

Modern and American Dignity: Who We Are as Persons, and What Difference That Means for Our Future

Peter Augustine Lawler

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Peter Lawler has written a lively and illuminating book of “closely related essays” addressing the true meaning of human dignity and human liberty. Lawler, a distinguished political theorist and culture critic who served on President George W. Bush’s Council on Bioethics, pays close attention to the here and now, to contemporary intellectual controversies and the changing face of popular culture. At the same time, his thought is rooted in the best that has been thought and said, ancient, modern, and Christian.

The book’s opening essays draw on Lawler’s experiences on the President’s Council while reflecting deeply on “modern and American dignity.” Against the influential Harvard sociobiologist and psychologist Steven Pinker, who railed against “the stupidity of dignity” in a widely discussed essay in *The New Republic* in 2008, Lawler persuasively argues that the defense of dignity has nothing to do with religious fanaticism or political obscurantism. It is a legitimate subject of philosophical reflection and thoughtful faith. The real “stupidity” lies with those who want to affirm human freedom and autonomy even as they adhere to reductive accounts of human nature and human motives. These incoherent partisans of limitless choice *and* scientific materialism dispense with the soul, while proceeding as if human beings are the oxymoron that Lawler humorously calls “autonomous chimps.” In contrast to this quintessentially modern incoherence, Lawler adopts a dialectical approach that aims to do justice to both the angel and the beast in man.

He, therefore, surveys a broad range of contemporary intellectual positions while constantly highlighting the theoretical and practical incoherence of that strange mix or hybrid of Lockeanism and Darwinism that underlies the modern affirmation of human beings as beings who are radically indistinguishable from other animals and yet capable of subduing or conquering nature, including their own. This produces an untenable anthropology of man who is at the same time a determined animal and a self-creator. Through technology and enlightened education, modern man aims to overcome “time, infirmity, death and all the cruel indignities nature randomly piles on us.” The radically modern position eschews natural limits even as it rejects a classical Christian anthropology that sees human beings as having dignity precisely because they are made “in the image and likeness of God.” Even in more moderate forms, Lawler shows that modern Americans want to eat their cake and have it too: We “assert that each particular person is equally and infinitely significant” while succumbing to the “nominalist” claim that words are just “weapons that we use to secure our being against nature and without God.”

Nominalism, with roots in Locke and early modern philosophy, gives rise to nihilism and what Lawler suggestively calls “techno-relativism.” For Lawler, words have an inherent meaning and point toward the “givenness” of the natural, created order. Lawler is also finally quite critical of a radical libertarianism that affirms groundless choice as an

end in itself, and can say nothing about the “erotic,” “rational,” and “moral” dimensions of the human person, or the ends and purposes of human freedom.

Lawler roots his own position in a Christian understanding of the human being as a subject or person who is indebted to a creator God, a personal and rational *Logos*, and not an impersonal “what” as in classical thought. For Lawler, the fundamental choice is not between reason and revelation. Like two of his heroes, John Courtney Murray and Pope Benedict XVI, he is a partisan of both. The deepest human choice for Lawler is between “personal *Logos*,” the creative Reason at the heart of the universe and an impersonal god or necessity that never interacts with man. Throughout these essays, Lawler draws deeply from classical thought. With Aristotle (and Tocqueville), Lawler affirms the dignity of the political vocation against a democratic individualism that loses sight of the common good and the multiple reasons that human beings have to be grateful to an order of truth above and outside ourselves. At the same time, Lawler does not see human beings as first and foremost “political animals”: “Being citizens reflects a real part, but not the deepest part, of human dignity.” He is thus with Augustine and Pascal in “relativizing” politics, in recognizing that it cannot address the deepest needs of human beings or the transcendent dimensions of human destiny.

As Lawler himself puts it, the “most dense and ambitious chapters” in the book are about a series of thinkers who have taught Lawler something about human dignity and moral responsibility rooted in personal *Logos*: the philosopher-pope Benedict XVI, the great nineteenth-century French statesman-theorist Alexis de Tocqueville, the contemporary French political thinker Chantal Delsol, and the American theologian John Courtney Murray. The chapter on Delsol brilliantly highlights the dual threat that totalitarian mendacity, the scourge of the twentieth century, and the moral indifference promoted by a fashionable postmodernism, a twenty-first-century disease, pose to the integrity of the human person. Eschewing dogmatism, Lawler and Delsol show that “dignified, personal responsibility” needs a clear ontological foundation in a “reality higher and greater than ourselves.” That reality is available to us if only we genuinely open our souls to that which transcends us. The individual posited by modern theory mistakenly believes that rights are sufficient when the experience of totalitarianism has powerfully demonstrated the ultimate dependence of rights on a deeper notion of human dignity. This is the lesson drawn by the anti-Communist dissidents—Jan Patocka, Václav Havel, and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn among them—one that does not depend upon an explicit endorsement of Christian revelation even if it is reinforced by it.

A particularly good chapter on “Solzhenitsyn on Technological Civilization” highlights what happens when human beings forget that they are beings with souls. By ceasing to submit our wills to a “real authority higher than ourselves” we have “ceased to *see the Purpose*” and, as a result, confuse technological progress with moral progress. Rather than reconfiguring all human experiences in a technological way, or subordinating our humanity to our interests narrowly defined, we need to recover those personal experiences of good and evil in the human soul that will allow us to turn modern progress “toward the perpetration of the good.” Only then, Solzhenitsyn adds, can we escape the “howl of

existentialism” by confronting our mortality with “a clear and calm attitude,” not seeing in it the extinction of the entire universe.

Drawing on Pope Benedict’s widely misunderstood 2006 Regensburg Address, Lawler suggestively argues that only a true “science of theology,” a judicious receptivity to the full promise of reason and revelation, can move us beyond the modern incoherence about the freedom and dignity of human beings. Such a “science of theology” affirms the freedom and dignity of the human being while rejecting the Lockean claim that nature is essentially “worthless” or without inherent purpose until man mixes his labor with it. It affirms nature as a standard while in no way denying the spiritual nature of human persons. Lawler is particularly sensitive to the fact that the last two Roman pontiffs have been two of the most eloquent and thoughtful defenders of reason against all those contemporary theoretical and practical currents that promote, willingly or unwillingly, “the abolition of man.”

Lawler’s wide learning is never merely academic but always at the service of understanding the human soul and the political predicament of late modern man. Sometimes, he presumes that a general readership is as learned as he himself is—he unfortunately dispenses with quotations from the figures under discussion more than is perhaps wise or useful. However, this is a book that allows us to think realistically about personal virtue by “correcting the autonomy freaks with the observation that persons are erotic or animated by love.” Lawler’s book powerfully reminds us of the “social or relational dimension of being personal,” an appreciation indispensable for understanding what it means to be a “dignified person.” As importantly, Lawler shows that American dignity, properly understood, is not reducible to modern dignity, to the *mélange* of Locke and Darwin that defines the modern sense of self. The American Founders “built better than they knew” (John Courtney Murray, quoting the Catholic bishops’ Third Plenary Council of Baltimore, 1884) and would never have reduced human beings to autonomous or productive beings or clever chimps. Neither Lockeans nor Puritans, they admirably avoided the twin extremes of theocratic fanaticism and antireligious enlightenment. Nonetheless, their achievement and insight needs the support of an antinomialist “science of theology” if it is to bear fruit in the contemporary world. It is that insight that ultimately unites the rich and diverse reflections in this work.

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