Dystopia and the Gospel of Life
Ryan J. Barilleaux

Two works of speculative fiction present visions of a dystopian future in which human life and human dignity are attacked in the name of pleasure and the greater good. These works, Huxley’s Brave New World and Percy’s The Thanatos Syndrome, not only anticipate several key aspects of the prophetic message of Evangelium Vitae, but they help to make concrete and to illustrate the dangers that John Paul II was warning the world about in his 1995 encyclical.

In October 2011, two seemingly unrelated stories appeared in the news only days apart. In the first, researchers used cloning technology to create a self-reproducing line of embryonic stem cells from a developing human embryo. While the experiment did not produce a true human clone, it was billed as “clearly a step in that direction” and was hailed by many observers as an important breakthrough in the quest to clone human embryos. “Human eggs do indeed have the magic we thought they did!” said one scientist whose company uses human stem cells to develop medical therapies.1 In another story, a study published in The Lancet reported that one-third of Medicare recipients in the United States underwent surgery in their final year of life, with many having surgery in their last month.2 Many commentators suggested that this study would be used as a rationale for rationing surgery to the elderly. Most news organizations and commentators drew no connection between these stories. But Pope John Paul II would have seen the connection, as would writers as disparate as Aldous Huxley and Walker Percy. Each of these men saw links between our view of human life, technology, and what we consider appropriate medical procedures. Each understood the challenges that humanity faces in our age of advanced care and widespread destruction.

The age in which we live is marked by remarkable achievements and unspeakable crimes against humanity. More people live in better conditions and enjoy greater freedom than at any other time in history; millions have also died from violence perpetrated in the name of nations and ideologies, in programs of extermination aimed at removing or subjugating unwanted masses of people, and as a result of the intentional disposal of inconvenient unborn children.

The paradoxical nature of our time makes it difficult to understand. Considering the defeat of totalitarianism in the twentieth century, have we advanced the cause of human freedom and human dignity? Yes, but...
Contemplating the availability of abortion and the growing acceptance of euthanasia, do we seem to have been overtaken by a new barbarism? Yes, but... Adequate explanations for our current condition, in which we have enormous capacity to save and improve human life—and medical professionals and others do so every day—and to snuff it out—medical professionals being at the forefront of this, too—are not simple.

An age of great contradiction and change is an age that calls forth prophetic voices. These voices penetrate the paradoxical and confusing times to speak clearly about what is at stake. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, this role has been filled by those who see beyond the everyday world: the writer of speculative fiction and the religious prophet.

One of the most powerful voices of prophecy in the decades since World War II was Pope John Paul II. His encyclicals and actions cut to the core issues facing post-industrial humanity: the very issue of truth (Veritatis Splendor, 1993), how to understand economic and social questions after communism (Centesimus Annus, 1991), and threats to life and human dignity in an age of scientific progress and democratic triumphalism (Evangelium Vitae, 1995).

In particular, Evangelium Vitae speaks to modern Americans, living as they do in a civilization of freedom, democracy, prosperity, and material progress. It offers not only a testament to human life, but also a sobering analysis of the downside of our democratic-scientific-material culture.

John Paul II had important things to say about the culture of death and the need for a culture of life, and his prophecy was a didactic analysis of contemporary culture and where it is headed. This type of prophecy, employed by pontiffs at least since Leo XIII, has a key role to play in reminding the world of the message and relevance of the Gospel in a secular age.

As important as the teaching of the popes has been for our age, it has not always engaged the modern mind, which is so resistant to authority. That makes other types of prophecy also relevant to calling contemporary secular society to pay attention to the big issues at stake in our time. In particular, the prophecies of speculative fiction have been able to engage the imagination and impart a lesson that supports and illuminates the prophecy of the Vicar of Christ.

In short, what I argue here is that there is more than one way to convey the message of the Gospel of Life, and that particular works of speculative fiction have advanced prophecies about the modern world that complement the message of John Paul II. Two novels of the twentieth century, Aldous Huxley’s Brave New World and Walker Percy’s The Thanatos Syndrome, portray the dystopian future of humanity that will come about if our democratic-scientific-material culture continues to separate freedom from truth.
Dystopia and the Gospel of Life

THE DYSTOPIAN FUTURE

Dystopia is a term that refers to an anti-utopia. Rather than describing a perfect society or political system (utopia), dystopia presents a perfectly awful society or regime. Dystopia occurs as a consequence of trying to create perfection in an imperfect world. Some of the most famous literature of the twentieth century is dystopian in nature: specifically, George Orwell’s *1984* and Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* present two different visions of how attempts to create perfect societies result in disaster. *1984* demonstrates how a totalitarian communist state leads to oppression, squalor, misery, and terror. In *Brave New World (BNW)*, the attempt to create a perfect order by controlling every person and all of society leads to an unbearable situation for “the Savage” who has been raised on Shakespeare (who serves as the representative of traditional Western civilization). In the end, both Orwell’s Winston Smith and Huxley’s Savage become victims of the “perfect” societies they reject.

Dystopias usually involve showing the awful consequences of trying to implement one particular vision of a perfect society. In *Brave New World*, Huxley warns his readers of the dangers of abandoning traditional notions of truth and happiness for a society based on pleasure and belief in a kind of salvation by technology. Like Huxley, Walker Percy highlighted the threat posed by the notion of salvation through technology. In *The Thanatos Syndrome*, he describes the dangers of allowing scientists to impose their own vision of a perfect society, as well as warning that many evils can and have been visited upon the world by those who have abandoned traditional morality and sought to perfect the world. These novels present different visions of how a perfect social and political order is attempted. Nevertheless, they share with other dystopian visions a set of common ideas about why utopia cannot be achieved and what are the consequences of trying to perfect humanity and society.

HUXLEY’S BRAVE NEW WORLD

Seven centuries from now, the world has achieved a highly stable society based on a caste system maintained through assembly-line techniques for mass-producing human beings and conditioning them to fit into one of five classes. Religion, monogamy, virtue, and anything that is contrary to a life lived for pleasure have been eradicated. Mindless games and inane “feelies” (movies with touch sensations) are the chief forms of entertainment. Casual sex is not only encouraged, but is the norm, with long-term relationships discouraged. Humans are conditioned to live for the moment.
and to prefer groups. They frequently consume *soma*, a universally available narcotic that allows them to avoid physical or psychic pain.

The social hierarchy runs from Alphas at the top—possessing the greatest intellectual abilities—down to the subservient and imbecilic Epsilons who are fit only for the most elementary tasks. World Controllers direct everything to insure social stability. Only a few places in the world remain apart from this new order: a “savage” (Native American) reservation in the American southwest, and a few islands where those who still do not fit in despite conditioning are sent so they will not infect others with their “anti-social” ideas.

The story unfolds mostly in London and centers on a few characters who stand apart from this mass of conformity. One is Bernard Marx, an Alpha-Plus who is unhappy because his short stature makes him seem unfit for his high status. His friend, Helmholtz Watson, is another Alpha who has grown discontented with his job creating propaganda slogans to perpetuate the status quo and who seeks greater opportunity to express himself. On a trip to a savage reservation, Bernard meets John. His mother, Linda, had been abandoned on the reservation years ago when she had gone there on holiday. John wants to see this brave new world that his mother has told him about. Both return to London with Bernard.

In London, they meet their fates. Linda, shunned because she has grown fat and has given birth, escapes into heavy doses of soma, which ultimately kill her. John, known as “the Savage,” becomes a celebrity and meets Mustapha Mond, the World Controller for Western Europe.

John and Mustapha Mond debate the relative advantages of their cultures. John makes the case for God and the traditional values of Western civilization, employing Shakespeare both as his evidence and his rhetoric. Mond makes the case for stability, comfort, and the greatest pleasure for the greatest number. John replies that he does not want comfort; he wants God, poetry, danger, goodness, and sin. When Mond protests that John is claiming the right to be unhappy and to succumb to all the ills that his society has eliminated, John replies “I claim them all.” But John cannot have these things in the new order and eventually kills himself rather than face the meaningless existence he has found in London.

**PERCY’S *THE THANATOS SYNDROME***

Dr. Tom More is a Louisiana psychiatrist who has just been released from prison. When his practice had fallen on hard times, Dr. More resorted to selling prescription drugs at a truckstop to make money. He returns home after a two-year sentence and he soon notices that people are acting strangely. He suspects that something is different, but he sees in two of his
patients unexplainable changes in their behavior, characterized by “a mild fond vacancy, a species of unfocused animal good spirits.” He notices changes in his wife and children, which makes him even more curious to discover what is going on.

With the help of his cousin, Dr. Lucy Lipscomb, and Vergil Bon (who works for Lucy), More seeks the source of this change in personality among so many around him. They discover that two leading scientists in the area are adulterating the water supply—mostly in schools and public housing projects—in a plan to “improve” society. One is John Van Dorn, a scientist at the nearby nuclear power plant. The other is Dr. Bob Comeaux, director of the Quality-of-Life division of Fedville, a National Institutes of Health complex responsible for several programs (including euthanasia).

Van Dorn and Comeaux have created Project Blue Boy, a program in which they dump heavy sodium (a radioactive substance from the nuclear plant) into the water. This has the effect of making people more docile, more easily controlled, even somewhat like domesticated animals. Another side effect is that people lose sexual inhibitions, an effect that becomes important later in the story. The scientists claim that this procedure solves all sorts of social problems: it reduces social conflict and violence, people are content, illegitimate births and venereal disease have declined, and so on. Those affected by the heavy sodium have better memories, can do complex multiplication and division in their heads, and are very industrious, even if their language skills are impaired (they tend to talk in two-word sentences), and they seem somewhat less human. The scientists are quite excited about their results and argue that the social engineering of Blue Boy is producing a virtual utopia.

Comeaux induces More to talk with Father Rinaldo Smith, whom Comeaux wants More to declare insane. This will enable Comeaux to take over a hospice that Fr. Smith runs and thus allow him to euthanize the old and sick and disabled at the hospice. More’s talks with Fr. Smith reveal that the old priest is not insane, but is troubled by the insanity of the times. In one conversation, he tells More the story of several scientists in pre-WWII Germany whose desire to improve society and relieve suffering led them to do and support horrendous things. Although these scientists were not Nazis, their ideas ultimately contributed to the Holocaust. More eventually understands that Fr. Smith’s story has to do with the evil that can be done in the name of improving society through science and technology.

More, Lucy, and Vergil eventually uncover the fact that Van Dorn leads a ring of child molesters who run a private school where all students are given regular doses of heavy sodium. This doping of students allows these adults to engage in a systematic molestation of the students, who in
their altered state passively comply with the molesters. More and his associates obtain photographic evidence of the abuse and gain assistance from local law-enforcement officials. In the end, exposure of this molestation ring and the use of heavy sodium brings an end to Project Blue Boy.

At the end of the novel, Fr. Smith warns More and others attending Mass about the danger of tenderness (that is, a tender-hearted feeling that is not connected to a true sense of human dignity). As he tells them, “Don’t you know where tenderness leads? . . . To the gas chambers. . . . More people have been killed in this century by tender-hearted souls than by cruel barbarians in all other centuries put together.”

THE ASSUMPTIONS OF DYSTOPIA

Portrayals of dystopia are based on three basic assumptions. The first is that utopia is unachievable. Despite the best efforts of the reformer, the scientist, the social engineer, the ideologue, or the charismatic leader, neither humans as people nor societies are perfectible. One need not conclude that this means that those who portray dystopia are cynical or hopelessly pessimistic; on the contrary, they are often committed to ideals of freedom, justice, and human dignity. Orwell looked to democratic reform to make society and the economic order more just, while Percy was a man of science who believed in science as means for alleviating (but not eliminating) human suffering. But these authors understand humanity well enough to know that people cannot be made perfect.

Second, portrayals of dystopia proceed from the realization that there is no single social, political, or economic order that will please everyone or make everyone happy at all times. One reason for this fact is the imperfectibility of human beings. Another is that humans have different interests, opinions, passions, goals, and desires. It is far easier to make everyone miserable than to make everyone happy.

This reality leads to the third assumption underlying dystopia: that attempts to create utopia will lead to disaster. The disaster may be small in scale, as in Hawthorne’s The Blithedale Romance, because the utopian commune of Blithedale affects only those who belong to it. Their dreams of utopia collapse under the weight of boredom, jealousy, and discord among the inhabitants. On the other hand, many dystopias—Orwell’s 1984, Huxley’s BNW, Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale, or Philip Jose Farmer’s Riders of the Purple Wage—involve consequences for millions of people. Grandiose attempts to create utopia lead to grand failures and misery. As Paul Johnson noted in his sweeping history of the twentieth century: “The destructive capacity of the individual, however vicious, is small; of the state, however well-intentioned, almost limitless.”
In the end, all dystopias reflect these fundamental assumptions. They do not merely urge us to be careful, lest we veer from the path to utopia and end up in trouble; on the contrary, dystopias assume that utopia is unreachable.

**THE FEATURES OF DYSTOPIA**

Perhaps as confirmation that there is no one, perfect order that will please everyone, there is no one vision of utopia. Francis Bacon’s *New Atlantis* presents a plan for a utopian society quite different from the utopias of the totalitarian ideologies of the twentieth century, and all of these are different from the utopian visions of B. F. Skinner’s *Walden Two*, Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward*, or Charlotte Perkin Gilman’s *Herland*. Despite this diversity, there are several features common to all dystopias.

1) *Regimentation of society.* All dystopias exhibit a greater regimentation of society than exists in the contemporary world. In *BNW*, society is divided into a strict caste system that begins in the treatment of embryos and continues through psychological conditioning. In *Thanatos*, social regimentation is more subtle but still present. Dr. Bob Comeaux wants to take over Fr. Smith’s hospice, which is a charitable organization, and bring it under government control. He wants to implement a system in which experts decide who will live and who will die. His vision of a more perfect social order is one in which large bureaucracies of government experts run society.

2) *Dehumanization.* Dehumanization is one aspect of dystopia that is actually more pronounced in *Thanatos* than in *BNW*. People who consume heavy sodium are reduced to a kind of subhuman status. Indeed, late in the story, Vergil observes that ingesting heavy sodium leads a person to “regress to a primitive primate sort of behavior.” More corrects him: “Not primate. Pongid. Primate includes humans.” The point of this distinction is that Blue Boy has “perfected” humans by making them less human and more like animals. In *BNW*, dehumanization occurs by treating people as pawns of the state, to be manipulated through chemical and psychological techniques.

3) *Misuse of technology.* This aspect of dystopia is obvious in both stories. In *BNW*, technology is used to mass-produce human beings, each biologically and chemically tailored to fit into a particular niche in society. In *Thanatos*, heavy sodium—a by-product of the nuclear power plant—is used to manage the population by dehumanizing those who consume it.

4) *State terror.* The use of state power to terrorize and intimidate the populace can be blunt or subtle. In *BNW*, state terror is blunt: those who do not fit in are treated with large doses of soma and exiled to islands. In
Thanatos, state terror is almost imperceptible, but is present nonetheless. The key way in which it appears is in Comeaux’s attempt to coerce Tom More to join Project Blue Boy. More is caught trespassing on the grounds of the nuclear power plant, which violates his parole from prison. Comeaux uses his authority over More’s probation to tell More that he must join Blue Boy or he will be sent back to jail. Only More’s exposure of the pedophilia ring saves him from incarceration.

5) The tragedy of the individual. In dystopia, the individual is subsumed for the purpose of the “greater good.” For many of the characters in BNW, their tragedy is being confronted with the choice of “conform or else.” The World Controller tells the Savage that he had been a nonconformist, but chose to subordinate his own freedom and happiness to the greater good. Bernard and Helmholtz are exiled for nonconformity. John cannot conform and has been told he cannot return to the Savage Reservation, so he commits suicide. In Thanatos, the tragedy of the individual lies in the dehumanization of those under the influence of heavy sodium. They are not fully human, so they seem fine when in reality they have had their dignity stripped from them. This loss of dignity is most apparent in matters of sex. Tom More finds it peculiar that women affected by the heavy sodium—including his wife—present themselves for sex in a position that is more animal-like than fully human. More even finds photos of children smiling for the camera while being molested.

6) The new class. Milovan Djilas was an official in the Yugoslav Communist Party, who observed that revolutions do not abolish class structures or elites, but replace one elite with another. He called this post-revolutionary elite “the new class” and it is a feature of every dystopia. In Thanatos, Comeaux and Van Dorn represent the new class of experts who will rule when heavy sodium is distributed to the population at large. They take pains to insure that Fedville does not receive any of the heavy sodium-laden water that they are using to control the larger population, and in particular they are free to carry on as they wish. To emphasize the point that Comeaux is part of a new class of elites, he dresses in a fashion that consciously imitates the plantation aristocracy of the antebellum South.

7) The role of propaganda. Propaganda is always a feature of dystopia. One reason for this fact is that the state needs to convince citizens of the rightness of its policies and actions, in order to keep them in line. Another reason is that propaganda aids the state in discrediting dissenters and enemies. Third, propaganda is a tool for reinforcing the message and philosophy of the state, which is at best misleading and at worst a lie.

In BNW, propaganda is central to the social control techniques that help to insure social stability. Broadcast House (London headquarters of
the BBC) has been renamed Propaganda House to baldly announce its purpose. Members of each caste are taught to repeat that they are glad that they are not part of any other caste. Other slogans reinforce messages that promote the values of the regime, including “A gramme [of soma] is better than a damn; “ “Everyone belongs to everyone else;” “Ending is better than mending;” and, “Hug me till you drug me, honey.”

In Thanatos, most of the work of controlling the population is left to the internal effects of heavy sodium on its victims. Nevertheless, Bob Comeaux employs what can be described only as propaganda to support the policies he promotes and to defend Project Blue Boy. Comeaux’s main job is directing the “qualitarian” center, which is a government agency that administers euthanasia for those whose “quality of life” is not sufficient to justify their continued existence. He endorses killing infants under the age of two who are “unwanted or afflicted” by means of “termination by pedeuthanasia.”

By covering the practice of infanticide—a word he rejects as “semantics”—under a phrase that seems clinical and neutral, he engages in propaganda. Similarly, he refers to the babies, the elderly, and disabled killed in his “qualitarian” center as “neonates” and “euthanates,” obscuring their humanity.

8) Totalitarianism. All dystopias are necessarily totalitarian. This fact flows from the state’s desire or need to control all aspects of life and society. The society of Brave New World proclaims it exists to make people happy, but they can be happy only if manipulated and controlled. That is why the World Controller calls them “nice tame animals.” In Thanatos, Project Blue Boy leads to totalitarianism because it alters the very nature of those who consume the heavy sodium, leaving them under the control of the expert elites who direct (and abuse) them. It is totalitarian because Comeaux’s grand vision is a society run by experts like himself, controlling a docile, animal-like population and exterminating those who are unwanted, infirm, disabled, or otherwise lacking in what Comeaux defines a sufficient quality of life. Either hard or soft, dystopia is totalitarian; anything that evades the control of the state could undermine or inhibit the project to perfect humanity and society.

THE PROPHETIC MESSAGE OF EVANGELIUM VITAE

These dystopian novels are works of fiction, but they contain a large measure of truth about the dangers of attempting to create a perfect society. The dystopias of Brave New World and The Thanatos Syndrome are especially relevant to our time, because they speak of threats to human dignity and life from both technology and from those who proclaim that they are really pro-
moting human happiness. These dystopian visions are more than works of imagination; they are warnings about where society may well be heading.

They are powerful warnings also because their analyses of the dangers ahead are given even greater urgency by the prophetic message of *Evangelium Vitae*. In this encyclical letter, Pope John Paul II presented an authoritative review of the Gospel of Life and of threats to life. He addressed the horror of abortion—not surprisingly, much media coverage of the pontiff’s message focused on his teaching about abortion and Catholic support even for partial limits on abortion—but there was much more to the letter than just an urgent plea against killing babies and others who are weak.

*Evangelium Vitae* (*EV*) makes two key points (among many) that are especially relevant to Americans living in the democratic-technological-material culture that characterizes our time. First, John Paul warns us of threats posed to human life and human dignity from technology; second, he penetrates the dangers that await us when freedom and democracy are disconnected from objective truth.

1) **Technology as a threat as well as a promise.** John Paul was no Luddite; he did not argue against all technology. Rather, he focuses considerable attention on the danger that technology presents to human life. Early in the letter, he notes that technological progress enables “new forms of attacks on the dignity of the human being.”

20 Later, he elaborates on these attacks:

> [E]normous sums of money have been invested and continue to be invested in the production of pharmaceutical products which make it possible to kill the foetus in the mother’s womb without recourse to medical assistance. On this point, scientific research itself seems to be almost exclusively preoccupied with developing products which are ever more simple and effective in suppressing life.  

21 Another threat comes from methods of artificial reproduction, which not only violate moral law regarding reproduction but treat human lives as nothing more than surplus tissue. This practice “in fact reduces human life to the level of simple ‘biological material’ to be freely disposed of.”

The pontiff does not present technology as inherently evil. On the contrary, the issue is how technology is used. In the end, each person is responsible for his actions: “Each individual in fact has moral responsibility for the acts which he personally performs; no one can be exempted from this responsibility, and on the basis of it everyone will be judged by God himself.” Because of this individual responsibility, the attitudes and ideas that underlie our use of technology matter more than technology itself.
2) The consequences of separating freedom from truth. John Paul notes that the contemporary world is marked by a “surprising contradiction;” specifically,

Precisely in an age when the inviolable rights of the person are solemnly proclaimed and the value of life is publicly affirmed, the very right to life is being denied or trampled upon, especially at the more significant moments of existence: the moment of birth and the moment of death.  

The pontiff then asks what are the roots of this contradiction, and finds them in “a notion of freedom which exalts the isolated individual in an absolute way,” and which severs freedom from “its essential link with the truth.”

What are the results of this separation of freedom from truth? There are several, many of which are also reflected in the dystopian worlds portrayed in fiction.

a) Selfishness and whimsy: “The person ends up by no longer taking as the sole and indisputable point of reference for his own choices the truth about good and evil, but only his subjective and changeable opinion or, indeed, his selfish interest and whim.”

b) Subjectivity and relativism: “Any reference to common values and to a truth absolutely binding on everyone is lost, and social life ventures on to the shifting sands of complete relativism. At that point, everything is negotiable, everything is open to bargaining: even the first of the fundamental rights, the right to life.” In BNW, individuals have no attachments: words such as “mother” are considered obscene; society actively discourages men and women from forming attachments that are exclusive, but encourages individuals to engage in casual sex with lots of partners. In Thanatos, Bob Comeaux claims to want to relieve neonates and euthanates of their suffering, but what he really wants is to relieve himself of the discomfort the handicapped and the elderly and the unwanted cause him to feel.

c) A “Promethean attitude” toward life and death. Believing that humans can take into their own hands decisions about life and death, and thus master the nature of existence itself, society comes to support and encourage the destruction of the weak and vulnerable in the name of “mis-guided pity at the sight of the patient’s suffering. . . . Thus it is proposed to eliminate malformed babies, the severely handicapped, the disabled, the elderly, especially when they are not self-sufficient, and the terminally ill.” As Father Rinaldo Smith repeats in Thanatos, “compassion leads to the gas chamber.”
d) A “conspiracy against life.” The problems that arise from freedom without truth are not limited to the thoughts and behavior of individuals, but come to be manifest in social and political institutions that work to promote policies contrary to human life and dignity:

[W]e are in fact faced by an objective “conspiracy against life” . . . lending credit to the culture which presents recourse to contraception, sterilization, abortion and even euthanasia as a mark of progress and a victory of freedom, while depicting as enemies of freedom and progress those positions which are unreservedly pro-life.30

In Thanatos, Bob Comeaux sees Father Smith as an enemy of progress, because he runs a hospice that takes in all those whom he regards as merely neonates and euthanates who need to be eliminated in order to improve the overall quality of life. In BNW, women practice Malthusian drills to prevent conception, but if they should become pregnant are sent to an Abortion Centre to “correct” that situation.

d) The “tyrant state.” The pontiff warns us that freedom and democracy are perverted when they are separated from the truth.

The State is no longer the “common home” where all can live together on the basis of principles of fundamental equality, but is transformed into a tyrant State, which arrogates to itself the right to dispose the life of the weakest and most defenceless members. . . . The appearance of the strictest respect for legality is maintained, at least when the laws permitting abortion and euthanasia are the result of a ballot in accordance with what are generally seen as the rules of democracy.31

This tyrant state regards itself as fulfilling the rule of law and democracy: “[W]hat we have here is only the tragic caricature of legality; the democratic ideal, which is only truly such when it acknowledges and safeguards the dignity of every human person, is betrayed in its very foundations.”32 But this tyrant state, exercising as it does “an absolute power over others and against others,” especially when this absolute power masquerades as democracy because it has been achieved through the processes of democracy, is not far from the totalitarian states of dystopian fiction. Cloaked in the mantle of democracy and the rule of law, the autonomous individuals of modernity have imposed on society the tyranny of the majority.
HOW DYSTOPIA INFORMS THE GOSPEL OF LIFE

Evangelium Vitae contains a powerful warning about threats to life and true freedom (which is bound to truth) in our age of contradiction. It is a warning that is especially relevant—and poignant—for those of us who live in the American culture of science, progress, liberty, and prosperity. What’s more, Pope John Paul’s warning finds parallels and echoes in the dystopian visions of Walker Percy and Aldous Huxley, who warn us about where modern society is headed.

Thanatos and Brave New World help to make concrete the general warnings contained in Evangelium Vitae. These works of fiction ring true and give us examples of what the pontiff is trying to protect us from. Although these novels were published before the encyclical, it is as if they are telling us to listen to the prophetic message of John Paul II. In the case of Walker Percy, writing only a few years before Evangelium Vitae appeared, his vision of compassionate scientists reducing humans to a Pongid state in the name of social harmony is one that is uncomfortably close to the world in which we live, where researchers seek to make human clones in order to produce replacement parts, and scholars at elite universities advocate euthanasia for the disabled. In the case of Aldous Huxley, his warning is more comprehensive: it depicts the logical extreme to which freedom without truth will lead us. Indeed, we can already see many elements of Huxley’s brave new world in our own time: hordes of autonomous individuals mindlessly pursuing pleasure, defining their own reality, demanding the right to whatever entertainment, technology, or activity they think will make them happy, and engaging in exhausting rounds of casual hook-ups; then leaving in their wake damaged families, neglected and abused children, and all manner of social pathologies.

The Gospel of Life is not just a message for Catholics or only the perspective of those who question the wonders of modernity; it is a message for all people. Moreover, the disparate prophetic voices of our time echo and amplify its message. We would be well advised to heed these warnings.

Notes


5. Ibid., p. 361.


14. Pongid: An ape of the family *Pongidae*, which includes the chimpanzee, gorilla, and orangutan. Pongid apes are farther from humanity than primates, which include monkeys and lemurs.


18. Ibid., 36.

19. Ibid., p. 199.


21. Ibid., no. 13.

22. Ibid., no. 14.

23. Ibid., no. 74.

24. Ibid., no. 18.

25. Ibid., no. 19. Emphasis in original.

26. Ibid. Emphasis in original.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid., no. 20. Emphasis in original.

29. Ibid., no. 15.

30. Ibid., no. 17.

31. Ibid., no. 20. Emphasis in original.

32. Ibid. Emphasis in original.