

Jude P. Dougherty

The Universe We Think In
by James V. Schall*

Recently-deceased on 17 April 2019, James V. Schall, S.J., was Emeritus Professor of Government at Georgetown University (known to generations of students at Georgetown, simply, as “Fr. Schall”). As the title of the book suggests, after retirement, he continued to write with all the verve of a young man amazed by what is going on in the world. *The Universe We Think In* is a collection of fourteen essays, plus a conclusion that brings it all together. What appears to be his last published essay may be found in the April, 2019 issue of the *New Oxford Review*, where he writes under the title, “Mind the Gap, On the Presence and Absence of Things.” The absence is modern philosophy’s propensity to neglect the innate or purposeful direction of human life.

James V. Schall was formed in an intellectual tradition represented in the twentieth century by philosophers Jacques Maritain, Etienne Gilson, and Joseph Pieper. A scholar of first rank, in the classroom, for college students, James Schall, was noted for bringing the abstract to earth and the abstruse to clarity. Given his omnivorous intellect there is hardly any contemporary issue of consequence that eluded his attention. He could quote Plato and Harold Berman of Harvard University on one

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page, and on the next, Charlie Brown and Lucy [comic strip characters created by the thoughtful Charles Schulz].

In the spirit of Richard Weaver's *Ideas Have Consequences* (1948), he speaks of "the world we discover and the world we make."¹ In the world we make, we are not bound by any reality; we can make ourselves over into whatever we want to be. In such a polity, there is no accountability, no standard to which words and actions may be judged. "This is why classical metaphysics and Christian theology are so dangerous [to those who subscribe to this subjectivism] and are met with furious opposition."² The multi-culturalist's notion that all views of life are equally good and acceptable is a form of this subjectivism with its own consequences. A polity formed in such a light would have no interest in passing on the words and deeds of men who lived before. Schall expresses it this way: "To know who we are as a polity, we need to know what we have been and done. We need to know the record of great men and terrible tyrants, as well as the deeds and words of ordinary people."³ That is why we have monuments, poems, and written words.

Chapter Seven is devoted to the nature of political philosophy. "Politics," Schall writes, "are concerned with human action and interaction insofar as men are organized together by custom and law to attain the common good."⁴ Politics, he finds, is a legitimate object of philosophical enquiry. "The academy is," he says, "or ought to be, a sphere in which not only politics but what is beyond politics can be freely and reasonably addressed. The good of any polity requires that it create a space for what is not just political."⁵ It is as only through a free and

¹ Schall, *The Universe We Think In*, 41.

² *Ibid.*, 47.

³ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁵ *Ibid.*

open discussion of ends that the politician comes to understand the good of citizens who are to be ruled and guided by the policies he adopts, given the many options available. The temptation to tyranny lurks. If a party adopts a particular philosophy, “it then allows no purpose but itself.”⁶

The only way a polity can be held accountable for the acts of its leaders and citizens is if there is a standard to which all words and actions are to be measured. Aristotle tells us that politics is the highest practical science, but not the highest science as such. Practical knowledge presupposes an end that is given to it, not one that is constructed or made by man. The highest science is metaphysics, whose proper object is the whole, all there is. Metaphysics opens one to the transcendent. It enables one to recognize a natural order, the immaterial component of human nature, and speak to the ends of human life. Schall points out that if we deny the force or existence of the metaphysical report, we are then free to construct a world in the light of our preferences. Absent an objective order to which our actions are accountable, “we are free to construct our own world as if the truth of things did not exist.”⁷

A particular target at this point is Machiavelli, often called the founder of modern political philosophy. A Renaissance humanist, Machiavelli is an empiricist who vigorously rejected not only the metaphysics of Aristotle, but also the Catholic moral tradition influenced by Aristotle’s *Politics* and *Nicomachean Ethics*. In the present volume, Schall does not spend much time addressing it; but he does say, “From Machiavelli’s premise as, carried forward by Hobbes, the good state is not that one in conformity with human nature. Rather it is one that cor-

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, 99.

responds to what the prince or democrat wants.”⁸ What the prince wills is the law, and he is entitled says to use any means, even unsavory ones, to ensure the continuation of his rule.

Modern politics is defined by the loss of accountability to a natural order. Modern politics has been an endeavor to replace the normal with the perfect polity of its own design. “In so doing it has distorted our understanding of ourselves, of our death, of our sins, of our very being.”⁹

Near the end of this volume, Schall adds this insight: “When we speak of Rousseau or Marx, or, before them, of Machiavelli, Bacon, Hobbes, and Locke, we are looking primarily at intellectual history from our time back to those ideas and theses that made the world, as it has become, a world in which the ‘fantasies’ of the modern philosophers are no longer abstractions.”¹⁰

Those not fortunate enough to have had Professor James Schall in the classroom, would do well to add this book to their reading list.



***The Universe We Think In* by James V. Schall**

SUMMARY

This paper is a review of the book: James V. Schall, *The Universe We Think In* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2019). The author discusses the reasons and consequences of modern philosophy’s propensity to neglect the innate or purposeful direction of human life.

KEYWORDS

James V. Schall, modern philosophy, metaphysics, politics, human nature.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ James V. Schall, *Political Philosophy and Revelation* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2013), 126.

¹⁰ Schall, *The Universe We Think In*, 172.

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