

THE ANCIENTS/MODERNS DISTINCTION: CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVES

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Introduction

By any standard, Leo Strauss must be numbered among the most influential political theorists of the twentieth century. Some indication of his far-reaching influence can be seen in the decision of the American Political Science Association to name its annual award for the outstanding dissertation in political theory in his honor. Nor, as the work of James V. Schall, Gary Glenn, Robert P. Kraynak, Peter Augustine Lawler and the late Ernest Fortin suggests, have self-consciously Catholic thinkers been immune to his influence. Yet if Strauss' work had a profound impact on a number of American Catholic political theorists, questions remain about the compatibility of his thought with the Catholic intellectual tradition. At the deepest level, these questions concern his understanding of faith and reason as well as the proper relationship between the two. But they also extend to Strauss' understanding of the nature of political philosophy as an intellectual enterprise, his approach to the interpretation of texts and the sociology of knowledge implicit in it, and the account of the history of Western political philosophy that emerges in his writings.

Perhaps the most famous aspect of the latter account is Strauss's distinction between the "ancients" and the "moderns," his contention that at the heart of Western tradition in political philosophy is found a conflict between these two fundamentally irreconcilable schools of thought embodying incompatible understandings of the nature and goals of political life. Using this contention as their starting point, a number of Catholic thinkers influenced by Strauss have argued that, properly understood, Catholic thought must be understood as being on the "ancient" side of this divide, that it must be understood as a variant

of the ancient or classical understanding of politics. Obviously, Strauss' distinction between the ancients and moderns raises important and highly complex questions about the history of political philosophy, the issues that are its subject matter, and fundamental alternatives with which it confronts us. It also raises important questions for Catholic thinkers—questions about whether the assimilation of Catholic thought to the ancient tradition does justice to Christianity's contribution to the history of Western political theory or to the distinctiveness of Catholic social thought as an intellectual tradition.

It is these latter questions that are our focus here. This symposium, it should be emphasized, represents an exchange of views—the contributors answer the questions it addresses in very different ways. Several defend Strauss' contention arguing that it clarifies the history of Western political theory, and the alternatives with which it confronts reflects, while enabling us to both preserve the integrity of the Catholic tradition in social thought and to relate it to the broader and ongoing conversation that is Western political philosophy. Others find it problematic in various ways and for various reasons, maintaining that it oversimplifies this history and these alternatives, while obscuring the distinctiveness of the Catholic understanding of human nature and society. At the same time, the contributors approach these questions from a variety of angles: some concentrating on Strauss' own work or some specific aspect of it (e.g., Strauss's engagement with Aquinas' work); others focusing primarily on the nature and constitutive commitments of the Catholic intellectual tradition itself; yet others exploring the nature of modernity and the challenges with which it confronts us, and the ways in which Eric Voegelin's work challenges the understanding of faith and reason that informs Strauss' account of the nature and history of political philosophy.

While the contributors to this symposium are all political theorists, and if at times the discussion may seem arcane to those not trained in political theory, it should be stressed that the issues it addresses are not purely "academic" questions of interest only to specialists in this field. On the contrary, they are of broader interest inasmuch as they go to the very heart of the nature of Catholic social thought as a distinctive intellectual tradition and its relation to Western culture as a whole. It is thus hoped that by clarifying the issues at stake in this ongoing dispute among Catholic political theorists, this symposium can contribute to a deeper understanding of these larger issues as well.

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