Remarks on Listening to and Reading the Three Short Papers of Peter Augustine Lawler, Marc Guerra, and Hadley Arkes
James V. Schall, S.J.

What has concerned me most is the coherence of political philosophy in the light of what is not political philosophy. Reality, what is, is always richer than our knowledge of it. If we are to understand political things, we have to understand more than political things—things like history, science, literature, practical living, common sense, philosophy itself, and yes, the terms and content of revelation.

First of all, I have read over these three comments on the meanderings of Schall’s mind over these years on sundry and most every topic. I appreciate that three men whom I respect and know would take the time to reflect more carefully on the many, probably too many, things I have written over the years. When a man writes anything, he never knows whether anyone will ever read it, let alone agree with it, or even disagree with it. But Peter, Marc, and Hadley have taken the time to consider matters that I have hoped were worthy of reflection and conducive to insight. I must say that each of them caught issues that I have long considered central.

Here at the Society of Catholic Social Scientists Panel at the 2015 American Political Science Association Meeting in San Francisco, the essays and books that I have expressly devoted to political philosophy are of first concern. What have I written that might be worth keeping and thinking about? In this light, each of the commentators has understood one or another of the themes that I have habitually stressed. They bring up lines of thought that I had forgotten or seen in another way. It is quite true that other people can see in what you write things that you did not wholly see yourself. This “thinking again” is why knowledge requires not just our own brains but the input of the minds of others thinking about the reasons we give for the truth of things. I have always considered Gilson’s Unity of Philosophic Experience to be a seminal explanation of this mutual endeavor.

One “first principle,” which each of these commentators has recognized, is the contention that to understand political philosophy and political things, one needs to know more than political philosophy and political things. Note the word “understand.” With Aristotle, I think an unlearned
man who has experience and insight can be wise and see the practical truth of things before him. With Plato, I am cautious about the political capacities of learned men. Such views are not unique to me. Still, if we are to understand political things, we have to understand more than political things—things like history, science, literature, practical living, common sense, philosophy itself, and yes, the terms and content of revelation.

Several of the commentators mentioned Strauss and Voegelin, to whom I would add Hannah Arendt. I have been grateful to them, and their schools, for bringing political philosophy as such back to the attention not just of the American Political Science Association, but of cultural life in general. Their careful and penetrating essays and books remain monuments to human intelligence and perception. Their work has enabled people from my tradition to find a voice in the discussion of the highest things, something that was, for the most part, lacking before they arrived on the scene.

For myself, I have been a student of several wise teachers who recognized the importance of political and philosophical things. They realized the specific importance of precisely political philosophy in the understanding of things. I think especially of Clifford Kossel, S.J., Heinrich Rommen, Goetz Briefs, Thomas McTigue, Rudolf Allers, and Charles N. R. McCoy. But over the years people like Ernest Fortin, A.A., Msgr. Robert Sokolowski, David Walsh, Michael Jackson, Daniel Mahoney, John Finnis, Ellis Sandoz, Leon Kass, James Hitchcock, Susan Orr, Janne Haaland Matlary, and the three men here have been both inspirations and guides, as we say, checks and balances of the mind.

Reading an author is reading someone who has read someone else. We think of Aristotle reading Plato who read Homer. We think of Augustine reading scripture, the Platonists, and Cicero; of Aquinas reading Augustine and Aristotle; of Machiavelli reading the ancient authors; of Locke reading Hobbes who read Thucydides; of Hegel who read Kant who read Descartes; of Marx who read the Epicureans; and of Nietzsche who seems to have read just about everything and thought it all mostly wrong.

As I look back on what I have written and thought, through the eyes of these three reflections, it is clear to me that what has concerned me most is the coherence of political philosophy in the light of what is not political philosophy. The key text, in some ways, is for me Strauss’s remark that philosophy is a “knowledge of the whole,” or, perhaps better, “a seeking of the knowledge of the whole.” Ever since at least Socrates, we have been conscious of the fact that the philosopher says of himself that he knows that he knows nothing. This is not an article of despair, as Josef Pieper, one of my abiding heroes, has often pointed out. It is simply an affirmation that
Remarks on the Three Short Papers of Lawler, Guerra, and Arkes

reality, what is, is always richer than our knowledge of it. We have a thirst both for being and for knowing being.

I came at political philosophy through philosophy. In particular, as I wrote in one of my earliest academic essays, “The Totality of Society: From Justice to Friendship,”1 I came from an experience that, like all young men and women, I wanted to sort out.2 This was the experience of friendship, considered initially in its relation to justice with its necessity and inadequacies. Aristotle, of course, had said that friendship was more important than justice in polities. Plato was simply eloquent on the topic, though it took me a long time to come to terms with Plato. After a number of years of teaching, I began even to wonder if there was much else worth teaching other than Plato. He was still the best at changing the souls of the “potential philosophers,” as I believe Strauss called them, those who were just waking up to or turning around to the wonder of what is.

What has always struck me about friendship? It was clarified by the way that Aristotle dealt with it, something most students, to their surprise, immediately grasped as true to life. But also, and this probably came from Augustine, it was the realization that even at its best, or especially at its best, friendship always left us open to something beyond the friends. The polity, though it could not legislate friendship, provided a home in which it could take place and flourish. When it did, we were always left unsettled even in its perfection. It seemed to point to something that could only be called a “higher” friendship, one that did not jeopardize but sealed what we experienced. From Aristotle’s treatise on friendship, I came away with two experiences in reason that have since guided much of my thought.

The first of these concerns revolves around Aristotle’s unexpected remark in the Ethics that “God seems lonely.” Therefore, he lacks a perfection that we human beings seem to possess. Indeed, friendship seems in many ways to relate to the highest thing about us. It was quite clear that Aristotle was right with the evidence that he had available to him. His “First Mover” seemed to be closed in on Himself. The revelational teaching that within the Godhead there was “otherness,” “Trinity” of persons, was a direct and sensible response to a problem postulated by Aristotle. All persons were “other-related” even in being and remaining themselves. The experience of friendship was in fact a participation in a love beyond itself, as we could somehow appreciate just from its nagging incompleteness.

The second concern had to do with death and the object of friendship. We know classical stories of men sacrificing their lives for their friends. The same notion is found in scripture. If the object of friendship was the person of the other friend, does not death indicate its futility? The answer to this concern, it seemed to me, was to be found in two steps. The first
was the Greek notion of immortality. The second was the Christian notion of the resurrection of the body, something that was related to Aristotle’s recognition of the fact that body and soul made one, not two, beings. It was through this avenue that the Incarnation in revelation relied upon the tractate on friendship for its full intelligibility.

Thus, I wrote my doctoral dissertation under Rommen with the title “Immortality and the Foundations of Political Philosophy.” The immortality that Christian thought understood was not eternal deathlessness. The soul, though it had origins in the Godhead, had a finite beginning. But once created, it could not be destroyed. It was not a body which could and did cease. Thus, it was possible at least to understand how the person who died was the same person who was resurrected. If the soul died and the body was recreated from nothing, it could not be the same person before and after. And this remaining the same person throughout time and eternity was the essence of the experience of the love that is called friendship.

I have made it a point to write as a Roman Catholic and as someone who reads philosophy. That is, I do not try to censor myself so that I can get published because the approach that I take is not politically correct. If I call books, Political Philosophy & Revelation: A Catholic View or Roman Catholic Political Philosophy, as I do call them, I expect a reader both to know where I am coming from and for him to know that a coherent argument can be made for what I maintain, one that is not just some weird religious rambling that makes no sense. I am quite prepared to be shown wrong. The fact is, as I see it, the core of what I argue does make sense, whatever else we make of it. I do not mind disagreeing but I do mind refusing to know what can be known about these concerns, even by someone who is not a Roman Catholic or a believer of any sort.

Alongside of these more philosophical reflections on reason and revelation, I have also devoted considerable attention to what I would call the education of the good student. I call the project, after the title of an early book, Another Sort of Learning. From several experiences of my own as a young man, I realized that I did not know what to read even when I finally realized that I wanted to read. Samuel Johnson said that the best thing you can do for a boy is to teach him how to read. But it is not enough to know how to read. The real crux is what to read. I have worried about the student in almost any college or university, even in years after he has graduated, suddenly coming across a book that makes him realize that he really knows nothing.

But once we have such an experience, what do we do next? It is in this context that I have been addicted to compiling book lists on various topics. Over the years of my own education, I came across books, often but not al-
ways short ones, that made me cheer to myself. In reading them, you sud-


denly know that “this is true.” Someone has taken me to a book that has in

turn taken me to reality, to what is. And when we come across such a book,
the first thing we want to do is to tell someone about it. And this brings us
back to the friendship question and what we do while we are in this life.
We do many things, of course. But there is always this nagging sense that
we want to find the truth of things. And we want to find those who find it
with us. It is not really ours when we find it. That is the marvel of it all.

A gentleman from some town in Ohio, a man I did not know, once
sent me a letter. On the margins of this letter—I do a regular column in
the University Bookman entitled “On Letters and Essays”—was a citation
from Thomas Aquinas. I was never quite able to locate it in the vast cor-
pus of Aquinas. But it said, in essence, that the best thing one can do for
his friend is to teach him the truth. So even as a cleric, I have not been a
good preacher like the Dominicans; I have not been involved in works of
mercy, and certainly not in politics or academic bureaucracies. I have been
a teacher and a writer. The common good of society requires many things.
No one can do everything. This is why there are so many of us. We are left
free to do what we can do.

We are never quite sure that what we end up doing is well enough
done. But in my case, I have been content if a student from thirty years
ago writes me from nowhere to tell me that that book I had him reluctantly
read changed his life. In this sense, to be a professor demands something
of us that is close to the act of faith. We never really know whether most
of what we said, recommended, or wrote had any effect. It was the func-
tion of the professor only to seek the truth and spell it out in the best way
he knew how. He knows that the truth, even the slender truth he may have
seen, is not his to own but only to be amazed at.

There comes a time for professors to be informed by their university
that they are now officially to be called “Professor Emeritus.” It is an hon-
orary title worthy of much reflection. Merit is not and cannot be something
we give ourselves. In the end, the whole academic world depends on our
recognizing truths that we received and passed on, but not without our
affirmation of them, our calling them to the attention of our students and
readers.

Let me end these reflections on the same topic with which I began.
In 1778, Samuel Johnson wrote a letter to Saunders Welch, Esq., at the
English Coffee House, Rome. In my Roman days, I have been there. In
the letter, Johnson wrote: “The world has few greater pleasures than that
which two friends enjoy, in tracing back, at some distant time, those trans-
actions and events through which they have passed together.”

The read-
James V. Schall, S.J.

ing of these three comments of good friends serves to remind me both of the truth of Johnson’s observation and of the greater pleasure to which friendship itself always points us, one that, we are sure, includes what we remember. My approach to political philosophy is one that, I think, makes such sentiments also conformable to reason.

Notes


2. This essay is found also in The Mind That Is Catholic (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 114–27.

3. This was later, further meditated on, published as Reason, Revelation, and the Foundations of Political Philosophy (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987).