I read *Rethinking Rights* at the same time that the United States was engaged in debate over health care reform. A few weeks before the final vote was taken by the House of Representatives, I attended a panel discussion that centered on the question, “Is Health Care a Human Right?” The panelists were each members of the Catholic Health Association, and each panelist claimed strongly, although unconvincingly, that by drawing from the resources of Catholic social thought, we can move from the notion that health care is a right to conclude that Catholics in America should support the Senate version of the health care bill.

In the days before the final House vote, these same panelists were quoted in national newspapers by journalists who hoped to show that Catholics were divided on the Senate bill; instead, it showed that there is a need to rethink what we mean by human rights.

Part of the reason that I was unconvinced by the CHA panelists was that they seemed both unusually partisan with regard to their politics and very sloppy with regard to the meaning of rights. I sensed in the CHA presenters’ reasoning a slapdash sort of logic that jumped from Pope John XXIII’s claim that “a human being has the right to security in cases of sickness” (*Pacem in terris*, 11) to an endorsement of the Senate bill. The panelists made little effort to respond to concerns raised by the bishops, for example, that the proposed legislation was, as the bishops stated, “profoundly flawed” in its failure to protect the life, dignity, consciences, and health of all. I found myself thinking that, in order to engage in this debate in a deeper, more responsible manner, we need to think through more carefully just what we mean when we call health care a human right. For that conversation to occur, it certainly would help for the participants to engage the new collection of essays in this volume edited by Frohnen and Grasso.

I don’t mean to give the wrong impression; *Rethinking Rights* is not directed towards the debate about health care reform. In fact, while it has implications for many contemporary social disputes, it is not aimed directly at policy questions at all. As the subtitle suggests, it is an interdisciplinary collection of essays; there are eight chapters plus two substantive introductory and concluding essays. The book flows out of a conference that was held in 2004; while the text prefigures many current judicial and legislative debates, the content engages deep questions...
rather than specific policies. The authors draw from research programs and ongoing conversations within the disciplines of history, political science, and philosophy. I found the essays to be substantive and—at those times when a particular author was drawing from resources beyond my usual range of expertise—rather demanding.

The introductory essay, jointly composed by the editors and titled “Rights in a Multicultural Age,” masterfully situates the eight chapters in several disagreements. These include 1) liberal and post-liberal conflict, 2) culture and conflict in the international arena, 3) the history of rights talk, 4) the individual in community, and 5) issues of size and scope. The book’s purpose is “to reexamine our understanding of human rights by setting forth a more clear and accurate picture of their roots, development, intrinsic nature, and sociocultural effects” (2). This reexamination is needed because of a curious irony: During the period after World War II, with liberal democracy enjoying its greatest time of triumph, “its greatest defenders refuse to give us reasons to value it” (3). The volume is not explicitly framed in terms of Catholic social thought, although the Catholic intellectual tradition plays a prominent role in this reexamination. After all, Pope John Paul II was one of the few leaders in recent times willing to value human rights not simply because of faith (a la Richard Rorty), but also by giving reasons. While an examination of the doctrine of the dignity of the human person “is beyond the scope of the book” (29), the editors aim to extend the conversation about the dignity of personhood to think through the meaning of human rights.

The eight essays that make up the body of the volume are divided into two parts. The first part retraces “the origins and historical development of rights in the West, paying special attention to their political contexts and implications” (31). These include contributions by Brian Tierney examining rights before and after Locke, Gary Glenn on natural rights and social contract in Burke and Bellarmine, George Carey on natural law, natural rights, and the Declaration of Independence, and Bruce Frohnen on individual and group rights in historical practice. The next section proposes that, if we are to rethink the place of rights in our intrinsically social lives, we need to rethink our understanding of existence and sociality. These essays, which are more philosophical in character, include thought-provoking contributions by Kenneth Schmitz, Paul Gottfried, Kenneth Grasso, and Jonathan Chaplin. Some readers of this journal will be particularly interested in Schmitz’s effort to situate human rights metaphysically, Grasso’s account of social ontology and the subsidiary state, and Chaplin’s effort to fill in the missing dimension of sociality in his examination of the rights of
intermediate social bodies, such as families, religious organizations, business corporations, trade unions, and voluntary associations.

The net effect of this volume is to dispose the reader to rethink human rights in terms of sociability, historically embedded practices, concrete social institutions, and a sense of society that includes a variety of self-governing social groups. I wish that more Catholics concerned with social justice and human rights, such as the CHA panelists that I heard recently, would rethink these issues in just these ways. As a volume addressed primarily to scholars, we should not expect this book to do more than its aim; the ongoing American dialect of rights, as Mary Ann Glendon has called it, likely will continue to neglect the social dimensions of personhood while promoting an image of the rights-bearer as an autonomous individual. For Catholic scholars concerned with deepening our understanding of human rights and social justice, *Rethinking Rights* is an important contribution to a continuing conversation.

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