



## James Schall on Being Open to “What Is”

Peter Augustine Lawler

*The most prolific and genuinely provocative writer in America today is James Schall. Schall tells that the Catholic Church is today about the sole source of a genuinely reasonable—meaning genuinely realistic—view of “what is.” That’s why Schall contends that political science is not a natural science; our lives as social or relational animals living together in community can’t really be understood realistically without seeing the whole truth about who each of us is.*

The most prolific and genuinely provocative writer in America today is James Schall. He also is a very careful writer, but he writes much more quickly than I can read. And so be patient with my careless thoughts.

Schall tells that the Catholic Church is today about the sole source of a genuinely reasonable—meaning genuinely realistic—view of “what is.” “What is” is creation, a gift of the Trinitarian God who infused every part of his creation with his rational, relational image, his personal *logos*. And who created each of us for a personal destiny that makes each of us more than a merely natural being, a being born to die. We know, when we tell the truth to ourselves, that our longings point beyond our natural satisfactions in the direction of infinite joy, and that what we most long for we can’t provide for ourselves.<sup>1</sup>

So what we know through reason points in the direction of both creation and redemption, most of all in the direction of the creation and redemption of particular persons. That’s why Schall contends that political science is not a natural science; our lives as social or relational animals living together in community can’t really be understood realistically without seeing the whole truth about who each of us is.<sup>2</sup>

Our deepest longings can’t be satisfied by any effort to make us perfect citizens—contrary to what the city in speech in Plato’s *Republic* or Rousseau (much more insistently or practically) seem to suggest—or by any effort to deploy our material resources with our intellectual ingenuity to prolong life indefinitely. The only way to live well with the invincible fact of biological death and sustain personal freedom or honor free will is to see that death or dissolving into nothingness is not the final word about who each of us is.

Political or technological projects aiming to cure us of our personal disorder always strike at the foundation of personal freedom. The freedom

we rational, willful, and sinful beings have is most of all to choose for or against the loving personal God. As Schall points out, the Catholic doctrine of hell remains quite reasonable; it describes what must happen to persons who believe they can save themselves all on their own.<sup>3</sup>

By the reasonable Catholic Church, Schall means, most of all, Thomism. And in our time that means above all the writing of our philosopher-pope emeritus, even though Pope Benedict doesn't follow the word of St. Thomas in every respect. Schall repeatedly declares the encyclicals and books of Pope Benedict XVI to be great, and the greatest or most indispensable of these is *Jesus of Nazareth*. I really do think it's true that if you want to see the personal *logos* that distinguishes Catholic teaching deployed in the most penetrating and practical ways these days, all you need is Ratzinger and Schall.

Why do you need Schall in addition to Ratzinger? Well, Schall might say you don't. But let's think about the differences between Schall and Ratzinger.

At the level of mode of expression, we can say that Schall is more American (not surprisingly!) and more Straussian. So Schall is someone more appreciative of the American way of life and of the place of economic freedom and modern techno-mechanization in serving personal dignity through abolishing slavery and pushing back poverty, although Schall echoes Ratzinger/Benedict when he says that modern technology is a wonderful revelation of the freedom we have been given.

Schall's gratitude for his own country, though, is not the "Americanism" of the West-Coast Straussian proclaiming that ours is the best regime and the Declaration of Independence is a perfect articulation of philosophic wisdom. His limited claim is that America has proven to be a very reliable country for people to live decent lives in freedom and dignity, with the freedom, especially, to live in conformity to the whole, differentiated truth about who each of us is. Ours is also a country that has stood up to defend freedom against ideological tyranny on behalf of the whole world. America, Schall observes, "does not offer a this-worldly heaven, but simply a way [for 'mortal men'] to rule themselves, provide for families, [gain] a sense of self-achievement, and [perform] service to others." Schall adds: "it is precisely these virtues that seem to be under fire within America itself."<sup>4</sup>

Schall's realistic position is the truthful mean between that of the West-Coast Straussians, including the Catholic ones, and that of the MacIntyreans, Pat Deneen, various traditionalists, and so forth, who think that America, from the beginning at least in principle, is of the devil. Schall is uniquely astute in showing how we should not expect too much or too little from the goods that are civic and economic or even from religious

freedom. He agrees with Deneen on many practical judgments about political issues today, but that’s because America—or elite America—has turned on itself.<sup>5</sup>

To make a maybe more subtle point: Schall has never even identified himself with the John Courtney Murray or *First Things* crowd when it comes to our country. He doesn’t go for a highly-principled defense of our Founders having built better than they knew or something like that (he doesn’t actually say much about our Founders), but—following, at one point, Eric Voegelin—he’s more about showing how, in America, the chief weapon against ideology has been the common sense of the people. And that’s why he’s so adept at analyzing and ferociously angry in opposing the drift in recent decades toward the transfer of power to centralized bureaucracies, courts, and so forth dominated by ideological elites.

From a Straussian point of view, maybe the most heretical recent article by Schall concerned the Confederates and their battle flag. He reminds us that the Civil War wasn’t only about slavery. It was opposing centralized government, and it was the honor and dignity of Lee, above all, to have defended his own. One reason among many the Confederates weren’t like the Nazis is that they understood themselves as playing defense against invading despotism.<sup>6</sup> Now why does Schall make this point?

A powerful ideological impetus today is to use the war against racism as the model for bringing all of relational life under governmental control. The war against racism, the experts allege, is no different from the war against heterosexism. And so the family and the Church have to be reconstructed for the same reason the South did. Well, not thinking same-sex marriage is really marriage isn’t anything like defending slavery or racism, you say. But that’s exactly Schall’s point. To get over that error, we might begin by refusing to reduce the South to racism, and to appreciate the distinctive virtues of Southern men and women for what they are. The Southern virtues, detached from their aristocratic and racist origins, support those these days who take a genuinely countercultural or “rebel” stand. (Having said that, I wish Schall hadn’t referred in particular to flying the Confederate battle flag in making his point.)

Returning to Schall vs. Ratzinger: Ratzinger is given to emphasizing the differences between the impersonal, giant magnet-God of Aristotle and the personal *logos* of the early Church Fathers. Schall is mainly about the continuities between Plato and Aristotle and Thomism, showing that what they say about friendship, love, justice, and the immortality of the soul points in a Christian direction, so that we can affirm Christian revelation as a realistic articulation or elaboration of what Plato and Aristotle had in mind.

Schall says he gives Catholic readings of the *Apology*, the *Gorgias*, the *Republic*, the *Laws*, Aristotle's *Ethics*, and so forth. His Catholic readings often borrow from Straussian readings, and, in fact, often do so in ways more faithful to the instructional intention of the dialogue itself than the readings of the Straussian authors themselves.

On the *Apology*, Schall says that the real choice is the way of Socrates or the way of modern technology. For Socrates, the one true progress is toward wisdom and virtue in a particular person's life. And although Socrates makes a point of obeying the law, he also disses it by showing how it is not genuinely open to those who searched for the truth about god and virtue.

The early Christians—Schall again echoes Ratzinger—were confused with atheists, because they denied the existence of the gods of the city. And they were much more concerned with the personal truth about God than with the political utility of theology. For them, nobody is meant to be a citizen above all.

Socrates doesn't go as far to say he disbelieves in the city's gods, but almost nothing about their claims for the truth survives his searching examination. And Socrates emphatically doesn't say that only the rare philosopher is exempt from the requirement to be wholly or uncritically devoted to the laws and their gods. In the *Apology*, he exhorts everyone to care about wisdom and virtue more than money and power. And he says that that he's undertaken his personal mission on behalf of god because both the law and atheistic, materialistic natural science (and its vulgarization into techno-sophistry) don't tell him what he most needs to know.

For now, Socrates says, he differs from his critics in knowing he doesn't know enough to educate others, but that doesn't mean he doesn't think they need educating. So the *Apology* is basically agnostic, and Socrates, unlike the most devoted citizens and the materialist thinkers and technicians, remains a searcher and seeker. But for a Catholic reader, that's because he doesn't know of the alternative of the personal *logos* of the Bible, which would connect for the philosopher the law's just claim for personal virtue and love and the natural scientist's insight that all of being is infused with reason.

But, in a way, Schall here doesn't really differ from Ratzinger, who wrote that the fundamental, world-transforming fact about the early church fathers is that they chose for philosophy against civic mythology. Fidelity to that choice is what distinguishes Catholic thought from the nominalism and fideism that came with later forms of Christianity that denied that a personal, relational, rational, loving, and creative Trinitarian God was really possible. The so-called reformed Christians chose against reason on behalf of unlimited personal will, both for God and soon enough for themselves.<sup>7</sup>

All that’s not Straussian, you say! Strauss does everything he can to separate reason and revelation and let us know that *personal logos* is an oxymoron. And Schall says that realism is Thomism, whereas Strauss’s one extended discussion of the thought of St. Thomas is basically a hit job designed to get reasonable men not to take him seriously as a coherent alternative.

Well, there’s another way of looking at it: For Strauss, the big distinction remains between the ancients and the moderns. And the Thomists are more ancient than modern. That’s finally all that Schall is saying too. He has a provocative essay where he tells us that the contemporary choice is not really between reason and revelation but Thomism and atheism. Most sophisticates these days are inauthentic relativists, diverting themselves from the issue of “what is” and the search for the truth about how they should live.

The Thomists and atheists each claim that there is no alternative but to deploy reason to discover the truth and strive to live accordingly. The big question is which form of realism is more realistic. And the answer begins with the observation that the atheists really divert themselves from their deepest personal longings and deceive themselves when they say they have serenity now. In that respect, Schall subtly disses the more Epicurean Straussians, while praising those for whom the search remains real, telling them where to search for the most realistic form of realism. (In all this, notice how rational and confident Schall’s Catholic thought is; it includes both “reasonable pleasures” and a kind of freedom from disorienting and debilitating anxiety.<sup>8</sup> Pascal and Kierkegaard aren’t Schall’s guides, and even Walker Percy is only to a limited extent.)

Well, that’s controversial. But another way of gauging Schall’s realism is to examine how well he does in judging the truth about and what to do in response to the issues of our time. Schall, as far as I can tell, is almost never wrong. In that respect, he’s a lot like Edmund Burke or Raymond Aron. A difference is that he doesn’t see, exactly, with eyes of the statesman but with the eyes of the Thomist.

Consider Pope Francis’s recent encyclical *Laudato Si’*: Schall, without denying its real virtues in continuity with the Church’s tradition of reason, explains exactly what’s wrong with it. It is silent about St. Augustine, both in the text and the copious footnotes. It waxes poetic about creation, but it is virtually silent about personal redemption. Its sometimes hysterical tones come from a false and sometimes quite unscientific confidence that we have some insight into the fate of the planet, one that slights the possibility that human ingenuity might be enough to solve or mitigate the problems that human ingenuity or human freedom have given us, just as

it ignores the huge place of modern technology and capitalism itself in enhancing personal freedom and reducing the misery of poverty. (That's not to say that capitalism offers some solution to the misery of loneliness or is some substitute for the practice of the virtue of charity or can produce a world in which the personal reality of sin fades away.) In any case, we know neither the day nor the hour, and the future of being isn't really in our personal control, although it is in the personal control of God. Where are the Ten Commandments in all the encyclical's accounts of the virtuous life? And where is the family? "Repent, repent, the end is near" is a piece of Protestant wisdom when the focus is on the destiny of the particular person. But it isn't so Christian when applied mainly to the planet or species or whatever.<sup>9</sup>

Pope Francis is perfectly right to say that there's a deep connection between natural ecology and social ecology, and that our orientation toward both creation and redemption depends on knowing the truth about who we are as free and relational persons. But he might learn from his fellow Jesuit Schall about how to understand and articulate the full economic and political significance of what that truth is.

### Notes

1. James V. Schall, *Political Philosophy and Revelation: A Catholic Reading* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2013). Most of this essay is a reflection on themes found throughout this book.

2. *Ibid.*, chap. 6.

3. James V. Schall, *Reasonable Pleasures: The Strange Coherences of Catholicism* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2013), chap. 11.

4. Ken Masugi and James V. Schall, "Political Philosophy Needs Revelation: A Conversation with James V. Schall," *Claremont Review*, April 11, 2014.

5. Schall, *Reasonable Pleasures*.

6. James V. Schall, "On Reconsidering the Confederate Cause," *Catholic World Report*, July 11, 2015.

7. See my "Defending the Personal Logos Today," in *Reason, Revelation, and the Civic Order: Political Philosophy and the Claims of Faith*, ed. Paul R. Dehart and Carson Holloway (DeKalb, Ill.: Northern Illinois University Press, 2014).

8. Schall, *Reasonable Pleasures*.

9. James V. Schall, "Concerning the Ecological Path to Salvation," *Catholic World Report*, June 21, 2015.