

## ON THE CONQUEST OF HUMAN NATURE: ANCIENTS, MODERNS—MEDIEVALS, FUTURES

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“The modern project was originated as required by nature (natural right), i.e. it was originated by philosophers; the project was meant to satisfy in the most perfect manner the most powerful natural needs of men; nature was to be conquered for the sake of man who himself was supposed to possess a nature, an unchangeable nature; the originators of the project took it for granted that philosophy and science are identical. After some time it appeared that *the conquest of nature requires the conquest of human nature* and hence in the first place the questioning of the unchangeability of human nature: an unchangeable human nature might set absolute limits to progress. Accordingly, the natural needs of men could no longer direct the conquest of nature; the direction had to come from reason as distinguished from nature, from the rational Ought as distinguished from the neutral Is.”

— Leo Strauss<sup>1</sup>

“We must take a look at the foundations of the modern age. These are with particular clarity in the thought of Francis Bacon. That a new era emerged—through the discovery of America and the new technical achievements that had made this development possible—is undeniable. But what is the basis of this new era? It is the new correlation of experiment and method that enables man to arrive at an interpretation of nature in conformity with its laws and thus finally to achieve ‘the triumph of art over nature’ (*victoria cursus artis super naturam*). The novelty—according to Bacon’s vision—lies in a new correlation between science and praxis. This is also given a theological application: the new correlation between science and praxis would mean that the dominion over creation—given to man by God and lost through original sin—would be reestablished.”

— Benedict XVI<sup>2</sup>

### I

The basic thesis that I will argue here is that the principal time period from which we must protect ourselves is not that belonging to the ancients, the medievals, or even the moderns, but, to coin a phrase, to the “futures.” No doubt the only temporal thing we can “do” anything about, via the present, is the future, even though, with memory and forgiveness,

we can do something to repair our actual past. The “now” is the only point at which we can affect anything in the future. The future, of course, for the moment, only exists in our minds where, though perhaps fleeting, it is not nothing. It is an idea awaiting a will to act in existence. Ideas, which are not substances, have their own relational reality. This is why we can talk about them. Indeed, it is in talking about them that we have them. Our minds connect us with the world which is on-going in time. What makes the future dangerous, or benign, is precisely that we, through our minds, can touch the world in our bodily actions and makings. These latter effects are ultimately based on our ideas or plans or thoughts.

We seek to put into effect what we have concocted or configured in our minds. Though also contemplative, our minds can be directed to action and making. Thus, the future has much to do with us. We are told that the Sun will burn out some day, and no doubt it will. The ecologists have made a minor industry of confusing what is natural or cosmic with what is human. Yet, St. Paul tells us that the world itself awaits our redemption. The relation of cosmic to human purpose is, we suspect, intimate. The danger of the future does not consist in the fact that the heavens and earth may pass away, which probably will be the eventual case. The danger is whether we now have in our minds ideas of the future that are totally cut off in their formulation and application from what the ancients and medievals understood of man who, in their minds, was not in principle the creator of himself or the cosmos, though he was a real actor in the existing world.

The purpose of the practical, as opposed to the theoretical, intellect, no doubt, is to arrange the future either of ourselves or our artifacts through something we have formulated first in our own minds and carried out for our own purposes. We think the world exists in some sense for us to do something with it that would improve both the world and ourselves. We would not be human beings if our “future” were already determined for us such that we had nothing to do with its contours. A deterministic world contains, in logic, no human beings. We can even say that the drama of our history consists in our ongoing guidance of that world that we put into effect through our own decisions and the actions that flow from them.

Moreover, the very fact that our future may be “dangerous” because of what is in our minds also implies that, to cite Bacon, we can improve man’s “estate.” The question revolves around the sources of what improves and what does not improve. It also implies the question of whether, by improving our “estate,” we also improve ourselves. Can we be improved if we have no part in what brings this improvement

about? Is it possible to improve our “estate” while, at the same time, becoming worse ourselves in what we ought to be? It seems obvious that the world is a field, or arena, for the playing out of what it is to be human. It makes a difference, an ultimate difference, both to the world and the one who initiates and carries out actions within it.

E. F. Schumacher once wrote that the most dangerous man in the world is the man “who does not know himself.”<sup>3</sup> This phrase, no doubt, is itself classical or ancient in origin. It predates modernity and encapsulates the classic claim to universality. The most dangerous period of human history is, ironically, the future when we do not know ourselves and the relation of ourselves to the world. Why that is so is a subject worthy of much reflection. What is written here, however, and, on the same grounds, contains the usual caveat that many good things have happened to our kind in the past, continue to do so, and can do so in the future. The fact that bad things happen to good people and vice versa implies that we have some objective grounds on which we can distinguish what is good or what is evil, what is an improvement and what is not. This is the classical view.

Yet, a number of different kinds of future exist—eschatological, historical, and cosmic. But the one that is most dangerous is that future that conceives itself to be cut off from our past, especially the past before what we now call “modern times,” the past we associate with both the ancients and medievals. The future is dangerous to the degree that we have replaced or rejected the idea that we could learn something about ourselves, including what we are, from experience, history, and philosophic reflection. The existence of the existing order is rejected. Into this lacuna comes another “reason,” which is human reason presupposed to nothing to itself, to no intelligible nature.

## II

What is there with which to replace this idea of a natural order? To understand what is at stake is the reason why I cited in the beginning a provocative and famous passage from Leo Strauss’ book, *The City and Man*. Strauss recognized that the logic of modern rights talk led to a questioning of the stability of human nature itself, which was initially considered to be stable, and hence the basis or rights or law. But if “science” in the modern sense is to continue on its path, the limit of human nature had to be removed. Science had a “right” to do what it could conceive.

This understanding of modern science involved confronting a concept of nature that acquired its content from existing nature that

evidently reflected a mind that was not human. What replaced this natural reason was a concept of reason that presupposed nothing but itself. It began with a *tabula rasa* not only in its mind but also in nature, whatever it was. Once mind came to mean whatever we want it to mean, then it became possible, as Benedict said in the second citation above, to remove by human means the effects of original sin. This was, in fact, the modern project, a replacement of prayer and contemplation with politics. It was possible, in other words, that we ourselves could configure a new and better man. Indeed, that was the “newness” of modernity.

The term “progress” is an Enlightenment or modern idea which, in effect, proposed that things were getting better and once man took full control, could be completely perfected. This idea, however, was, from religious tradition, based on an elevated sense of what man is, over and above his natural capacities. This idea of human nature capable of being elevated to the highest perfection was originally a theological idea. The classics never believe that such an idea existed anywhere but in speech. Man, from the beginning, it was held, was created for a supernatural, not natural end.

With the rationalism of modernity, however, what was left was this idea of producing a more perfect man, but without the theological underpinnings of how it was to be accomplished. The means were secularized and politicized. The notion of “progress” now became a secular version of salvation history in which its main goals were to be accomplished by scientific and political methods. The inner-worldly salvation or progress and its insufficiency is the principal topic of Benedict’s *Spe Salvi*.

All of the eschatological accomplishments became implicitly transposed to these worldly dimensions and infinitized. Thus eternal life became inner worldly immortality from science, birth and improvement of the human body by genetics, freedom to do whatever one wanted by politics, these were to be the “scientific” goals of man now freed from the limits of nature and anything addressed to this nature by a Creator. Virtue and grace were replaced by scientific projects. It turns out, however, that, when the alternatives are spelled out, the life for which we were actually created, eternal life, after death, and the kind of four score years and ten to which men were traditionally directed in reason and charity proved to be a far superior sort of life than this scientifically-induced alternative. Paradoxically, by not believing in revelation but believing in science, modern man proved the medieval solution was in fact superior, but with a foundation in the ancients.

Strauss himself proposed that the way back to sanity was through a turning away from the logic of modernity to a revival of classical philosophy with its famous moderation about transcendent things. Classical Greek philosophy, with its basis in Plato and Aristotle, indeed had much to be said for it. A return to the classics was a far more reasonable solution than the ideological alternatives that proposed new human natures deliberately designed against the norms of nature as understood in the classics through the philosophic methods.

The proposal of Strauss was in many ways on target. It understood that the classical philosophers did know a truth that was the foundation of human thinking and living. The classical philosophers knew what virtue was. Their problem, as Augustine was to point out, was that they did not know how to achieve it against what Aristotle called human “wickedness.” What was lacking in Strauss was rather any direct confrontation with that aspect of medieval thought that was influenced directly by Christian revelation as directed to this same classical reason. Strauss did seek to protect the Old Testament revelation to the extent of showing that reason and revelation could not refute each other and therefore both could stand.

Benedict XVI, in his Regensburg Lecture, was careful to establish the relations of this same Greek philosophy to both Old and New Testament ideas. Reason and revelation were not seen opposed to one another but in a way directed to one another. Without arguing that philosophy could “prove” the validity of revelation, it was clear that it could not answer many of its own questions as it sought to understand the whole. Revelation did, moreover, as we find in Exodus, John, Paul, and other sources, direct itself to issues which, when reflected upon, did cause philosophy to be more itself, more philosophy. This is something John Paul II treated in *Fides et Ratio*.

For the sub-title of this essay, I have listed the following four words in deliberate order: *Ancients, Moderns—Medievals, Futures*. Obviously, the listing, were it chronological, would place medievals after ancients. But I think, to make my point, that the effort to consider modernity as if the medievals were simply a repetitive part of the classics or simply extensions of them, misses their real significance. What in fact has replaced nature is a reason that has no limits, hence, as I mentioned, its real danger to us. It was in the effort to escape from the intelligibility of revelation that modern scientism or progress had finally to deny that nature placed any limits on itself. This “freedom” of limits left the only mind in existence to be the human mind now free to reconfigure human bodily and spiritual existence as if its best being was not already proposed to it.

The real step we must take is to restore the relation of classic reason to Christian revelation as both dealing with the same whole that is *what is*. The modern project sought to replace the man of nature to whom revelation is directed by a man closed both to reason and revelation. Hence, such a man thinks himself to be free to construct himself in any way he wishes. This possibility is being actively carried out in biology, social science, even literature and history. It is why I said in the beginning that the most dangerous thing before us is precisely the future presupposed as a world empty of any intelligence but man's. Reason, as Strauss rightly said, is now "distinguished" from a nature that reveals intelligibility, not one that finds intelligibility in nature, the classical project.

### III

In the Regensburg Lecture, Benedict is careful to point out that modernity has much to do with mathematics, which he considers to be part, not of modernity but of the classics, particularly Plato.<sup>4</sup> His point, unlike Descartes', is that science, including mathematics, in fact does investigate a real world which has its own form that is not put there by the mind of the scientist. The curious fact that mathematics works on the real world is not an indication of empty rationalism but of realism and proper abstraction. The fact that things are measurable leads to the wonderment of the cause of this curious relationship. The relationship of ancients to moderns cannot bypass the medievals because they had explained to reason, indirectly at least, certain unaccounted for lacunae in its own classical understanding of the world. Just as mathematics "worked" in the world, so did revelation.

Modernity, as it were, left standing intact within the culture the notion of human perfection itself. Both the classics and the medievals understood in different ways that this perfection was in principle beyond human achievement by its own powers. Perfection is a form that is, in fact, beyond the capacity of existing fallen beings to achieve. This fact is often considered an insult to human worth, though it is, in fact, the only real way that their real perfection can be freely offered to them.

For the classics, this perfect city existed only in speech. For the Christians, it was the "City of God," in Augustine's famous phrase. In this sense, Christians were more "realistic" than the classics, but still in their same line. Perfection existed but not fully in this life. The effect of revelation was to leave this world free of man-made drives to perfection which could not be achieved by man's own powers, when, in a kind of pride, they always gave him something less than what he was created for. The normalcy of the world in which actual people live and die then

depended on the right understanding of what revelation proposed as the human end.

“The transformation of the world into a mathematical world is not an isolated philosophical issue...,” Robert Sokolowski has written to this point. “It is related to political philosophy and philosophical anthropology, as well as to ethics and logic. The two antagonistic camps in this controversy are the ancients and the moderns, represented by Aristotle and pre-modern thinkers on the one hand and by figures ranging from Machiavelli to Nietzsche on the other.” Mathematics still has some contact with being, with formal causality, but not with real being in motion. It always bears, as we know in Plato, the assurance of permanence and the universal, as Benedict wrote.

The mathematical connection is what links classical and medieval philosophy to that side of modernity that actually invented and made things for human purposes. The return to Aristotle is not then a rejection of all of modernity, but only that part of it that sought to replace reality by pure human logic independent of being. “The philosophical desideratum is not simply to return to Aristotle,” Sokolowski continues,

but to restore the validity of what he describes within the context set by the great transformation brought about by modern thought, and one of the elements in such that restoration is the recovery of the public-ness of the mind that executes judgments. Along with this restoration of mind is the recovery of things as having essences, properties, and ends, which govern the purposes we set for ourselves.<sup>5</sup>

The public world means that world in which we live and which we describe in our words and, in its own way, by our mathematics. The “purposes we set for ourselves” are those which can be achieved in this world. They are always limited. But they also recognize that more is given than just this world, the outlines of which are also addressed to our reason to comprehend, in fact, our destiny.

In conclusion, the relation of medievals to futures needs to be restored to the limits of the mortal world in which man actually lives. Those who wish to save man by returning to the classics take the first step. But they do not understand the full temptation of modernity unless they realize how charity and grace have elevated our destiny above what is achievable by a reason which creates its own “Ought,” as Strauss put it. Modernity is essentially, in its philosophic roots, an effort to replace the reasoned and revelational account of what man is in the world with an account that is totally under the management of man’s independent

reason, a reason arrived at by the denial both of classical intelligence and the revelation addressed to it.

The effect of this restoration of a revelation addressed to classical reason is the representation of hope. The original notion of man's purpose in the world showed him as a wayfarer and pilgrim, not as its maker of himself. Modernity itself contained an elevated notion of what was man's perfection from revelation but secularized it in the notion of progress. The understanding of human nature in modernity was itself subject to a science that operated as if there were no nature. The fact of mathematics, however, prevented science from totally separating itself from common sense reality. This is why all of modernity's discoveries need not be rejected.

A proper understanding of mortal life in this world does not see it as unlimited progress. It sees it rather as a field of action or a stage on which the true end of man in eternal life can be freely offered to him. The inner-worldly alternatives which have been the proposals of modern ideology to perfect man in their own ways have now pretty much displayed their anti-human faces. The future we need to be saved from is not that which proposes to us eternal life after death but that which proposes an inner-worldly immortality for a being re-engineered by man's own efforts to perfect himself.

Man's ultimate perfection is not a question of science or technology but, as the classics said, of virtue and as revelation said, of grace. In this sense, we can conceive the proper relation of ancients, medievals, moderns, and futures. When the "conquest of nature required the conquest of human nature," it meant that both man and nature disappeared. In the end, it seems that the restoration of reason awaits the restoration of the proper nature of revelation's own address to reason. The dominion over creation cannot be reestablished by science and praxis alone. It requires that which, within the medieval understanding, caused man to expect more than he is by nature.

That heightened concept of man's end is the Augustinian notion that we are not made for this world, but for the happiness that comes from the reason the world exists in the first place and our place within it. If this hope of eternal life proves too lofty for our souls and our culture, we can take comfort in the fact that all the alternatives thus far tried lead to the degradation of man through the search for a future that is not worthy of him. The "conquest" of human nature by a radical science which presupposed no nature obscured what this same nature was originally intended to be. The history of modernity, in a very real sense, is nothing so much as a "proof" of the need of grace for man to be fully what *he is*. The medievals, in the end, more than the ancients, moderns, and futures, are the ones most likely to understand why this is so.

## Notes

1. *The City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 7.
2. *Spe Salvi*, 2007, #16.
3. E. F. Schumacher, *A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Harper Colophon, 1977), 119.
4. James V. Schall, *The Regensburg Lecture* (South Bend, IN.: St. Augustine's Press, 2007), Appendix I, #59.
5. Robert Sokolowski, *Phenomenology of the Human Person* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 118.