Evangelium Vitae and Modernity:
The Philosophical Origins of the Culture of Death
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This article argues that the "culture of death" identified in the papal encyclical Evangelium Vitae is deeply rooted in the structure and principles of modernity. The foundational thinkers of modern political society--Machiavelli, Locke, and Hobbes--articulated a philosophical base for modernity that tends toward a death-oriented culture. Modernity thus rests on a basis contrary to the culture of life to which Pope John Paul II calls Catholics and all people. Catholics and others of good will must work to overcome the culture of death by pronouncing the truth about human nature.

I.

In 1995 Pope John Paul II issued the encyclical Evangelium Vitae, or The Gospel of Life. The purpose of this encyclical was to call attention to, analyze, and call for resistance against what the Holy Father termed a "culture of death" that he saw developing in the countries of the West. Such a culture, the Pope contended, is characterized by the refusal to acknowledge the universal right to life, by the rejection of human life as something always good and worthy of protection, whatever its condition. This culture shows itself most clearly in the widespread killing of the innocent and defenseless, particularly the unborn and the dying, and in the equally widespread public justifications of such practices.

In pondering Evangelium Vitae and the world it describes, one cannot help but wonder how deeply rooted the culture of death is. Is it the result of a relatively recent wrong turn and therefore correctable by a relatively easy modification of our course? Or did we stray from the right path a long way back, and do we therefore confront a long and difficult retracing of our steps before we can once again find the true way?

The evidence seems to cut both ways. On the one hand, the offenses by which the culture of death most clearly manifests itself, abortion and euthanasia, are such recent developments that one is tempted to think that the culture of death’s hold on us is somewhat superficial. On the other hand, once introduced such practices have progressed so rapidly, have so quickly won not only toleration but respectability, that one suspects the presence in our civilization of some prior susceptibility to the culture of death.

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This question is not merely of theoretical or speculative interest but is also of great practical importance. The Pope calls on Catholics, and indeed on all people of good will, to act. Our obligation is not merely to understand but to resist the culture of death by public argument and example. Yet our resistance to the culture of death surely should be governed by our understanding of it, of how deeply it is rooted. In medicine, a disease caused by some genetic disorder, a disease that arises from the very foundations of the patient's physical being and thus can even be said to be part of the patient, calls for different and more radical therapy than, say, a viral infection, which perhaps inhabits the patient but is not part of the constitution of his nature itself. So it is in the treatment of the sickness of the soul of a civilization. If the culture of death or some inclination to it is rooted in the very foundations of our way of life, then surely it demands a different response than if it is a kind of moral influenza, dwelling in our civilization but having only recently entered from the outside. At the very least our knowledge of the depth of the culture of death's hold on our civilization can help us to persevere in our practical efforts against it. If we judge that it comes from a relatively recent deviation, then we can take heart from the expectation that a little determined effort will correct it. If, on the other hand, we discover that its roots go deeper, our knowledge will help us avoid the discouragement that would arise from a false expectation of an easy victory and lead us to steel ourselves for a protracted conflict.

This paper argues that the culture of death described in *Evangelium Vitae* is very deeply rooted indeed. This culture has its origins in modern political philosophy, that is, in the thought of the intellectual architects, particularly Hobbes and Locke, of modern liberalism which thought has so profoundly influenced the constitution of modern civilization, its understanding of human nature, morality, and the purpose of political life. The culture of death, far from being the result of some recent wrong turn, some relatively superficial and therefore easily corrected error in our thinking, is instead present in the very origins of modernity. The contemporary attacks on human life deplored by the Holy Father are not accidental deviations from the usually just behavior of a fundamentally sound civilization; rather they are the necessary consequences of a way of a thinking and living that the West has pursued for the last several centuries.

II.

It must be conceded at the outset that this thesis is somewhat paradoxical. The obvious and reasonable objection to it might run as follows: Surely modern liberal political philosophy cannot be the source of the culture of death, for that philosophy famously bases the polity on the right to life, just as the Holy Father, in *Evangelium Vitae*, states that "every human community and the political community itself are founded" on "recognition of this right" (*EV* 2).1
On this view the apparent agreement between the Church and the moderns on this crucial issue renders implausible the notion that modern political philosophy could somehow harbor the origins of the culture of death. If modernity is fundamentally sound, then the recent emergence of crimes like abortion and euthanasia must be merely the result of some deviation from liberalism, not a necessary consequence of its basic principles.

In response to this objection one must of course admit that the right to life does figure prominently in the modern account of politics. There is not in modern political philosophy anything like an explicit and intentional embrace of the culture of death. This paper’s argument, then, is rather that the moderns offer a flawed basis for the right to life, one so flawed that it leads ultimately to the widespread selective disregard for the right to life we see today. Their philosophy of politics—designed to establish a secure civic peace, to ensure the security of life, by basing society on principles of self-interest with which almost no one would disagree—terminates, unintentionally but inevitably, in the culture of death.

To see how this comes about we must better understand what the culture of death is, for on the Pope’s account the term describes more than just the physical killing of the innocent. The culture of death, however, is understood in contradistinction to the culture of life. Thus a more complete understanding of the former requires a more complete understanding of the latter. We begin, then, with an examination of the kind of society the Pope commends, expecting that it will shed light on the one he condemns.

III.

What is the Christian understanding of life? It is of course more than mere bodily existence. Christianity holds out the promise of, and calls us actively to seek, a fullness or perfection of life, a final and complete satisfaction of all human longing, which is found in union with God through His Son. It is in this connection that the Pope quotes the words of Christ reported in the Gospel of John: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (EV 1). "Man," the Pope comments, "is called to a fullness of life which far exceeds the dimensions of this earthly existence, because it consists in sharing the very life of God" (EV 2).

We approach this abundance of life, moreover, through love, love understood as self-sacrifice. This is the paradox of the Christian life: He who saves his life loses it, and he who loses his life saves it. Life, the Holy Father teaches, is "brought to perfection in love and in the gift of ourselves to God and to our brothers and sisters" (EV 2). "[T]he deepest and most authentic meaning of life," he says, is "that of being a gift which is fully realized in the giving of self" (EV 49, emphasis in original). Through his crucifixion Christ proclaims that "life finds its center, its meaning and its fulfillment when it is given up" (EV 51,
emphasis in original). Life, on Evangelium Vitae's account, is not mere biological existence but is rather a fullness of "peace and happiness" that one can find only through "loving and serving life" (EV5).

The "culture of life" that the Pope proposes is, then, not merely a condition of society in which people refrain from killing the innocent. It is more broadly a culture characterized by active self-sacrificial love, by generous self-giving in the service of others. Thus the Pope mentions as positive signs of the continued existence of such a culture "all those daily gestures of openness, sacrifice, and unselfish care which countless people make in families, hospitals, orphanages, homes for the elderly and other centers or communities which defend life" (EV27). He continues, noting that the actions of those "freely giving of themselves out of love for their neighbor, especially the weak and needy . . . strengthen the bases of the 'civilization of love and life'" (EV27).

IV.

If the Pope construes the culture of life in this broad fashion, then presumably the culture of death may rightly be similarly construed. That is, just as the culture of life is not fully present when we merely refrain from killing the innocent, so the culture of death may be present in some sense even when we do refrain from killing the innocent. If the culture of life in its full sense is a culture of generous self-sacrifice, then the culture of death can be understood as a culture of cold self-interest. If the culture of life exists where there is love, then the culture of death exists where love is absent.

It can be said that in this broader sense the society proposed by the modern political philosophers--and largely adopted by the modern world--is the culture of death. Far from being a "civilization of love," that society is instead based on material self-interest. The moderns reject as unrealistic the classical and Christian idea of a politics that leads citizens to a lofty and complete happiness found in moral perfection. In so doing they follow the lead of Machiavelli, who seeks to guide political life not by merely "imaginary . . . republics and principates" constructed on the basis of naively pious opinions about "how one should live," but rather by what he calls the "effectual truth" about "how one" in fact "lives". This "effectual truth" about how human beings actually live is revealed by Machiavelli in Chapter III of The Prince: "It is a thing truly very natural and ordinary to desire to acquire; and when men who are able to do so do it, they are always praised or not blamed; but when they are not able and yet want to do so in every mode, here is the error and the blame." In other words, human beings are fundamentally selfish, and political society must be based on clear recognition of this unpleasant but unavoidable fact.

This Machiavellian view is adopted in its essentials by the later modern thinkers thought to be the architects of modern liberalism, with its focus on individual rights and its belief that governments exist to secure those rights.
The *Leviathan*, for example, indicates that man is driven almost entirely by self-interest and that government should be oriented toward satisfying his selfish desires. In Chapter XIII, on the "Naturall Condition" of mankind, Hobbes writes that the "End" of men is "principally their owne conservation" but also "their delectation"; and he concludes that political society should therefore aim to secure the safety of the people, understood not as their "bare preservation" alone but as including "all other Contentments of life, which every man by lawfull Industry . . . shall acquire to himselfe." The same is true of Locke, whose teaching is in fundamental agreement with, though advanced more cautiously than, Hobbes's. He suggests that human beings are moved primarily by the same selfish passions described by Hobbes, contending in his *Second Treatise of Civil Government* that the purpose of men's uniting under governments is "the Preservation of their Property," which he defines as including their "Lives, Liberties, and Estates."

Again, such a society as Hobbes and Locke propose is already "dead" in light of the broader, fuller understanding of life found in the Gospel and again set forth in *Evangelium Vitae*. A community (if that term may be used to describe the partnership advocated by the moderns) based on the assumption that all men are fundamentally self-interested, in which all men associate with each other only out of self-interest, has no place for the loving self-sacrifice that constitutes the culture of life. The members of such a society cannot know the fullness or abundance of life, the happiness or blessedness, that the Pope teaches arises paradoxically from giving one's life in service to others. Such a society is a culture of death, of spiritual death.

V.

If we grant that modernity is the culture of death in this broader sense, does it follow that it must terminate in the culture of death in the narrower sense? Must a civilization based on self-interest, on the abandonment of love as a publicly authoritative principle, end up not only unhappy but also actually murderous? At first glance it would seem that such an outcome is not necessary. After all, not loving others is not the same as wanting to kill them. Being self-interested does not necessarily mean being hostile to the fundamental rights of others. On the contrary, we have a selfish interest in not trying to kill others, inasmuch as we hope that by agreeing not to do so they will in turn agree not to attack us. This, indeed, is the practical calculus by which the moderns hope the security of life can be firmly established—much more firmly established than it would be if based on dangerously naive notions of the fullness of life realized through loving self-sacrifice.

*Evangelium Vitae*, however, suggests otherwise. In Chapter 1 the Holy Father considers the Old Testament story of Cain and Abel as a place to begin thinking about "the roots of violence against life." In this context he quotes a
passage from the First Letter of St. John which comments on the Genesis account of the first murder: "For this is the message which you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another, and not be like Cain who was of the evil one and murdered his brother." This passage is striking because it suggests that the fundamental alternatives for human beings are love and murder. Modern political philosophy, believing that it is unrealistic to found a political community on love, seeks to found it instead on lower but more secure ground: self-interest. That is, modern political philosophy attempts to build the political community on a middle ground between love and murder. Yet the passage from St. John implies that no such middle ground exists, and therefore that any way of life built on it is bound to degenerate into a murderous one.

That such a degeneration is necessary can be seen if we more carefully examine modern political philosophy in light of the description of the culture of death offered in Evangelium Vitae. This examination indicates that the moderns' attempt to found society on self-interest removes the basis for any principled prohibition on the killing of the defenseless, such as occurs in abortion and euthanasia, destroys the motives that would lead us to protect defenseless life, and even creates positive incentives to destroy it.

VI. Evangelium Vitae suggests that the right to life has a certain metaphysical standing. It is not merely the result of human agreement or convention, a product of positive law. It is rather a precept of God's eternal and unchanging law to which all men are necessarily subject regardless of their own will. The Pope contends that the "sacredness" and "inviolability" of life are "written from the beginning in man's heart, in his conscience. . . . In the depths of his conscience, man is always reminded of the inviolability of life . . . as something which does not belong to him because it is the property and the gift of God the Creator and Father" (EV 40). The right to life is part of the transcendent moral truth apprehended by conscience.

Moreover, the Pope's argument suggests that this understanding is the only secure basis for the right to life. Thus he identifies as a "profound" cause of the culture of death the severing of the connection between "freedom" and "truth." When man abandons "the truth about good and evil" only "his subjective and changeable opinion, or, indeed, his selfish interest and whim" remain to guide his choices (EV 19).

The modern political philosophers, however, are guilty of this very rejection of transcendent moral truth and of an accompanying (and ultimately disastrous) attempt to base the right to life instead on "selfish interest." Hobbes repeatedly denies such a basis for morality in the Leviathan. There he contends that there is no such thing as "a right Reason constituted by Nature," that is,
there are no universal standards of good and evil inherent in the nature of things for reason or conscience to apprehend. Hobbes goes even further than this. Not only is there no moral order to the universe, there is no order at all. Thus he writes that there is "nothing in the world Universall but Names; for the things named, are every one of them Individuall and Singular." On this score the reputedly more moderate Locke is apparently just as radical as Hobbes. In the Essay Concerning Human Understanding he famously denies the existence of innate moral ideas, ideas, in the Pope's words, "written from the beginning in man's heart." According to Pierre Manent, the Essay holds that all moral ideas are "archetypes" created by man from very simple ideas received from the senses and hence from nature. Therefore, "moral ideas do not correspond to anything in nature," and even "the idea of murder is an 'arbitrary' idea."

These founders of modern liberalism instead try to ground morality on something they regard as more substantial. Like the earlier writers of the Christian tradition, and like the current Pope, they believed in a kind of natural law. For them, however, to be truly natural the natural law must be effectual, and to be effectual it must be based on man's passions, and more particularly on his most powerful passion, the desire for self-preservation. On this understanding the right to life is based on the desire for life, the desire of each man to preserve his own life. The right to life is based on self-interest.

As we saw earlier, the Pope suggests that the inviolability of life cannot be securely based on such grounds. To see why this is the case we must examine how on the modern account the right to life arises from the desire for self-preservation. Initially, according to Hobbes and Locke, the desire for life leads paradoxically to its insecurity. Men are by nature under no authority, and thus each man may, and should, take it upon himself to do anything he judges necessary in defense of his own life, including killing others. In such a situation, however, no one's life is safe. All men are equally at risk of violent death in the state of nature because all men are equally strong in the decisive respect. Even the weakest, Hobbes teaches, can kill the strongest, either through cooperation with others or while the strongest sleeps. As a result life in the state of nature is, in Hobbes's celebrated formulation, "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short."

The solution to this difficulty is provided not by nature itself but by human invention, by a certain convention that can expect to receive nature's--that is to say passion's--support. A right to life that must be respected in others is posited and a government to defend it is created because this is the best way to preserve one's own life. On this view the right to life and the state's role in vindicating it are derived not from some transcendent moral truth that all men are bound to obey, but from a mutual non-aggression pact among self-interested individuals. But if self-interest, the desire to preserve one's own life, is the basis of the agreement, then there is no reason to extend the pact's protection
to those who are incapable, either individually or in concert, of threatening one's own life. One gains no security by including them. Thus the modern account of the right to life in principle opens the door to the very culture of death described in *Evangelium Vitae*, a society in which the inviolability of the weakest, most defenseless human lives is not recognized. Hobbes may be correct that the weakest man may kill the strongest, and that both therefore have an interest in agreeing not to kill each other. But it is certainly true that even the strongest unborn baby (or the strongest terminally ill bedridden patient) poses no threat whatsoever to even the weakest normal adult. The latter therefore has no reason to agree not to kill the former—that is, no self-interested reason, no reason that modernity recognizes.

In addition to providing no basis for extending the right to life to the weakest human beings, modernity's attempt to found society on the self-interested passions also destroys certain beliefs about human life that, on the Pope's account, provide a powerful motive to defend the defenseless. *Evangelium Vitae* suggests that human life is sacred, holy, or glorious, no matter what its condition. Human life is, according to the Holy Father, "always a good" because it "is quite different from the life of all other living creatures, inasmuch as man, although formed from the dust of the earth . . . is a manifestation of God in the world, a sign of his presence, a trace of his glory" (*EV* 34, emphasis in original). Man is made in God's image, and this image is revealed "not only in man's dominion over the world but also in those spiritual faculties which are distinctively human, such as reason, discernment between good and evil, and free will" (*EV* 34, emphasis in original). All human life should be respected, one concludes, because human life is the highest thing in the world. And as the Pope indicates, it is the highest not just in the sense that man is clever enough to dominate the rest of creation, but in the sense that he is a worldly manifestation of God's transcendent goodness, his perfection.

It should be stressed that this view of life provides a motive to protect all human life, even that in which the image of God is not immediately evident, such as the immature (a human fetus) or the debilitated (a comatose terminally ill patient). No doubt such persons do not display the activity of the "spiritual faculties" by which man can be said to be in God's image. Nevertheless, we know that those faculties are truly present in such persons, even if they are dormant. All of human nature, every human capacity, is present in a newly fertilized egg as well as in an unconscious victim of, say, severe head trauma. In each case, however, the distinctly human faculties cannot be activated because of circumstances, insufficient development in the former case and the injury in the latter. Such lives demand protection, even veneration, because the image of God must be respected wherever it is found, whether active or
dormant. To suggest otherwise, to insist that these faculties must be active for the life in question to be worthy of protection, is to say that any man may rightly be killed so long as one waits for him to fall asleep.

Modern political philosophy, however, abandons this high and noble conception of human nature. Indeed, for the moderns man is dominated by those passions that he has in common with the lower animals: the desire for life and for pleasure. As Hobbes and Locke agree, man seeks not only his "conservation" but also his "delectation" or "comfort." The higher faculties of which the Pope speaks are, according to the modern anthropology, no longer present in the same sense. That is, they have no life of their own, are no longer directed toward achieving the blessedness that comes from "knowing and loving" the "Creator," but are instead merely in the service of the baser instincts man shares with the beasts (Ev 34). That is, for both Hobbes and Locke reason serves passion. In the former's famous formulation, "the Thoughts, are to the Desires, as scouts, and Spies, to range abroad, and find the way to the things Desired." Similarly, the latter holds that the only purpose of reason is to "make use of" the world "to the best advantage of" man's "Life" and "convenience."

Thus the dignity of man is denied in modern political philosophy, and this denial eliminates what is on the Christian understanding of man a powerful motive to respect life. Where is the sacredness of human life if man has no higher end than his own safety and comfort, if he is nothing more than a more clever version of the animals that we routinely kill, and that routinely kill each other, in order to gratify such selfish passions?

VIII.

Indeed, the modern view of human life actually creates incentives to destroy certain human lives. Again, for the moderns, man is fundamentally hedonistic: his primary desire is for his own preservation and delectation. Indeed, as Leo Strauss points out, Hobbes—and by implication the other moderns, including Locke, who follow him—rejects the ancient (and Christian) distinction between the noble (or holy) and the pleasant and instead adopts the Epicurean premise that "the good is fundamentally identical with the pleasant." Why is life good? Modernity can no longer answer this question in the same way the Pope does, with reference to man's attainment of blessedness through the manifestation of God's glory in the use of his spiritual faculties, even and especially when this calls for the denial of the lower, self-interested passions. Simply put, the Pope suggests that life is good because it provides an opportunity to attain fullness or abundance of life through self-sacrifice. In contrast, modernity's answer must be that life is good because it is pleasant.
Everyone knows, however, that life is not always pleasant. So the modern answer resolves itself into the belief that life is good to the extent that it is pleasant. But once we accept that understanding we are led to the culture of death in all its most egregious manifestations.

If we believe that the goodness of life comes from its pleasantness, then we will endorse the efforts of those who seek to end their lives because they are no longer pleasant and hold out no prospect of future pleasure. Thus we approve suicide and assisted suicide. But there is more. To the extent that we take the equation of pleasure and goodness as the closest thing to an objective truth—that is, to the extent that we take pleasure and pain as the only solid realities and thus follow the moderns in rejecting the notion of supreme happiness that comes from self-sacrificial love as the illusory ramblings of naively high minded philosophers and deluded priests—we become suspicious of those who choose interminable suffering which death could end. We doubt their grasp of reality, their sanity, their "competence" to decide for themselves what course to take. Thus we approve "compassionate" but involuntary euthanasia for the "good" of those who suffer. Finally, because we are firmly convinced that pleasure is what makes life good, we seek the destruction of those lives that make our own lives less pleasant, those that call for society's generosity and self-giving. We come to regard as enemies those whose absolute neediness—the unwanted unborn and the dying—demands our money, our time, our compassion, in sum, our death to self. Thus we ultimately embrace murder committed out of cold self-interest.

Evangelium Vitae bears witness to all these connections between hedonism and the culture of death. With regard to hedonism's inclination to suicide and euthanasia, the Pope writes that in a pleasure-seeking and materialistic culture "suffering... is 'censored,' rejected as useless, indeed opposed as an evil, always and in every way to be avoided. When it cannot be avoided and the prospect of even some future well-being vanishes, then life appears to have lost all meaning and the temptation grows in man to claim the right to suppress it" (EV 23, emphasis in original). Similarly, he later contends that "[w]hen the prevailing tendency is to value life only to the extent that it brings pleasure and well-being, suffering seems like an unbearable setback, something from which one must be freed at all costs. Death... becomes a 'rightful liberation' once life is held to be no longer meaningful because it is filled up with pain and inexorably doomed to even greater suffering" (EV 64). With regard to the connection between hedonism and self-interested murder, the Pope suggests that because of our culture's concern with efficiency "a life which would require greater acceptance, love and care is considered useless, or held to be an intolerable burden, and is therefore rejected in one way or another. A person who, because of illness, handicap, or, more simply, just by existing,
compromises the well-being or life-style of those who are more favored tends to be looked upon as an enemy to be resisted or eliminated" (EV 12).

Of course, the view of life set forth in the Gospels and re-articulated in *Evangelium Vitae* can make sense of—indeed, can show how happiness can arise from—the suffering both of the sick and weak, on the one hand, and, on the other, of those who sacrifice their own pleasures and interests in order to care for them. Modernity cannot. The ultimate consequences of its inability to do so become constantly clearer as its deficient theory manifests itself more and more in perverse practice.

**IX.**

This critique of modernity in light of the teaching of *Evangelium Vitae* is open to the following objection: One might question the standard by which it judges modernity, contending that the argument relies on a political standard derived from a suspiciously utopian interpretation of a single encyclical.

This objection suggests that the interpretation of *Evangelium Vitae* offered here—that only a culture of love, understood in the very demanding Christian sense, can avoid degeneration into the active culture of death the Pope observes and deplores—is not representative of Catholic social teaching as a whole, that it mistakenly adopts a utopian standard of political life, perhaps as a result of being misled by a rhetorical exaggeration of the social and political necessity of self-sacrificial love in an encyclical devoted, after all, to condemning and seeking to correct the most ruthless forms of selfishness. We might note in support of this objection that such exaggeration is not wholly foreign to the rhetorical approach of Our Lord himself as it is presented in the Gospels. Thus, in stressing the need to love Him above all things he speaks of the need to hate one’s father and mother, even though he elsewhere endorses the Old Testament injunction to honor one’s father and mother. Thus to the Pharisees, obsessed with worldly glory, he emphasizes the utter renunciation of honor, even though he elsewhere accepts for himself such honors as are fitting, thus suggesting that his followers may innocently do likewise.

In response to this objection we may note, first of all, that the notion that selfless love is at or near the center of Catholic social teaching is not derived only from an interpretation of *Evangelium Vitae*. In *Centessimus Annus*, his encyclical commemorating Leo XIII’s *Rerum Novarum*, the current pontiff offers a brief overview of the Church’s social doctrine of the last century indicating that love is indeed the keystone of what the Church has to say about the proper organization of society and politics. Thus John Paul writes that "what we nowadays call the principle of solidarity ... is clearly seen to be one of the fundamental principles of the Christian view of social and political organization. This principle is frequently stated by Pope Leo XIII, who uses the term ‘friendship,’ a concept already found in Greek philosophy" (CA 10).
We may pause here to note that in Greek thought, or at least in Aristotle’s thought, friendship, or *philia*, was considered to be a form of love in which the friend was thought of as "another self." John Paul continues his summary, pointing to formulations that even more clearly indicate the centrality of self-sacrificial love in the Church’s social and political teaching. Thus he points out that Pope Pius XI refers to the same principle "with the equally meaningful term ‘social charity,’" while Pope Paul VI, "expanding the concept to cover many modern aspects of the social question, speaks of a ‘civilization of love’" (CA 10). Here we may note that charity is the specific term in Catholic moral theology for love in the highest sense, love that, like Christ’s, gives without expectation of return, and that the term "civilization of love" is the very term adopted by John Paul II in *Evangelium Vitae* to describe the culture of life that, in its willingness to care for others at great sacrifice, opposes the culture of death.

Even if we grant, however, that the Church really intends the notion of self-sacrificial love as a standard by which to judge social and political life, we are still confronted with the other part of the objection: that this standard is utopian, that it seeks to judge political and social life in light of a standard unrealistically indifferent to what can legitimately be expected of human beings *en masse*. Of course love or charity is at the center of Christian moral teaching, this objection might run, but it ought not to be the basis of the Church’s social and political teaching, because with human nature wounded by original sin we cannot expect political society to live up to the Christian understanding of love. We may hope, perhaps even confidently, for the appearance of a few saints; but we cannot realistically expect whole political communities to be characterized by love. Thus we cannot lay the culture of death at the door of modern liberalism, which represents, after all, nothing but a clear-sighted coming to terms with human limitations in light of the Fall, which is itself the true root of the culture of death. We ought not lay the culture of death at the feet of Hobbes and Locke but Adam and Eve, and ultimately Satan himself.

In response to this objection we must distinguish between the legitimate insistence that society should take its bearings from love, on the one hand, and the foolish expectation that it will fully live up to love, on the other. It is possible, after all, to have high standards along with sober expectations. Thus the point of the critique of modernity offered here is not that a perfectly loving society is the only real alternative to the culture of death. It is rather that a society that publicly aspires to a culture of life understood as a culture of love is the only real alternative to the culture of death. To elevate self-interest as the only publicly acknowledged principle of action is already to lay the intellectual groundwork for the culture of death.

Nevertheless, while insisting that love should be not only our personal, but also our social and political, standard, we can still realistically accommodate
the role of self-interest in human life. This John Paul does, for example, in *Centessimus Annus*, where he observes that, in light of the fact that men are still bound to self-interest despite their ability to transcend it, the "social order will be all the more stable, the more it takes this fact into account and does not place in opposition personal interests and the interests of society as a whole, but rather seeks ways to bring them into fruitful harmony" ([CA 25]).

On the basis of these considerations it becomes clear that modern liberalism is not responsible for the culture of death in the sense of being the author of selfishness, which is rightly attributed to the Fall of Man. Rather, modern liberalism bears a special responsibility for the culture of death because it, more than any previous mode of thought, provides an ideological justification for the unruly drives of our lower nature. It thus emancipates self-interest in a way undreamed of even by pre-Christian paganism. As C. S. Lewis points out in *The Abolition of Man*, the maxim the Roman father taught his son was that "It is a sweet and seemly thing to die for one's country." In contrast, modern liberalism, by its account of human nature and the political doctrine drawn from it, renders self-sacrifice of any kind unintelligible. It thus tends to make impossible not only the peaks of love to which saints ascend, but even the common decency that refrains from killing one's own children and parents when they become burdensome.

X.

On the view propounded in this paper our situation is grave indeed. To return to the medical metaphor used at the beginning, our sickness is deeply rooted. The seeds of the culture of death are contained in modern political philosophy, and modern political philosophy has greatly, and perhaps decisively, influenced modern society. The first, theoretical point is the conclusion of the arguments advanced in this paper. The second, historical point I have simply assumed as something beyond serious question. In the words of Leo Strauss, the doctrine of "political hedonism" originated by Hobbes "has revolutionized human life everywhere on a scale never yet approached by any other teaching."¹⁴

If this article is correct, then we can expect the struggle against the culture of death to be long and difficult. That struggle, it seems, ultimately presents a challenge not merely to recently acquired opinions but to long-, widely-, and deeply-held convictions about the nature and purpose of the political community and of human life itself. This article suggests that the easier, more rhetorically attractive arguments against the culture of death that appeal to a kind of self-interest and invoke an older, more respectable liberalism--over against the nihilistic liberalism of today--will not in the end produce the desired results. For the reliance on self-interest characteristic of that older liberalism itself opens and invites us through the door to the culture of death. Ultimately
the only arguments that can defeat this culture are as radical as the Gospel itself, because they are taken from the Gospel itself: that all human life, no matter how lowly, manifests the greatness and glory of God; that true happiness, fullness of life, is found only in death to self, in service to others. Such arguments are not easily accepted in any culture, let alone one that has been fed on "political hedonism" for centuries. The culture of death should therefore be resisted with a firm determination based on a realistic understanding that a quick and easy victory is not, so far as human wisdom can discern, in the offing.

This is not to say, however, that such resistance should be despairing, that it should be viewed as a beautifully valiant but practically futile last stand in defense of the right. The struggle is hard, but it is not hopeless. No matter how deeply rooted the culture of death is, the culture of life is in the end even more deeply rooted. No matter how influential the habits of thought derived from an erroneous philosophy of human nature, the truth about human nature remains. No matter how loudly and often we proclaim that the only solid happiness is to be found in the life of selfish pleasure-seeking, the real unhappiness of a culture dedicated to such a view proves the opposite. Thus an openness to the culture of life remains even in those hearts most hardened by the culture of death. As the Holy Father reminds us in another important encyclical, *Veritatis Splendor*, "no darkness of error or sin can totally take away from man the light of God the Creator. In the depths of his heart there always remains a yearning for absolute truth and a thirst to attain full knowledge of it." Here lies the hope for victory.

**Notes**

1. John Paul II., *Evangelium Vitae* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1995). In parenthetical references the encyclical's title is abbreviated E.V. The numbers provided are section, not page, numbers.


3. Ibid., pp. 17-18.


13. In this and all subsequent parenthetical references, *Centessimus Annus* is abbreviated *CA*. The numbers refers to sections, not pages, of the encyclical.
