluntarist idea of law as will” and “a tradition of natural law as inheritance [as an] intellectualist idea.”⁴ In Murray’s reading, the political thought of the American Founding thus stood in constant need of internal moderation. It continually needed to be reminded of the fact that the truths

contained in the American proposition were ultimately grounded in a "realist" anthropology and natural law. By broadening and deepening what was true about the American proposition, in other words, Thomistic realism could show that the Founders, to use Murray's famous phrase, "built better than they knew."⁵

Murray developed this argument along two lines. On the one hand, he turned to those supports that could be found for democratic government in the works of St. Thomas. To this end, Murray drew upon St. Thomas' teachings on the social and political nature of man, the importance and integrity of the common good, and the role that virtue and morality play in political life. But Murray realized that the soundness of these teachings finally depended upon the persuasiveness of more "metaphysical" and "theological" arguments about the nature and dignity of human beings. Along these lines, he set out to recover the kind of robust philosophical anthropology that informed St. Thomas' thought. Over and against the dehumanizing anthropology of early modern political philosophy, Thomism did not require "a basic betrayal of the existential structure of reality itself."⁶ Consequently, it could affirm the rational, spiritual, and social nature of human beings and draw attention to the range of social, political, and spiritual goods that add to the true dignity of human life. By taking seriously what we reasonably can know about human beings, Murray argued, Thomism simultaneously was able to affirm both the naturalness of social and political life and what is ultimately transcendent about human life.

Perhaps no contemporary thinkers take the political challenge of American Thomism more seriously than Robert P. George and Peter Augustine Lawler. George and Lawler both identify themselves as American Thomists, albeit Thomists of differing and rather idiosyncratic types. Each shares an appreciation of the goodness of the American regime and of the account of human beings given by Christian revelation. Moreover, in recent years, both have published books, George's *The Clash of Orthodoxies* and Lawler's *Aliens in America*, that argue that Thomism finally gives the fullest account of the moral, political, and spiritual aspirations inherent in the American proposition.⁷

But despite these similarities, George and Lawler occupy two distinct positions within Thomistic political thought. While George and Lawler both argue that Thomism can help sustain democratic thought, they disagree about Christianity's fundamental relation to liberal democracy. Moving well beyond the boundaries of Murray's argument, George argues that the liberalism of the American Founding is for the most part "fully in line" with the "old-fashioned Liberalism" championed by "John Paul II and the contemporary Catholic Church."⁸ Lawler, on the other hand, remains more skeptical about the "full" compatibility of Christianity and liberal democracy, seeing their reconciliation as being more prudential and theoretical.

The disagreement between George and Lawler on this point draws attention to an internal tension in contemporary Thomistic political thought. For in its more thoughtful presentations, American Thomism is split over the fundamental relation of Christianity to liberal democracy. George and Lawler's works offer particularly illuminating examples of this split. As we shall see, their arguments on this matter

reveal as much about their understandings of Thomism as they do about their seriousness as political thinkers.

Robert George's Old-Fashioned Catholic Liberalism

Robert George is arguably America's most prominent natural law theorist. Professor of Jurisprudence and director of the James Madison Program in American Ideals and Institutions at Princeton University, George's thought is marked by an uncompromising and at times maddening desire for moral and theoretical clarity. Contrary to the obfuscating tendencies of so much of present-day ethical and legal theory, George's writings display both the logical rigor of analytical philosophy and the moral seriousness of natural law theory. The arguments George presents in *The Clash of Orthodoxies* about the relation of Christianity to liberal democracy are no exception to this rule.

George sets his discussion of Christianity's relation to liberal democracy in a series of reflections on the often "clashing" moral orthodoxies at the heart of today's "culture wars." George views the contemporary culture wars not simply as a debate between two different moral codes but rather as a fight over the very nature of morality itself. It is a war, in George's view, between those who adhere to traditional biblical teachings on morality and those secular "liberationists" who deny the validity of any and all moral codes.

Today's moral liberationists, as George shows, believe that human beings are fundamentally autonomous moral agents. Consequently, they see human beings as essentially free from all but the most minimal moral and political restraints. George traces the intellectual origins of this radically libertarian view of human freedom back to the powerful doctrines of moral relativism that came to animate the thought of mainstream social science in the 1960s. Such thought claimed to have scientifically "discovered" that moral codes were ultimately the product of a series of historical and cultural prejudices and that all moral teachings were in truth arbitrary and conventional. Having severed any principled connection between human freedom and transcendent moral truth, it championed a view of human beings as radically autonomous moral agents whose personal dignity required nothing less than the full exercise of human freedom. George sees this ideology as lying behind what have now come to be viewed as such mainstream social and moral orthodoxies as "feminism, multiculturalism, gay liberationism, [and] lifestyle liberalism."⁹

But as George argues, the secularist moral orthodoxy is in the end built on a series of questionable dogmatic assertions. Chief among these is its denial of any transcendent moral order. For the argument it advanced is only defensible if one accepts the radical claim that reason is in fact incapable of knowing any moral truth, that human beings really know nothing about the basic structure of the moral universe. Conflating the claim to moral truth with the claim to complete or perfect moral knowledge, it transforms moral truth from something that reason "discovers"

by reflecting on the moral contents of human life into something that the human will "creates or expresses." As a result, it inevitably reduces all moral questions simply to matters of personal or volitional consent. And yet, by so doing, this radical view of human liberty, George demonstrates, renders itself theoretically indefensible. For by allegedly liberating human beings from all types of moral claims, it makes it impossible to explain the legitimacy of any of the various things the human will desires. The claim to radical moral autonomy, in other words, is thus theoretically incapable of explaining why human goods are desirable. Indeed, within its framework, the very idea of any human good, let alone those political goods secured by liberal democracy, necessarily becomes unintelligible.

Over and against secular orthodoxy's perverted view of human liberty, George champions the notion of "ordered liberty" present in the thought of the American Founders and currently defended by the Catholic Church. This view of human liberty, George argues, is capable of affirming the genuine human goods upheld by liberal democracy precisely because it realizes that authentic human freedom is finally grounded in a transcendent moral order. It is therefore a mistake to see George's powerful critique of the libertarian excesses of today's reigning secular orthodoxy as being rooted in a politically conservative hostility toward liberal democracy. On the contrary, George is an articulate and staunch defender of the goodness and desirability of liberal democracy. He praises liberal democracy for its ability to secure such things as the rule of law, the political participation of free individuals, and the promotion of human rights. Moreover, siding with the thought of Pope John Paul II, George ultimately believes that liberal democracy is "the system of government most in keeping with the fundamental Christian belief in the equality in human rights and dignity of every human being."¹⁰

George recognizes that the Roman Catholic Church historically has not always embraced liberal democracy. Indeed, much of the Catholic Church's moral and political thought in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was characterized by its religious critique of liberalism. George is also aware that even "today, certain Catholic conservatives—the sort of conservatives who are decidedly not what I am calling old-fashioned liberal—remain suspicious . . . as to whether democratic political principles are compatible with Catholic faith."¹¹ The so-called Catholic conservatives George here speaks about are in truth both a theologically and politically diverse group. In America, for instance, this group would include current Catholic thinkers that are as intellectually diverse as the theologian David Schindler and the political scientist Robert Kraynak. What such Catholic conservatives have in common, however, is the belief that on the level of principle there are important differences between liberal democracy's and Christianity's teachings about human beings and human liberty.

In George's view, such conservative Catholics, however, typically make the mistake of basing their understanding of liberalism exclusively on the kind of anti-Christian and anticlassical thought that animated the actions of the French revolutionaries. This strand of liberalism clearly advocated the kind of "moral and religious subjectivism, relativism, and indiffertism" that George sees as being

inimical to the tenets of the Catholic faith.¹² But this is not the only current in modern liberalism as George points out. What conservative critics of liberalism too often fail to see, George argues, is that there are other, healthier strands of liberalism "developed largely by British and American thinkers and manifested in the words and deeds of the American Founders" that do not pose the same type of fundamental objections to Christian faith.¹³

While George does not here explicitly address the teachings of early modern political philosophy that ground this other "healthier form" of liberalism, he briefly touches upon them in his discussion of the central political role that individual rights play within liberal democracy. Such rights, he observes, are in fact "central to" this tradition of liberal democracy. But what separates the Anglo-American view of rights from its French counterpart is that it integrates the idea of individual human rights into a broader understanding of human beings as participants in a created order that itself reveals the moral structure of the universe. Far from viewing human beings as radically autonomous moral beings, this conception of "ordered liberty" tethers human liberty to transcendent moral truth. By so doing, it then severely limits radical libertarianism's efforts to view human beings as "atomistic" individuals that possess a "right" to moral subjectivism.¹⁴ The conception of rights that is then operative in the kind of Catholic liberalism that George advocates and claims is fully in line with the liberalism of the American Founding is thus one that grows out of an earlier tradition of natural law. Indeed, as George repeatedly asserts, within this type of liberal order human beings possess duties proscribed to them by the natural law in addition to the rights that flow from these prior duties.¹⁵

The fundamental question that George's account raises, however, but finally does not adequately address, is whether this alternative, healthier form of liberalism really has no principled connection to the other form of liberalism that George himself admits is incompatible with the moral and spiritual demands of Christian faith. Put differently, George's reflection does not finally address the question of whether or not the philosophy of liberalism, even in its Anglo-American presentation, does not necessarily require viewing human beings as being in some important respect free from all natural and divine restraints. Truth be told, George indirectly recognizes this problem. He notes, for example, that "reasonable people" can, and in fact do, question whether modernity's very idea of individual rights does not ultimately contain the theoretical seed of libertarianism's radical view of human freedom. Along similar lines, he notes that when used properly, that is carefully, the "language of rights" is "of great value in articulating the requirements of social justice" in liberal democratic regimes.¹⁶ But such acknowledgments of the important need to qualify liberal thought in the end only begs the question further: Are the two kinds of liberalism George describes truly unrelated? Is the philosophic liberalism of the American Founders entirely different from the liberalism of the French revolutionaries? And if it is not, what then does this say about how Thomistic political thought should address the question of the theoretical relation of Christianity and liberal democracy? These are in the final analysis philosophical

questions that George's political reflection on the old-fashioned liberalism of the Catholic Church is incapable of answering.

Peter Lawler's Decision for Natural Law

Peter Lawler is one of the most thoughtful and for that reason original Christian political thinkers writing today. A prolific writer, Lawler has written on subjects as seemingly diverse as the threat biotechnology poses to human dignity to the Christian undertones of the film *The Last Days of Disco*. Yet almost all of Lawler's writings are born out of a common intellectual concern: the need for modern human beings to come to terms with what Pascal called the "greatness and misery of man." Lawler's *The Restless Mind* (1993), for example, examined how Tocqueville's defense of liberalism was in part motivated by his admiration of the "greatness and misery of the self-conscious mortal being." Similarly, his *Postmodernism Rightly Understood* (1999) argued that contemporary skepticism about, and dissatisfaction with, modernity ironically paved the way for a much-needed return to the kind of Thomistic-Pascalian realism practiced by thinkers like the Southern Catholic-novelist-psychiatrist-philosopher Walker Percy.

Lawler's *Aliens in America* takes advantage of the opening that postmodern thought gives to a return to Thomistic realism. At the heart of this book lies a deep reflection on both what it means to be a human being and what modern liberalism, particularly in its American presentation, says human beings are. And yet it is precisely because Lawler engages in this serious philosophical reflection on the nature of modern liberalism that he is able to show why natural law thinking finally offers the best available account of the nature of human freedom and of our natural and ineradicable longings for the eternal. Simply put, this serious work of Thomistic political reflection offers a substantive and compelling account of what such a return to "Thomistic realism" actually has to offer American political thought today.

As Lawler shows, the American Founding was in some sense a philosophic act, or at least an act performed by the philosophically informed. And the central philosophic player in the act was Thomas Jefferson. While clearly indebted to Locke's political and philosophical teachings, Lawler's Jefferson is not simply a dyed-in-the-wool Lockean. Rather, Lawler brings to light the fact that Jefferson was a rather eclectic and original thinker who combined Lockean, Epicurean, and Christian elements in his thought. Like Locke, Jefferson also understood the modern liberal regime as being founded on a great philosophic abstraction: the rights-bearing individual. For Jefferson's political liberalism, like Locke's, also, sought to secure for human beings living in civil society the full realm of freedom they supposedly possessed in "the state of nature." Appealing to man's original freedom from all natural and divine restraints, he developed a notion of rights that saw man's freedom as more fundamental to his being than any artificial social, political, or religious association.

This appeal to the "primordial" freedom man enjoyed in the state of nature, Lawler notes, had the effect of changing the very way that human beings tended to view themselves and the world. For inasmuch as they understood themselves most fully as individuals, human beings would henceforth be inclined to see the security of rights, which did not come from "God or nature but by human beings themselves when they institute government," as being "the really valuable thing."¹⁷ They would thus tend to view all human actions and ties as "matters of consent" and all forms of "government as . . . human constructs" designed to satisfy man's all-encompassing "desire for safety."¹⁸ As Lawler points out, to the extent that it was truly effective, Jefferson's notion of rights perpetuated Locke's view of human life as "a tale of self-liberation in the absence of a living, and giving God" and a quest to secure the security and comfort that made human life worth living.¹⁹ Unlike George, in other words, Lawler does see in Jefferson's philosophical teaching on individual rights some of the theoretical seeds for today's libertarianism. For at the theoretical core of Jefferson's idea of individual rights, lies the image of human beings who are naturally free to construct the moral and political universe.

But as Lawler shows, Jefferson also understood that there was something both politically deficient and existentially untenable about this teaching. Jefferson recognized that left on its own, the doctrine of the rights-bearing individual was theoretically incapable of explaining why such radically free individuals would understand themselves as having any social and political obligation to others. The realization of this fact, in Lawler's view, is what prompted Jefferson to turn to Christianity's moral teaching about human beings' social obligations to others. Yet Lawler does not believe that this turn was simply rhetorical or that it was purely motivated by political utility. Drawing on Jefferson's correspondence with Benjamin Rush, Lawler sheds light on the sincerity of Jefferson's belief that human beings really do have moral and social obligations to other human beings. Jefferson thus turned to a despiritualized version of Christianity's moral teaching, in other words, because he realized that there was something lacking in philosophic liberalism's account of the lived experience of human life.

Lawler interestingly traces the roots of this tension in Jefferson's thought back to his attraction to the teachings of the ancient Epicurean philosophers. In so doing, Lawler draws attention to the Epicurean resonances that lie at the heart of modern liberalism's account of human beings. Like Epicureanism, philosophic liberalism also claims that human beings are most naturally asocial beings and that moral and political life is at bottom unnatural. What is more, both see the enjoyment of human happiness as being most properly a private affair, a form of tranquility that comes from a type of "happiness" that man constructs and enjoys by himself. Yet the two ultimately differ over whether or not this happiness is truly obtainable for human beings. The classical Epicureans clearly believed that it could. Their modern counterparts like Jefferson, Lawler suggests, are far less certain of this fact. Having been touched by modernity's claim of human beings' relative isolation in the world, they felt the "uneasiness" that comes from this sensation more deeply than the ancient Epicureans. As Lawler puts it, "the real human experience at the end of the

destructiveness of the modern era is a spiritual vacuum at the heart of human existence."²⁰ Taken seriously, the creative but false anthropology championed by philosophic liberalism makes it "impossible for human beings to experience themselves as reasonable, happy, or secure."

In Lawler's view, "the best" and "most reasonable" alternative to philosophic liberalism's reductionist account of human beings and political life can be found in the robust kind of natural law reinterpretation of the American Founding given by the Catholic theologian John Courtney Murray. Lawler's reasons for advocating such a return are twofold: (1) modern human beings need a theoretically coherent way of responding to today's increasingly "destructive mixture of libertarianism and technology" and (2) "most human beings can live well, even better, in light of the truth about themselves." Lawler, like Murray, recognizes that the philosophical anthropologies that liberal democracies such as America rely upon ultimately do not articulate a single, coherent account of human beings and human life. Rather, they typically employ what Walker Percy called a "mishmash" anthropology, a politically useful, but theoretically incoherent, account of human beings that combines incompatible rationalistic and theological elements. The virtue of this mishmash anthropology, as Lawler subtly shows, however is that its theoretical incoherence provides a "prudential" opening for the "reductionist" elements of philosophic liberalism to be broadened and deepened by natural law thinking.

Following Murray, Lawler also offers a reinterpretation of the Founding along natural law lines. For Lawler, the reductionist elements present in the writings of the Founding are then best understood not as wholesale rejections but rather as truncated modifications of America's Christian natural law inheritance. Lawler consequently views the moral and theoretical reductionism that characterizes some of the Founders' thought as the result of a self-imposed philosophical narrowness that was adopted for the sake of political expediency. By placing such elements within the framework of natural law, it is possible to see how they help explain the moral and political grounds for democratic self-rule as well as human beings' natural moral and social desires to "know and love other human beings and God."

Lawler therefore sees the primary crisis that confronts liberal democracies such as America as being theoretical in nature. Indeed, as his subtle analysis of Jefferson's thought points out, what liberal democracy lacks but needs most is an account of human beings and the world that can actually make sense of the genuine moral and spiritual goods that it politically secures. Natural law thinking provides just such an account. By acknowledging a moral order that is finally not of man's making and "the sovereignty of God over nations as well as individuals," natural law is capable of giving political life its "fundamental human meaning."²¹ Viewed in this context, the turn to natural law that Lawler advocates is really seen to be part of a broader return to a distinctively Christian tradition that the architects of modern liberalism may have misunderstood and distorted, but ultimately helped perpetuate.

However, for Lawler the return to natural law thinking ultimately requires a prior, "metaphysical decision" for natural law. That is, the return to natural law cannot simply take the form of a more or less willful assertion of a preference for a

politically useful conception of a fixed moral order. In sharp contrast to other contemporary Thomists like Germain Grisez and John Finnis who advocate a turn to a largely metaphysically neutral natural law, Lawler defends the decision for natural law because natural law articulates what we know to be metaphysically true about human beings. The "foundation of the natural law tradition" thus rests on human beings' natural and moral "apprehension that human freedom is limited [and ordered] by God's sovereignty."²²

Lawler's metaphysical decision for natural law is then finally not a willful existentialist decision for order over moral chaos. On the contrary, it is most deeply a decision that the human goods and moral order articulated by the natural most reasonably corresponds to what we actually know about human beings and the universe in which they live. Lawler, like Murray, thus "decides" in favor of natural law because it corresponds to the truths about human beings and human life that are disclosed through a realist epistemology. For what natural law in fact points to is that human beings are ultimately and in some mysterious way moral, political, social, and spiritual beings. They are beings that take part in the genuine goods of the human world but at the same time beings that long for something eternal that transcends this world. Or as Lawler puts it, what the realism of natural law truthfully reveals is that human beings are "the beast with the angel inside" and as such they can never be more than "ambiguously at home in this world." And for this reason, Lawler maintains, the metaphysical decision for natural law "deserves to prevail over rival doctrines on empirical grounds alone."²³

In advocating a return to natural law thinking, Lawler thus goes a long way to developing precisely the kind of rich philosophical anthropology that Pope John Paul II argues is lacking in contemporary thought. Pope John Paul concludes his powerful defense of the dignity of human reason and the interdependence of faith and reason in his encyclical *Fides et Ratio* by noting that what modern liberal moral and political thought most noticeably lacks is "a philosophical anthropology and a metaphysics of the good."²⁴ Having slowly lost an appreciation of the variegated goods of human life that this kind of anthropology and metaphysic is capable of articulating, liberal moral and political thought characteristically takes refuge in an "ethic" that is finally either "subjectivist" or "utilitarian."²⁵ Natural law thinkers such as Lawler, however, clearly do not follow this well-beaten path. Indeed, to the extent that they approach such "ethical" questions from within the theoretical context of natural law, their moral and political reflections on specific questions are able to shed a light on what is truly good and desirable about human life.

Lawler's natural law approach is especially adept at drawing attention to the reductionist and finally dehumanizing view of human beings that animates so much of today's discussion, on both the right and the left, about the problem of biotechnology. Lawler is clearly no Luddite. He is too thoughtful and too much a partisan of human physical and psychic well-being to be numbered among those critics who characteristically oppose every and all biotechnological advancement. At the same time, he realizes that biotechnology's increased ability to biologically alter our minds and human nature poses a real, fundamental threat to our dignity as

human beings. Lawler thus sees the burgeoning biotech revolution as something of a mixed blessing. He soberly looks forward to "the good" that new biotechnologies will undoubtedly do by allowing many of us to live longer and healthier lives. Yet, with equal sobriety, he also worries that some of the emerging biotechnologies in neuroscience and psychopharmacology will alter the very way that we perceive and experience human life.

The kind of natural law approach that Lawler takes to questions of biotechnology is then acutely aware of the all-too-human costs we could impose on ourselves through our use of biotechnologies. It weighs the human worth of specific biotechnological advancements not in terms of the "rights" of human self-ownership or the degree to which they contribute to a "culture of death," but rather whether they contribute to what C. S. Lewis aptly called "the abolition of man."²⁶ Recognizing that human beings are more than mere bodily beings, natural law thinking is capable of explaining why the belief that physical health is *the* greatest good inevitably runs the risk of sacrificing the moral and spiritual goods that make our lives both distinctively human and genuinely worth living.²⁷ Simply put, for natural law thinkers like Lawler, the real danger that an unfettered acceptance and use of biotechnology poses is that it makes all-too-real the possibility for us to intentionally and perversely choose to flatten our souls by "surrendering" the genuine good of "human self-consciousness" to the supposedly unqualified benefits of physical and psychic "comfort."²⁸

Natural law thinkers like Lawler, in other words, understand that to do justice to what is really morally and politically good for human beings it is necessary to appreciate, if even only imperfectly, the variety of legitimate but competing goods that all contribute to the true dignity of human life. The curious thing about human self-consciousness, as C. S. Lewis pointed out, is that it requires us to acknowledge "the law which is peculiar to [our] nature, the law [we do] not share with animals or vegetables or inorganic things, . . . the one [we] can disobey if [we] chose."²⁹ And as Lewis also noted, this acknowledgment initially should give us "cause to be uneasy." For it requires us to come to terms with the initially uncomfortable truth that there is only "one case" in the visible universe where this "dismay[ing]" fact applies, "our own case."³⁰

Philosophical natural law thinkers like Lawler therefore remind modern human beings of an important, if increasingly untimely, truth. Employing a "realist epistemology," they resist the modern temptation, indulged in today by thinkers like Francis Fukuyama and other proponents of a morally serious sociobiology, to fully integrate human beings into the goods of the biological world. For they recognize that ultimately human beings naturally desire a good that transcends the finitude of the biological world and therefore that we can only ever be, as Lawler puts it, "ambiguously at home" in the world. Their thought thus seeks to humanize and transcend the realm of mere human biology by incorporating it into the spiritual realm of reason—to view the various goods of human life in light of the high and not the low. That it is necessary to give this kind of account of the ultimate goods

sought in human life, as natural law thinkers like Lawler remind us, is in fact the "strange truth about our souls."

Conclusion

To different degrees, the Thomistic political reflections of George and Lawler both draw attention to the problem that American democracy currently has with maintaining the kind of ordered liberty it needs for its health and survival. This problem is not new. For more than forty years, political thinkers increasingly have spoken about this "crisis" in liberal democracy. And yet as Lawler shows, this problem cannot, in the final analysis, simply be reduced to an epiphenomenon of the liberationist doctrines of the 1960s. Rather, it is a problem that plagues and will continue to plague liberal democracy because it feeds off of the very idea of human life and of human freedom that philosophic liberalism so powerfully articulates and defends.

How, then, we may ask, should Thomistic political science respond to this political and philosophical challenge? I would suggest that the only way that Thomism can really address this problem is by articulating the kind of realist anthropology and epistemology that Lawler advocates and by defending an account of the moral and spiritual goods of humanity that is rooted in natural law thinking. By providing a perspective that ultimately transcends the political and anthropological limits of philosophical liberalism, Thomistic political thought is capable both of praising the virtues of liberal democracy and moderating its, at times, dehumanizing excesses. But this is only possible as long as Thomistic political thought is willing to think seriously and philosophically about the basic relation of liberal democracy and Christianity. Only then is Thomism capable of showing why genuine human liberty must be ordered liberty. Only then is Thomism capable of showing that human beings are much more than the asocial, comfort-seeking, contractualizing beings that philosophic liberalism claims they are. In other words, Thomism can aid liberal democracy only if it is willing, as Lawler points out, to defend the truth of Christianity's teaching on the ambiguous nature of human beings.

Notes

1. John Courtney Murray, *We Hold These Truths* (Kansas City, Kans.: Sheed and Ward, 1988), viii.
2. Murray, *We Hold These Truths*, viii.
3. Murray, *We Hold These Truths*, 41.
4. Murray, *We Hold These Truths*, 41.
5. Murray, *We Hold These Truths*, 30.
6. Murray, *We Hold These Truths*, 310.

7. Robert P. George, *The Clash of Orthodoxies: Law, Religion, and Morality in Crisis* (Wilmington, Del.: ISI Books, 2001) and Peter Augustine Lawler, *Aliens in America: The Strange Truth about Our Souls* (Wilmington, Del.: ISI Books, 2002).

8. George, *The Clash of Orthodoxies*, 235.

9. George, *The Clash of Orthodoxies*, 3.

10. George, *The Clash of Orthodoxies*, 240.

11. George, *The Clash of Orthodoxies*, 234.

12. George, *The Clash of Orthodoxies*, 235.

13. George, *The Clash of Orthodoxies*, 235.

14. George, *The Clash of Orthodoxies*, 239.

15. George, *The Clash of Orthodoxies*, 234, 235, 237, 238, 239.

16. George, *The Clash of Orthodoxies*, 239.

17. Lawler, *Aliens in America*, 179.

18. Lawler, *Aliens in America*, 178.

19. Lawler, *Aliens in America*, 179.

20. Lawler, *Aliens in America*, 154.

21. Lawler, *Aliens in America*, 159.

22. Lawler, *Aliens in America*, 159.

23. Lawler, *Aliens in America*, 159.

24. Pope John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio* (Boston, Mass.: Pauline Books & Media, 1998), 121.

25. Pope John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, 121.

26. I should point out, however, that Lawler does not, rightly in my mind, agree with Francis Fukuyama that biotechnology ultimately opens the door to ushering in a truly "posthuman future." For Lawler, human nature itself is in the end too resilient to such fundamental change. He argues that the distinctive fears and hopes that animate human life, and that in part animate the very desire to build a better future through biotechnology, are ineradicable in human beings. For a full examination of this question, see chapter 2 of Lawler's *Aliens in America*.

27. Lawler, *Aliens in America*, 49.

28. Lawler, *Aliens in America*, 49.

29. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Touchstone Books, 1996), 18.

30. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 33, 39.