

# *The Politics of Realism*

## *Locke, Maritain, and Hallowell on Liberalism and Knowledge*

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The rapid spread of liberal regimes in the developed world has been the most notable of the positive political stories of the twentieth century. Throughout the West—and increasingly in other parts of the world—constitutional governments dedicated to protecting, or at least obligated to protect, the rights of their citizens have become the norm. The rise of these states has resulted in an increase in the official recognition of human dignity unthinkable only two hundred years ago. Across the world, the wealthiest and most powerful nations are, for the most part, measured and regularly called to account, through their own constitutional mechanisms, based on how they treat their citizens as human beings—as persons. In fact, it appears that despite continuing pockets of nationalism and tribalism, liberalism has created an ideological hegemony within the developed world. Despite the myriad of political problems we continue to face, the positive effects of this achievement cannot be denied. As John Paul II has himself said, reflecting on the new human rights regimes, “it is impossible for the Christian conscience not to be moved by this.”<sup>1</sup>

Yet, this achievement, beginning in the eighteenth century and continuing to the present day, seems to have come about almost solely due to the rise of liberal philosophy—and concurrent decline of Christianity—in the West. This philosophy—expounded by Constant, Kant, and Mill, but ultimately rooted in Locke<sup>2</sup>—maintains that all human beings are autonomous, and must be free to exercise their personal liberty, or freedom.

Locke maintains that persons must be free to pursue their own happiness, which Locke defines as the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain. This

<sup>1</sup> Charles Taylor, “A Catholic Modernity” in *A Catholic Modernity? Charles Taylor’s Maritain Award Lecture*, ed. James L. Heft, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 18.

<sup>2</sup> “...to the extent that modern liberalism can be said to be inspired by any one writer, Locke is undoubtedly the leading candidate.” Sheldon Wolin, *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1960), p. 293.

pursuit of happiness is grounded in Locke's own epistemology and philosophical anthropology<sup>3</sup>—largely outlined in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. In the *Essay*, Locke makes a series of epistemological claims. First, men have no innate ideas. Second, all knowledge comes via sensation; the interaction of our sensory organs with external objects. Third, our complex ideas that are constructed from these sensations fall “short of the reality of things.”<sup>4</sup> These tenets are a radical departure from the epistemology of moderate realism in the Western philosophical tradition.<sup>5</sup> The promulgation of these ideas are at least correlated with—if they are not the cause of—the “emotivism” and lack of “unassailable criteria” that dominate public life in the West.<sup>6</sup>

This exposition of Lockean epistemology presents the Christian reader with a dilemma. Despite its dark underside, liberalism has undeniably resulted in a vast expansion of human dignity unparalleled in human history.<sup>7</sup> The expansions of civil rights, of the franchise, and of access to education promoted by liberal regimes (albeit often spurred by Christian groups and/or movements) have all promoted a general increase in personal autonomy. This development should be welcomed and cherished by Christians of all stripes.

Yet this liberal philosophy rests on an epistemology that can only be described as skeptical, or neo-sophistic, denying the ability of the person truly to know the world in which he or she lives.<sup>8</sup> This is disturbing, as the Protestant political theorist John Hallowell convincingly linked this epistemological doubt

<sup>3</sup> And ultimately, his implicit metaphysics.

<sup>4</sup> John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University, 1975), p. 539.

<sup>5</sup> I will use the following as a working definition of “moderate realism”: “These basic beliefs of mankind are also the three basic doctrines of realistic philosophy: (1) There is a world of real existence which men have not made or constructed; (2) this real existence can be known by the human mind; and (3) such knowledge is the only reliable guide to human conduct, individual and social.” John Wild, *Introduction to Realistic Philosophy* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1948), p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), pp. 6-17.

<sup>7</sup> This is not the venue in which to discuss liberalism's “dark underside.” For recent explications see Francis Canavan, *The Pluralist Game: Pluralism, Liberalism, and the Moral Conscience* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1995) on the “dissolving of norms;” Paul Edward Gottfried, *After Liberalism: Mass Democracy in the Managerial State* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999) on contemporary liberalism as a “managerial state” and John Gray, *Enlightenment's Wake: Politics and Culture at the Close of the Modern Age* (New York: Routledge, 1995) on liberalism's “implausibility and strangeness.”

<sup>8</sup> Peter A. Redpath, *Masquerade of the Dream Walkers: Prophetic Theology from the Cartesians to Hegel* (Atlanta: Rodopi, 1998), pp. 33-36.

with the rise of totalitarianism in Nazi Germany. Hallowell's argument runs as follows. Liberalism espouses responsible freedom under the law, which is discoverable by reason. We must note, however, "only conscience bids the individual to follow the dictates of reason rather than those of interest."<sup>9</sup> It is not always "rational," from an economic or purely self-interested perspective, to "do the right thing." But it then follows that if the positive law can be restructured to promote one's interest (whether that of an individual, a vocal minority, or a tyrannical majority), rather than the demands of reason—which are, in Locke's account, vague, largely constructs and presumably manipulable—then this limitation can be overcome. Compliance with the new positive law (counter to the old demands of both reason and conscience) will soothe the conscience—as the much-observed phenomenon of the "good Germans" effectively demonstrated. And so long as there exists a mass belief in the relativism of truth, there is no check against such an occurrence. In fact, given our observations of human nature, one should regard such an outcome as at least likely, if not inevitable.

So the mass acceptance of Lockean epistemology, as Hallowell writes, makes a belief in natural law untenable, and thereby frees the State from any limitations other than its own enacted laws, placing the actions of the State beyond good and evil. Once the state rejects ethical limitations, it then "becomes completely irresponsible, ready to turn the control of its organs over to the group with the greatest power for ends which it selects."<sup>10</sup> In short, the adoption of Lockean epistemology, carried to its logical end, has proven itself to be a great enemy to that same recognition of human dignity and freedom that finds its basis in Locke's political teachings. How can these two seemingly incompatible observations be reconciled?

I will deal with this puzzle in three steps. First, I will explicate Locke's epistemology. Second, I examine the tensions between Locke's epistemology and his political theory. Finally, I then use the writings of Hallowell and the Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain—two mid twentieth century writers who recognized serious difficulties with liberal thought—as a corrective to put forth a more "integral" version of liberalism. This modified liberalism should be able to avoid the excesses and errors—including widespread relativism and nihilism, "possessive individualism" (both economic and sexual), and the "culture of death"—of the current Lockean regimes.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> John Hallowell, *The Decline of Liberalism as an Ideology: With Particular Reference to German Politico-Legal Thought* (New York: Howard Fertig, rpr., 1971), pp. 7-8.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106.

<sup>11</sup> See *The Decline of Liberalism as an Ideology* and Jacques Maritain, *Integral Humanism* in *The Collected Works of Jacques Maritain*, Vol. 11, ed. Otto Bird (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996) on the terms "Integral Liberalism" and "Integral Humanism."

### Lockean Epistemology

In his opening chapters, Locke quickly sets out the assumptions underlying his theory of knowledge he will present in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Locke maintains that men have “no innate principles in the mind” and that all knowledge is a product of sense impressions, both defensible assumptions.

However, as we progress through the text, we discover that Locke is not concerned with the objects of sensation themselves, but instead (turning from the object to the subject) the data which they convey to the mind through the senses. Locke labels the impressions conveyed upon the senses by the mysterious external object “simple ideas.” These are the features an object causes us to experience—blueness, largeness, sweetness—that the Aristotelian tradition would call “qualities.” From these simple ideas the mind, through the faculty of reflection, assembles complex ideas, or notions. These notions are of two types. There are those that exist only as notions—such as numbers and geometric shapes—and there are those that exist in the material world.

Our complex ideas that have a materially existing referent are labeled as substances. Substances have essences, even for Locke. In fact, they have two. The first essence Locke calls the real essence, that which truly categorizes an object. Locke acknowledges the existence of these real essences. However, he maintains that the real essences are knowable only by God—and perhaps the angels.<sup>12</sup>

Instead, Locke claims we mere mortals deal with nominal essences. As the name implies, these essences are more or less arbitrary categorizations based on our conception of the “powers” or simple ideas in a subject. Therefore, when we categorize by species, or form, or essence, we are not acknowledging the order of the universe, for these “species of Things to us, are nothing but the ranking them under distinct Names, according to the complex ideas in us; and not according to precise distinct real Essences in them.”<sup>13</sup> Instead, he says, any glimmer we may have of perceptible order is an individual construct. To maintain that the orderings exist outside our minds is vanity, for:

we in vain pretend to range Things into sorts, and dispose them into certain Classes, under Names, by their real Essences, that are so far from our discovery or comprehension. A blind man may as soon sort Things by the Colours, and he that has lost his Smell, as well distinguish a Lily and a Rose by their Odors, as by these internal Constitutions which he knows not.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, p. 440.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 443.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 444-45.

We have neither sensory organ nor cognitive faculty to detect forms or essences—Locke claims—and therefore we cannot know them. God has not empowered his creatures to understand nature. Again, our “idea” of a substance, such as a man, “is only an imperfect Collection of some sensible Qualities and Powers in him.”<sup>15</sup> We must, of our own accord, “build a bridge from thought to thing.”<sup>16</sup>

Nature and the world around us then have little authority for Locke, since:

[T]he general Propositions that are made about Substances, if they are certain, are for the most part trifling; and if they are instructive, are uncertain, and such as we can have no knowledge of their real Truth, how much soever constant Observation and Analogy may assist our Judgments in guessing.<sup>17</sup>

Therefore, any real knowledge human beings gain from nature is insignificant, and if humans believe they discern anything of consequence in nature, they are engaging in self-deception. Yet Locke is well known for introducing “natural law” into state of nature theory, essentially taming that Hobbesian condition with the introduction of a more robust natural law. But how, we may ask, do we derive a law of nature from a nature we cannot know?

Locke’s answer seems to be that the person constructs a law of nature from the coherence of his or her ideas—simple and complex. The law of nature is “something that we being ignorant of may attain to the knowledge of, by the use and due application of our natural Faculties.”<sup>18</sup> Locke is, ultimately, a very tentative metaphysical realist. He does believe that reality is out there, *extra mentem*—he simply thinks that persons perceive reality only in the dimmest sense. Locke maintains that the ideas persons acquire do reflect, however obscurely and with inevitable distortions, the order of the world. Therefore, by use of their reason, human beings can manufacture a reasonable construct—a self-referential system—that will help guide them through the world. While this construct will be imperfect, Locke maintains that men are not to seek happiness or understanding in this world anyway. The imperfection of our understanding should direct individuals towards the enjoyment of God, in whom there is “fullness of joy.”<sup>19</sup> Presumably, the inevitable gaps in our merely coherent truth theory will give evidence to our lack of under-

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 590.

<sup>16</sup> Jacques Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, trans. Gerald B. Phelan (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), p. 75.

<sup>17</sup> *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, p. 615.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 130.

standing and point us to God. While this may be a troubling theory for some, it is internally consistent. Locke challenges us to doubt the correspondence between what we perceive and what truly exists.

### Political Theory

However, when Locke moves from epistemology to political philosophy, his doubt that we can adequately know nature quickly disappears. For Locke is plain that there is “nothing more evident” than that “Creatures of the same species” should all be equal to each other. This is the key insight and premise necessary for a liberal theory of government. Unfortunately, in his *Essay*, Locke clearly stated that there were neither self-evident principles, nor truly distinguishable species. Therefore, despite its being affirmed in the *Second Treatise*, the equality of persons is implicitly denied by the *Essay*. In short, there appears to be a contradiction between Locke’s epistemology and his political philosophy, despite the adamant objections of his defenders.<sup>20</sup>

The key inconsistency between Locke’s two theories therefore comes to light. Locke specifically denies that humans can know that they are all of one species—and therefore in their essence—equal. Locke goes so far as to state that persons cannot be certain that all things born of women are humans, or even possessed of souls.<sup>21</sup> The basis of Locke’s doctrine of human equality is then, at root, positivistic. Human beings cannot know that they are equal, but it is politically useful for them to believe so.

Locke’s assertion that there exists a law of nature is then subject to a similar critique. It is simply that—an assertion—without justification or grounding in his epistemological treatise. Again, this stands in contrast to the classical teaching, in which epistemological realism and moral realism are closely linked.

<sup>20</sup> Peter Meyers in *Our Only Star and Compass: Locke and the Struggle for Political Rationality* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998) defends this seeming contradiction as part of living in “a manifold state of tension.” Meyers proposes Locke as a *via media* between subjectivism and “immoderately rationalist foundationalism”—presumably such as that proposed by Maritain. An alternative—and, I would argue, more probable—reading might claim that Locke’s delicate balance between these two positions is a contingent and historical one, which Locke himself was partially responsible for disrupting, and which, at any rate, is no longer tenable.

<sup>21</sup> *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, pp. 570-72. It must be acknowledged that this aspect of Locke’s thought has the potential to undermine the premise of this project. If the increase in human dignity promoted by liberal states is “purchased” through the denial of human dignity to “weak and defenseless human beings,” this may indicate a net reduction, not increase, in the respect for human beings. See John Paul II *Evangelium Vitae [The Gospel of Life]* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1995), especially para. 5.

For example, Aquinas's teaching holds that while what we perceive are the individual things, what is received by the intellect is the general form, as the matter which individuates the form is not transmitted to the intellect. Therefore, contra Locke, Aquinas does *not* hold that the intellect constructs a simulacrum of the species from the individual sense impressions, but instead receives the general form from the individual specimen.<sup>22</sup> The natural law (being those things to which human being naturally incline—whether *qua* substance, *qua* animal, or *qua* rational being) is also known in general terms. Therefore, when the natural law must be put into practice, the general principle is applied to the specific case—the species to the individual—and provided no perversion or evil intervenes, the law will be appropriately applied.<sup>23</sup>

However, Locke's epistemology holds that human beings are not naturally equipped to know nature. The general principles of the natural law, as explicated by Aquinas, are then not known, nor can they be. The reader must conclude that Locke's natural law is at the very least not effectively promulgated (if it exists at all) and therefore not truly law. Thus, the exercise of freedom permitted and encouraged by liberal political theory is almost certain to transgress this unpromulgated law, making a core tenet of Lockean liberalism—that men in the state of nature will observe the natural law and not harm each other—problematic at the very least.

Even if Locke is granted his premise that human beings ought not to harm each other, Locke does not allow us to know the species or form that constitutes a human being. Therefore, "human being" is simply a matter of nominal definition. This nominal definition could be overly inclusive, or (more likely) overly exclusive. History is, of course, rife with examples of the latter. "Barbarians," slaves, "kulaks," Jews, the handicapped, fetuses, the comatose and the elderly have all been deemed unworthy of the appellation "human" at one time or another. So if a society is able to arbitrarily define who must be treated as a human being, the protections of a Lockean natural law may not be extended to all human beings.

This qualification should lead one to question just how much liberty will exist in this liberal state for those left outside the definition. For even if the Lockean "moral relation" between human beings is correctly understood, it will—again—apply only to those who qualify as "human beings" under the nominal definition. For as Locke himself concedes, "all Relation terminates in, and is ultimately founded on those simple Ideas, we have got from Sensa-

<sup>22</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *An Aquinas Reader: Selections from the Writings of Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Mary T. Clark (New York: Fordham University Press, 1972), p. 239.

<sup>23</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 94, a. 4.

tion, or Reflection.”<sup>24</sup> If our morality is only as reliable as are our senses, would not those with unreliable senses (and whose senses are infallible?) therefore have a deficient understanding of the natural law and be in state of truly invincible ignorance? Can Locke’s epistemology co-exist with a belief that there exists a natural law, a law we “can’t not know?”<sup>25</sup>

However, despite these disturbing implications, Locke’s doctrines still form the core of contemporary liberalism. The “self-evident” equality of individuals has become part of our “secular faith,” and this faith has been instrumental in the creation and maintenance of the human rights regimes. Yet these are beliefs without foundations. For example, as Richard Rorty freely concedes, modern philosophy—Locke seemingly included—simply posits these beliefs, the Christian tradition behind them being “...gratefully invoked by freeloading atheists....”<sup>26</sup> This candid admission by perhaps the most famous postmodern apologist of our time gives emphasis to the problem earlier formulated. Modern philosophy cannot defend the principles underlying the natural rights regimes. Developing this point, Robert Kraynak writes that Rorty is “a nonbeliever who demands that all people be treated with dignity and respect but offers no reason why, while thanking the Judeo-Christian tradition for allowing him to live off its teachings about human dignity. Rorty thus concedes Maritain’s primary point, that democracy must be grounded on the transcendent dignity of the person as a creature of God.”<sup>27</sup> We might follow up on Kraynak’s point by asking whether Locke, in seeking another grounding, downplays this same transcendent dignity.

Accepting Aquinas’s insight that we have true perceptions of being, or *esse*, we can adequately distinguish the species “man” from the other animals, and know that all human beings are persons.<sup>28</sup> The status of all human beings as persons encapsulates certain characteristics. All persons are spir-

<sup>24</sup> *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, p. 360.

<sup>25</sup> J. Budziszewski, “Denying What We Can’t Not Know” in *Reassessing the Liberal State: Reading Maritain’s Man and the State* (Washington, D.C.: American Maritain Association / The Catholic University of America Press, 2001).

<sup>26</sup> Richard Rorty, “Postmodern Bourgeois Liberalism”, *The Journal of Philosophy* 80 (Oct 1983), pp. 583-89.

<sup>27</sup> Robert P. Kraynak, “Review of Jacques Maritain: *The Philosopher in Society* and *Jacques Maritain (1882-1973): Christian Democrat, and the Quest for a New Commonwealth*” *Journal of Politics* 61:3 (August 1999), pp. 862-64.

<sup>28</sup> “Reality and the knowing mind, then, are not to be conceived as the two separate though somehow interrelated hemispheres of all that is. Instead, reality is the field of reference for the mind, and the mind is the active (more precisely: the actively accepting and receiving) center of the field of reference. All that is, is true.” Joseph Pieper, *Living the Truth* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), p. 80.



its, or are partially composed of spirit, thereby liberating them from the strict determinism of the material. All persons participate “in the absolute being” and their continued existence is not subject to material utilitarianism. In short, all persons are rooted in the exemplar causality of the Trinity itself and receive an inherent dignity from this created status. In Maritain’s formulation:

To say that a man is a person is to say that in the depths of his being his is more a whole than a part and more independent than servile. It is to say that he is a minute fragment of matter that is at the same time a universe, a beggar who participates in the absolute being, mortal flesh whose value is eternal, and a bit of straw into which heaven enters. It is this metaphysical mystery that religious thought designates when it says that the person is the image of God. The value of the person, his dignity and rights, belong to the order of things naturally sacred which bear the imprint of the Father of Being, and which have in Him the end of their movement.<sup>29</sup>

This status as persons gives men a claim to independence, or liberty—the key ingredient of modern liberalism. However, Maritain argues that certain influential moderns have tragically misunderstood this liberty—here he singles out Rousseau and Kant:

According to them, man is free *only if he obeys himself alone*, and man is constituted by right of nature in such a state of freedom (which Rousseau considered as lost owing to the corruption involved in social life and which Kant relegated to the noumenal world. In a word, we have here a divinization of the individual, the logical consequences of which are, in the practical and social order: (1) a practical atheism in society (for there is no place for two gods in the world, and if the individual is in practice god, God is no longer God except perhaps in a decorative way and for private use); (2) the theoretical and practical disappearance of the idea of the common good; (3) the theoretical and practical disappearance of the responsible leader, and of the idea of authority falsely considered to be incompatible with freedom.<sup>30</sup>

This misunderstanding is necessitated by modern philosophy, which does not tolerate an equivocal understanding of freedom. Instead, the contemporary definition of freedom denies that the freedom proper to creatures might be only analogous to the freedom of the creator. This dogmatically univocal definition further maintains that “there is neither freedom nor autonomy except insofar as no objective rule or measure is received from a being other than oneself.”<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Jacques Maritain, “The Conquest of Freedom” in *The Education of Man*, ed. Donald and Idella Gallagher (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1962), pp. 163-64.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 170.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 167.

This view of freedom is also implicit in Locke's epistemology. While Locke will speak at length of the "natural law" in his "state of nature," this law is a law of reason, independently constructed from the various "Ideas" received by the senses and processed by the intellect. Each person is then "free" to create his or her own private universe, governed by laws of his or her interpretation. Despite Locke's attempt to found the polity on consent, only fraud, force or the threat of force can create a political consensus under such a law, unlimited by either innate ideas or an intuition of being.<sup>32</sup> We see the threat of force implicitly in Locke's "golden rule," commanding us not to harm each other as we are—at the core—God's property. The *Second Treatise* reminds us that in the State of Nature, all men being equal, none ought to harm another:

For Men being all the Workmanship of one Omnipotent, and infinitely wise Maker; All the Servants of one Sovereign Master, sent into the World by his order and about his business, they are his Property, whose Workmanship they are, made to last during his, not one anothers Pleasure.<sup>33</sup>

The threat of Divine retribution is clearly discernible here. Thus the "fear of the Lord"—used in a less than Christian sense—is the mechanism that ensures the counter-Hobbesian character of Locke's state of nature. Locke's consent is made possible only by the threat of God's force.

Locke's glorification of our independent reasoning, based on his highly subjective—and therefore deeply questionable—epistemology, does serve to advance the cause of freedom, albeit in a debased form. However, the idea of freedom, whatever its root, carries with it an imprint, however faint, of the inherent dignity of the person. It is here that we begin to see the unraveling of our modern mystery. The philosophy underlying the modern liberal state carries a powerful truth—the freedom and dignity of the human person—which is not yet totally negated by the "capital error" so closely bound with it. To borrow Maritain's language, the modern democratic movements have not only sought, but also to some extent obtained "true political emancipation under false standards."<sup>34</sup>

But while the freedom gained by such a philosophy is real, the stability of the political consensus underlying it is illusory. For this philosophy of

<sup>32</sup> See also Eugene J. Roesch, *The Totalitarian Threat: The Fruition of Modern Individualism, as Seen in Hobbes and Rousseau* (New York: Philosophical Library Inc., 1963), pp. 147-51.

<sup>33</sup> John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960), p. 271.

<sup>34</sup> "The Conquest of Freedom," p. 169.

freedom is based on the belief that man is free to posit his own definition of truth. And all good readers of Aquinas and Aristotle know what happens to a *parvus error* in the end.

### Hallowell and Maritain

It is at this point that realism, buttressed by Christian belief, calls the reader to a higher understanding of truth. In an age when modern writers such as Vaclav Havel and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn have clearly shown us the need to live “in light of the truth” and acknowledge the “power of the word,” we may have a historic opportunity to clearly articulate such a truth.<sup>35</sup> In short, there is a need to distinguish between theories of liberty which acknowledge the existence and comprehensibility of external truths and those which do not, as well as to demonstrate the dangerous—and ultimately totalitarian—nature of theories which deny our access to truth.

John Hallowell and Jacques Maritain recognized this need, and sought to ground an “Integral Liberalism” (in Hallowell’s terms) in a Christian anthropology, known through a moderate realism, resulting in a Christian Realism (in a non-Niebuhr sense). Both Hallowell and Maritain were unapologetic about this need. Hallowell maintained that, “Only through a return to faith in God, as God revealed Himself to man in Jesus Christ, can modern man and his society find redemption from the tyranny of evil.”<sup>36</sup> Similarly, Maritain called fellow Catholics to a “politics intrinsically Christian by its principles, its spirit, its modality, and the claim to proceed in this world to a vitally Christian political action.”<sup>37</sup> Why did both Hallowell and Maritain seek a “New Christendom,” given the abuses of power by the Old? They both saw a necessity to reform certain principles that were being abused by modern liberalism and were no longer defensible in either theistic or even pragmatic terms. Maritain summed the failure of modern liberalism:

In modern times an attempt was made to base the life of civilization and the earthly community on the foundation of mere reason—reason separated from religion and the Gospel. This attempt fostered immense hopes in the last two centuries, and rapidly faded. Pure reason appeared more incapable than faith of

<sup>35</sup> Peter Augustine Lawler, *Postmodernism Rightly Understood: The Return to Realism in American Thought* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), pp. 1-13. See also *Living the Truth*.

<sup>36</sup> John Hallowell, *Main Currents in Modern Political Thought* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, rpr., 1984), p. 651.

<sup>37</sup> *Integral Humanism*, p. 319.

insuring the spiritual unity of mankind, and the dream of a “scientific” creed uniting men in peace, and in common convictions about the aims and basic principles of human life and society vanished in contemporary catastrophes. In proportion as the tragic events of the last decades have given the lie to the optimistic rationalism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, we have been confronted with the fact that religion and metaphysics are an essential part of human culture, primary and indispensable incentives in the very life of society.<sup>38</sup>

To once again return to Locke—an architect of the “foundation of mere reason”—his theory of freedom is grounded in the quasi-historical *de facto* freedom of man in a virtually law-less “State of Nature.” Since human beings did not relinquish this freedom in the “social contract,” they still retain said freedom even upon entering civil society. However, this freedom is unlimited by natural laws, save for a few positivistic ones—namely not to harm another in his person or possessions—given by God. Among men not enlightened by Christian revelation, customs dictate numerous variations on the law. The only law universally known is that of self-preservation.<sup>39</sup> This is entirely consistent with Locke’s epistemology in the *Essay*, which maintains that “Things” are “wholly separate and distinct” from both actions which bring happiness, and the signs which order knowledge.<sup>40</sup>

Therefore, Locke’s political order, in Dunn’s phrasing, relies “for [its] very intelligibility, let alone plausibility, on a series of theological commitments,”—namely those of a heterodox, nominalist Protestantism, probably Socinianism.<sup>41</sup> Once these theological commitments are challenged—whether by atheism or orthodoxy—the gaps in Locke’s political philosophy quickly surface. If an atheist examines Locke’s theory, she will find his “State of Nature” to be indistinguishable from that of Hobbes, therefore requiring an absolute sovereign to save man from his fellow man in the State of Nature. When examined by an orthodox Christian, the very concept of a State of Nature becomes problematic, as does the paucity of Locke’s “positivistic” natural law.

But again, the saving grace of Locke’s theory is that while the foundation is—at best—shaky, much of the superstructure is sound. This

<sup>38</sup> Jacques Maritain, “The Pluralist Principle in Democracy: A Qualified Agreement” in *The Social and Political Philosophy of Jacques Maritain* ed. Joseph W. Evans and Leo R. Ward (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1955), pp. 116-22.

<sup>39</sup> John Locke, *Questions Concerning the Law of Nature*, ed. Robert Horowitz, Jenny Strauss Clay, and Diskin Clay (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University, 1990), pp. 183-93.

<sup>40</sup> *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, p. 721.

<sup>41</sup> John Dunn, *The Political Thought of John Locke: A Historical Account of the Argument of the “Two Treatises of Government”* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), p. xi; *Our Only Star and Compass*, p. 23.

superstructure—the regimes of human dignity—provides the basis for the practical “secular faith” of which Maritain speaks—the “practical points of convergence” on which all men of good will can agree.<sup>42</sup>

But—as one earlier reader asked pointedly—if the premises of modernity are false, then how can a sound superstructure, these regimes of dignity, exist? A rotten tree does not bear good fruit, and people do not pick fruit from thorn-bushes. This is indeed a difficult question, but I suggest at least two possible answers. The first borrows from theology, and notes that heretical sects often preserve certain truths better than do the orthodox. For example, a good Catholic must believe the Protestant Reformation to be a rebellion against the true Church. However, in all honesty, the same Catholic must admit that within Protestantism, certain aspects of the faith—particularly a dedication to the study of Holy Scripture and a passion for evangelism—have been more faithfully retained, and perhaps even better developed, than in Catholic practice. A similar effect may be at work in liberal regimes, preserving human dignity in a more complete manner than did “confessional states.”

But perhaps a better explanation may be found in Jacques Barzun’s most recent work, *From Dawn to Decadence*. Barzun notes that, while modernity assumes that science precedes engineering—that an intellectual must conceptualize the idea before a practical worker can bring it into being—in fact the historical record indicates the converse to often be the case. “Inventors made machines before anybody could explain why they worked.... This sequence of practice before theory has its parallel in literature and the fine arts, which says something important about the workings of the human mind and the essence of culture.”<sup>43</sup> In other words, the West may have produced a political culture that still awaits a theory to explain how and why it works. This argument does not discount the insight that “ideas have consequences.” However—painful as it may be for academics to admit—not all consequences are the result of philosophical ideas. The oft-maligned common people may be able to work out certain practical solutions and agreements, based on natural reason. Liberal democracy may be perhaps the most notable of these solutions, what Maritain referred to as a “practical conclusion.”<sup>44</sup>

Such practical agreements are wonderful things for federal amalgamations, and International Charters. However, the local community—the civil society—should be able to produce something more substantive, rejecting a

<sup>42</sup> Jacques Maritain, *Man and the State* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951), p. 111.

<sup>43</sup> Jacques Barzun, *From Dawn to Decadence: 500 Years of Western Cultural Life, 1500 to the Present* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), pp. 205-06.

<sup>44</sup> *Man and the State*, p. 115.

skeptical “overlapping consensus.” But again, the problem is that of the *parvus error*, which becomes large in the end. While Lockean liberalism is largely responsible for the expansion of human dignity in the world, it now threatens to degenerate into its logical conclusion—a thoughtless, soft nihilism.<sup>45</sup> It is the task of a Christian philosophy to provide a truthfully grounded liberalism that is not self-consuming.

Maritain clearly posits just what this foundation should be. For Maritain, “the idea of man propounded by the metaphysics of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas is the rational foundation of democratic philosophy.”<sup>46</sup> Rather than principles off which Rortian ironists may “freeload”, however, these ideas of man must be foundational to the self-conception of truly free states.

This “idea of man” is a simple one. Contrary to Locke, Maritain maintains—following St. Thomas—that we can know the species of man, for the “quiddity” of a thing “is the first and proper object of the intellect.”<sup>47</sup> Truth, then, is not an internally coherent system, but instead a conformity “between the being possessed by the thing and the being affirmed by the mind.”<sup>48</sup> The intellect considers not sense ideas and its reflections thereupon, but the form and being of the object<sup>49</sup>—allowing classification of particulars by their essences, not accidental properties.

The implication of this Thomistic insight, philosophically retrieved by Maritain (*inter alia*), is perhaps best expressed politically by John Hallowell:

When integrally conceived, liberalism postulated as its fundamental premise the absolute value of human personality. Conceiving as the essence of human individuality a God-given soul it espouses individual equality, in a spiritual sense. Each individual is regarded as potentially worthy of salvation, in the sense of fulfilling his destiny or function in the light of his talents and capacity. Hence, individuals are never means but always, as equal moral entities, ends in themselves...

As its ideal, therefore, liberalism posits freedom under the impersonal rule of law, the law being conceived as filled with certain eternal objective truths and values discoverable by reason. The existence of objective truth and value, of transcendental standards, is presupposed.<sup>50</sup>

Hallowell’s integral liberalism then relies on the Thomistic “critical realism” as laid out by Maritain. Just as the false epistemology of modern philosophy

<sup>45</sup> *The Pluralist Game*, pp. 125-29; See also Peter Berkowitz, *Virtue and the Making of Modern Liberalism* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 178.

<sup>46</sup> “The Pluralist Principle in Democracy,” p. 121.

<sup>47</sup> *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 85, a. 5.

<sup>48</sup> *The Degrees of Knowledge*, p. 94.

<sup>49</sup> Though these are transmitted through the sensible species. See *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 85, a. 2.

<sup>50</sup> *The Decline of Liberalism as an Ideology*, p. 109.

mandates a liberalism that ends in positivism, so a philosophy of critical realism allows for a just and stable integral liberalism. As Hallowell writes elsewhere, “true freedom requires both knowledge of the good and the will to choose the good when known. The denial of either is a denial of freedom.”<sup>51</sup>

Locke’s doctrines do not allow for knowledge of the good. Since we cannot know the essences of things, but only the ideas we draw from them, Locke’s version of freedom allows persons to choose those things whose good is utilitarian, or whose good is pleasurable, but not those things good in themselves—of which the dignity of persons is one. Despite Locke’s attempt to preserve as much liberty from the “State of Nature” as possible, his epistemology does not allow the true freedom outlined by Maritain and Hallowell.

The conclusion then seems clear. Liberalism, properly understood, is utterly reliant on a realist theory of knowledge to avoid self-consumption. Without “knowledge of the good,” liberalism will inevitably degenerate into a derivative based on deception or force. As the “cultural reservoir” left by earlier realist thinkers begins to decline in America, one must logically expect liberalism to decline as well. The “house we did not build” which is this polity will not survive the erosion of its foundations.

The task before us then becomes equally clear. Political action to repair the polity will likely be futile so long as the public culture rejects or denies its ability to know, discern, and judge the truth. The actions of “Moral Majorities,” “Christian Coalitions” or “Catholic Worker” movements, while perhaps instrumental in slowing liberalism’s decline, do not attack root causes. One can attempt to preserve the fruits of the Lockean inheritance only through the promotion of a non-Lockean theory of knowledge. Such a theory must demonstrate that human beings are naturally equipped to know the world around them. Universal access to “the truth of all things” is the only hope for political consensus without overt or covert violence. Only such access allows the person to “rule his acts to choose what in fact is good” and participate in a “community of knowers.”<sup>52</sup>

Promoting belief in such access will be a difficult task. As Ruth Shively has perceptively written about objectivist (read: realist) truth, while mainstream American political theorists:

have qualms about the erosion of common ethical moorings...they seem to be even more uneasy about attempts to rebuild ethics on objective moral grounds.... Among other reasons, they may cite prudential fears about moral truth claims as

<sup>51</sup> John Hallowell, *The Moral Foundation of Democracy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1954), p. 112.

<sup>52</sup> James V. Schall, *Jacques Maritain: The Philosopher in Society* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), p. 130; *Postmodernism Rightly Understood*, p. 79.

grounds for intolerance and conflict, philosophical qualms about the impossibility or meaninglessness of correspondence theories, or pragmatic concerns with the metaphysical and impractical orientation of objectivist claims. Perhaps most important, however, this unwillingness to consider objectivist alternatives may be linked to the fact that moral contextualism has become an almost axiomatic assumption in political theory today, and this assumption is commonly presumed to stand against belief in objective or supracontextual moral truth.<sup>53</sup>

The political theorist Peter Lawler echoes this warning, cautioning us about “experts” who:

deny the truth and goodness of traditional accounts of human choice and moral responsibility. The experts are, officially, pro-choice in the sense that they dismiss all accounts of moral limits as reactionary prejudice. They add that, given that there are no limits to choice, we should choose against death and human misery. We should choose against the illusion of personal responsibility or sovereignty. We should trust the experts, not ourselves, for the content and meaning of our experiences. The pro-choice position is anti-life in the sense that it tends to choose against human life as it actually exists. The choice is for a world without choice or virtue.<sup>54</sup>

A re-education of the culture will not be an easy task, and resistance—particularly within the academy—will be strong. However, the age has provided guides and mentors. Realist theories clearly underlie work being done in many disciplines. One may look especially at the practical politics of Vaclav Havel, the novels of the late Walker Percy, and the physics of Stanley Jaki. The calling of the new century must be to build on the work of these realist theorists and actors, Maritain and Hallowell included, in order to communicate to the body politic the necessity of moderate epistemological and moral realism to its continued political well being. A return to Christian realism is not a panacea and does not obviate the need for the study and reform of political institutions. But it is a necessary foundation.

<sup>53</sup> Ruth Lessl Shively, *Compromised Goods: A Realist Critique of Constructionist Politics* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), p. 4.

<sup>54</sup> *Postmodernism Rightly Understood*, p. 181.